A Random House Mystery by

Patrick Quentin

The Green-Eyed Monster

The Green-eyed Monster

by PATRICK QUENTIN

Andrew Jordan adored his beautiful wife, who was, perhaps, too beautiful, too seductive. Like many good men before him, with wives too beautiful and too seductive, he could not control his jealousy. For the eighteen months of their marriage, it had filled him with self-loathing. Any small, inexplicable event fed the monster. Sometimes he could control the impulse to check up; sometimes he could not.

The anonymous letter fell on fertile soil, and climaxed a domestic situation ripe for murder.

Murder happened.

Andrew's jealousy made him distrust the people he loved. It also made him the major suspect.

To find the murderer, he had to reexamine his relationships with his younger brother Ned, perennial house guest of the idle rich, whom Andrew had alternately loved and hated for years, and with his four-times-married mother, whose air of irresistible helplessness masked a calculating heart. Andrew had to look behind every face he'd ever known, including his own.

Like all of Patrick Quentin's brilliant suspense novels, THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER is based on a universal theme: an emotional problem which must be resolved if a murder is to be solved.

Jacket design by Jerry Kuhl

BOOK CLUB EDITION

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Now it can be told. Patrick Quentin is really Hugh Wheeler. For many years he was half of the writing team of Patrick Quentin (also Q. Patrick, or Jonathan Stagge) with R. Wilson Webb. Since 1952, Mr. Wheeler has been the sole support of the popular Mr. Quentin, writing one mystery novel a year under that name.

Hugh Wheeler was born in London, England, and educated at London University, after which he came to the U.S. and became a citizen as quickly as possible. He has been earning his living by writing since he was nineteen, and aside from a stretch in the U.S. Army Medical Corps, has never worked at any other occupation. An eighteenth-century house in the Berkshires has been his headquarters for over fifteen years; in winter he resides in happy exile in Europe or the Caribbean.

Mr. Wheeler reports that his hobbies are his friends, travel, music, and almost continuous reading, and that he is "English enough to struggle with a very reluctant flower garden." He has no ambitions to be anything but a writer, and is now at work on his sixteenth Patrick Quentin novel.

His first produced play, LOOK, WE'VE COME THROUGH, is scheduled to appear on Broadway this season.

Printed in U.S.A.

The Green-Eyed Monster

The Green-Eyed Monster

PATRICK QUENTIN

RANDOM HOUSE New York

Manufactured in the United States of America

The Green-Eyed Monster

ONE

Andrew Jordan had no idea his brother was back in New York until he came home a little early from the office one evening and found Ned in the living room with Maureen. The two of them were sitting together on a low, cushion-piled couch, their legs tucked under them, drinking Rob Roys, looking deceptively cozy and relaxed.

"Hello, darling," said Andrew's wife. "Look who dropped in."

Ned grinned. Andrew knew his kid brother so well that he could analyze his grins. This was a "riding-high" grin. Ned's skin was tanned and his hair bleached almost white by the sun. Andrew tried to remember where it had been this time. The Caribbean? It was hard to keep track of Ned's gilded grasshopper existence as perennial house guest to the idle rich.

"Hi, Drew," said Ned. "I just dropped in to say hello, but your timing's lousy. I've got to run. Some people waiting at the Pierre."

Ever since his first (and only) year at Princeton there had always been "people" waiting for Ned at the Pierre or its equivalent. Andrew seldom got to meet them, but he knew that if they were not girls they were millionaires or celebrities or at the very least "some couple who have an amusing villa just north of Malaga."

He said, "You staying around for a while?"

"Who knows?" Ned swallowed the rest of his Rob Roy. "I'll give you a call, my friend."

He kissed Maureen, which surprised Andrew since there was so little love lost between them. Putting his hand affectionately on Andrew's shoulder, he started for the door.

When Andrew had seen him off, he went back into the living room and said to his wife, "Ned seems in good shape. What's the news?"

"Oh—Ned." Maureen shrugged him away. "Darling, I swore we'd be at the Reeds' by six-thirty. We're going to be disastrously late."

During the eighteen months of their marriage, it seemed to Andrew that he and Maureen spent every evening in a chronic state of being late for parties. It was a way of life which wasn't his, but since parties were Maureen's natural element, he'd adapted himself to them. That night he adapted himself to the Reeds. By the time they got home, he had forgotten Ned.

Maureen was already in bed when he came out of the bathroom. Although he never had or never would say so and thus expose himself to her ridicule, she always reminded him of a white rose. Now her beauty was fresh and glowing as if it were nine o'clock in the morning after an eight-hour sleep. His love for her, which had been obstructed all evening by brittle, chattering people, was almost like a physical pain in him. He slipped into the bed beside her. As he turned toward her, her hand moved quickly to his cheek and patted it.

"Good night, darling. Nice party, wasn't it? But, my God, the hour."

Andrew had expected something of the sort and accepted the hint in silence. He knew his love for his wife was more physical as well as more romantic than her love for him, and

the knowledge had made him diffident, humble and obscurely ashamed.

Reaching up with his hand, he turned out the light above the bed and, as he did so, there came back to him a memory of Maureen and Ned sitting together, legs tucked under them, on the couch. He had given it hardly a thought at the time. If anything, he'd been relieved to see them less frigid with each other. But now, as the mental picture of the two of them hovered in front of him, the easy intimacy of their pose suddenly seemed to him to have been the intimacy of lovers, as if, one second before he'd walked through the door, their two heads, both so handsome in their contrast of dark and fair hair, had only that moment broken apart from a kiss.

He knew instantly that the fancy was ridiculous, just a new and even more ignoble symptom of the jealousy which had become his almost constant companion. But jealousy, he had already learned, was a disease as irrational as it was humiliating, as shameless in its choice of suspicions as it was destructive.

He lay fighting the tension in him by trying to explain it away. He knew that most of the trouble had started when the anonymous letter had come to the office. He'd never seen one before but it was exactly as they were described in books, composed of capitals cut out of newsprint and pasted onto a plain white sheet of paper. It had said:

YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE IN NEW YORK WHO DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT YOUR WIFE.

He had tried to dismiss it as a piece of psychopathic and meaningless malice, but the seeds of doubt had found in him a most fertile field, for ever since his childhood he had absorbed by osmosis his mother's and Ned's idea of him as the

dull one of the family, good old Andy, dependable, plodding, whose function was to get things done but for whom life could hold no exalted rewards. Even when Maureen had consented to marry him (both his mother and Ned had been in Europe at the time) it had seemed to him a little too good to be true.

Although he'd torn up the letter and never breathed a word of it to his wife, it had left an indelible mark. From that day on, there had been an ever-present shadow lurking on the edge of the happiness which had never anyway seemed quite real, always ready to pounce on a telephone unanswered, an appointment kept a little late, lurking and growing until it could produce this latest and most preposterous fantasy.

It was the very preposterousness of the fantasy which finally gave the victory to common sense. There was nothing wrong with his marriage except for this unattractive and self-punishing flaw in himself. And as for Maureen and Ned!

As many times before, Andrew Jordan, who very much wanted to be a good man, felt disgust with himself and a great need to establish contact with his wife, as if by touching her he could become purged of this degrading mistrust.

"Maureen," he whispered.

His hand went out toward her. With a little sigh—sleep? or pretended sleep?—she rolled away from him onto her side.

The bedroom was very dark. The darkness was infused with her perfume.

During the following week, Andrew didn't see Ned at all. It wasn't surprising to him. Since their father's death, when he had taken over in the business and Ned had inherited a small but adequate income from a trust fund, they had drifted out of the close alliance which had been formed in a childhood bandied between the boredom of their father's Riverdale respectability and erratic flights into their mother's world of

hectic, global gaiety. Whenever there was a real crisis, Ned, as Andrew knew only too well, would still come running to him. But Ned had his celebrities and millionaires to charm now and no longer needed Andrew as Old Faithful, while Andrew, thanks largely to Maureen, had been almost released from the exhausting syndrome of loving Ned, resenting him, being bewildered by him and picking up after him. At thirty he had grown up about his brother. He could see him at last, as he could see his mother, with his eyes open. At least, he thought he could.

As it happened, it was through his mother that Andrew got his next news of Ned. She called him at the office around three on a Wednesday afternoon to summon him for tea at the Plaza.

"Five o'clock, Andrew. Don't be late and don't stay too long either because Lem and I are going out. Bring little what's-her-name, if you like."

"Little what's-her-name" was Maureen. At the beginning Maureen had struggled to win his mother's approval, but as Andrew's wife she had been doomed to remain "little what's-her-name"—a vagueness which, Andrew realized, was just another symptom of his mother's compulsive need to pay him out for being such a boring son. If his mother had to have children—which was highly debatable—the least they could do was to be "amusing" like "darling Neddy." Any offspring of hers who by choice had taken over his father's partnership in a small carton-manufacturing firm was something to be vague about, like a husband who hadn't worked out very well—like the father of her children, in fact.

Andrew called Maureen to tell her they'd been summoned. The phone didn't answer. He tried again just before he left the office, but there was still no answer. Maureen had specifically told him she was planning to stay home all day and

rest. He felt the familiar tentacle-stirring of anxiety but he suppressed it. He went to see his mother alone.

She had a suite on the park side of the hotel. Mrs. Pryde's hotels, in Paris or St. Moritz or wherever, were always "her" hotels, and "her" hotels invariably reserved "Mrs. Pryde's suite" for her. Not, of course, that it had always been Mrs. Pryde. Andrew's mother, having married four times, had had many different names with which to sign hotel registers. Pryde was quite new. She had met Lem Pryde in California the year before. He was good-looking and fifteen years younger than she and penniless. After two brilliantly profitable marriages, she had felt, Andrew imagined, that she could indulge herself for once.

When he got to the suite, Lem wasn't visible. His mother was sitting by the window, with tea laid out on a table in front of her. Even when she had been mere "Mrs. Jordan" married to Andrew's father, she had already discovered how well tea became her. The silver, the delicate china, the atmosphere of relaxed elegance made the perfect setting for her fine-boned, exquisite profile and the little fleeting smiles which so successfully (to strangers) suggested irresistible helplessness.

"Well," she said, "at least you're punctual, Andrew. Where's your wife?"

"I couldn't get in touch with her."

She shot him a bright glance. "It's all going along nicely, I hope?"

"Of course."

"That's a relief. She's very pretty. She was on the stage, wasn't she?"

"She was a model for a time."

"Well, it's much the same thing. I do hope she's taken to domesticity. So many of those girls get used to excitement

and thrills. It's hard for them to give it all up. I'm surprised you married such a glamour girl. You've always been so possessive, haven't you, like your father? I'd have thought you'd have chosen a nice, plain dumpy sort of wife. But I'm sure it'll all turn out all right."

As always, with some ninth sense, she had managed to locate her son's most sensitive spot and twist her knife in it. She poured herself a cup of tea daintily like a Viennese baroness. Then she poured one for Andrew. He could tell from the faint ripple in her forehead that something was bothering her. He'd taken it for granted anyway, because she never called him unless some "tiresome" situation had developed.

She picked up her cup and sipped. Soon she came out with it.

"Andrew, Neddy was here this morning. He tried to borrow money."

Andrew sat up alertly. Ned's big trouble, which had happened the year before, had been triggered by his trying to borrow money from their mother.

"Why?" he said. "What did he want money for?"

"He didn't say. He just tried to wheedle it out of me."

"How much?"

"Five thousand dollars." Mrs. Pryde's very blue eyes were watching him over the cup, the pupils slightly narrowed the way they always were when it was a question of money going out rather than coming in. "Really, I don't understand you boys. The moment there's trouble you come running to me. Does he think I'm made of money? Doesn't he realize the constant drain, taxes, expenses, and Lem . . . Dear Lem, it isn't as if Lem was able to fend for himself with that wretched heart of his."

Mrs. Pryde and Lem were constantly talking about Lem's

heart. No one ever quite knew what, if anything, was the matter with it.

"Did you give him the money?" asked Andrew.

"Give it him? Even if I could possibly have managed it, I wouldn't dream of setting a precedent. Adult males should never have to come crawling to their mothers. I told Neddy that last year. He knows he's going to get everything when I die, except, of course, for a little something for Lem. Besides, he has his own money. Why in heaven's name can't he make that do?"

She leaned forward and put her hand on Andrew's knee, a pretty hand with a huge emerald ring on it.

"Andrew, that's why I asked you over. Do speak to him. After all, you're so much older, you're really in the position of his father; it's much more your problem than mine. Do make sure everything's all right. And if he does really need the money—well, that business of yours is doing terribly well, isn't it? After all, no intelligent person sweats away at paper boxes unless they're profitable."

Andrew could feel the light, almost clawlike pressure of her hand on his knee and there came back to him all the myriad times of his childhood when his desire to win his mother's approval had been as violent as it had been hopeless. How remote they seemed now. How remote too seemed his later hatred and vindictiveness when he'd realized that the failure between them had not been his. Now there was nothing—just Mother being Mother.

"Andrew, you will, won't you? You'll talk to him. He's such a sweet boy and I dote on him. But he can be so tiresome. Oh, Lem dear . . ."

She had jumped to her feet as lightly and easily as a girl, because the door had opened and Andrew's current stepfather was moving toward the tea table. Mrs. Pryde ran to

him and put her arms around him. She was tiny and he was very big—a massively handsome military type with a home-grown English accent, who gave the impression of being a pukka sahib of the British Raj but who in fact, so far as Andrew could gather, had got no nearer the British Empire than a small supporting role in an Errol Flynn movie.

"Lem my darling, but where have you been? I expected you back by three."

"Sorry, chick. Had lunch with a pal. Then, as I was walking back, I saw that good French picture at the Paris was coming off—the one you liked so much. I thought I ought to catch it."

Lem Pryde stooped and kissed her on the cheek. His mustache stretched in a bluff major's smile. "Miss me, chickie?"

"Oh, Lem . . ."

He turned and saw Andrew. He looked slightly guilty; he always did when he saw him, as if Andrew had caught him out in something. "Hello there, Andrew old boy."

"Andrew's just leaving," said Mrs. Pryde. "Some boring business, but it's all cleared up."

As Andrew went to the door, his mother was pulling Lem over to the couch by the tea table, chattering, smiling prettily, using all her battery of charms. It had never occurred to him before that she might be capable of love. For the first time in his life he found himself feeling almost sorry for her.

But soon, as the elevator took him down, he was back thinking about Ned. Although it was a year ago, the other time Ned had tried to borrow money from their mother was brutally vivid to him. Wanting to keep up with some movie people at Las Vegas, Ned had got drunk and gambled idiotically at the crap tables and lost more than he could possibly afford. He had tried to call Andrew but he and Maureen had

been out. He'd called Mrs. Pryde on her honeymoon at the Beverly Hills Hotel, with the inevitable results. The next morning a rich and elderly Brazilian widow, who was staying in his hotel, had accused him to the management of stealing a diamond bracelet.

Andrew had flown to Vegas. The hotel had been as eager as he to hush it up. Finally Ned admitted he had the bracelet; Andrew made him give it back and talked Madame Da Costa into keeping her mouth shut. He also paid the gambling debts with the money which, ironically enough, he had been saving to buy Maureen a diamond bracelet.

In the face of Andrew's controlled but formidable anger, Ned had been suitably contrite; but, being Ned, he had taken it for granted that his brother would appear from nowhere and make everything all right. He'd grinned his sheepish little-boy grin, which, in spite of himself, still had for Andrew the maddening and disarming poignance it had had when Ned was nine years old and had managed to smash up Andrew's new bicycle.

"Well, that's the way it goes, I guess. But—do you know something, Drew? That old Da Costa cow gave me her goddam bracelet. 'Dear preety boy,' she said, 'take these leetle jewels and pay your leetle gambling debts.' I thought it was a typical grandiloquent Brazilian gesture, so I grabbed it and kissed her pudgy hand and said, 'Your humble servant, Senhora.' Of course, she was blind at the time. Bourbon on the rocks. I guess in the cold light of hangover she just forgot the whole romantic episode and I was far too much of a gentleman to nudge her memory."

He could, Andrew decided, have been telling the truth. As a child his brother had been a magnificent liar but he seldom lied to him. And for Ned, who at twenty-three had never grasped the basic principles of conventional morality,

a maudlin offer from a drunken old woman would have seemed a perfectly satisfactory justification for acceptance.

"Drew, don't tell Maureen."

"She knows already. She was right there on the other phone when you called."

"She'll blow her top, won't she?"

She had, of course. Maureen had never seen the point of Ned's charm anyway. After that, she was through with him for keeps.

"Tell her I'll pay you back. And, Drew, don't worry. I'm not going to do anything dim-witted like that again."

"You'd better not."

"I won't. I swear it. Cross my bloody heart."

That had been their very secret sacred oath when they were kids.

The elevator ejected Andrew into the lobby of the Plaza. Had he been an ostrich in believing that by crossing his bloody heart Ned had made the promise binding?

When he got home, Maureen wasn't there. It was, he knew, ridiculous to worry. Any one of a score of friends could have called her and lured her out for the afternoon. And yet they were due at Bill Stanton's at—when was it? He went into the bedroom and consulted the engraved card stuck in the mirror. Seven-thirty. He called Ned. A man answered who said he was a house guest. Ned was out. Could he take a message? Andrew told him that he and Maureen would be out late but asked him to have Ned call first thing in the morning. He fixed himself a drink and, carrying it with him into the bedroom, took a shower.

He was drying himself when the phone rang. He ran into the bedroom, convinced it would be Maureen.

A girl's voice, light and rather pretty, said, "Is Mrs. Jordan there—Maureen Jordan?"

Andrew said she was out.

"Is that her husband?"

"That's right."

"Maybe you know about me. I'm Rosemary Thatcher."

He knew who she was. Rosemary Thatcher was Maureen's cousin. Her mother was Maureen's mother's sister and, when Maureen's parents were killed in an automobile accident, the Thatchers had taken Maureen as a girl of fifteen to live with them for several years in Los Angeles. Recently, Mr. Thatcher who was immensely rich and in industrial design had shifted his headquarters to New York, where they had become very much in Maureen's life again as Uncle Jim and Aunt Margaret. Rosemary, however, Andrew had never met. For the last couple of years she'd been out of the country most of the time at some finishing school in Lausanne.

He said, "Rosemary Thatcher? Of course. I didn't know you were in town."

"I only got back yesterday. I'm dying to see Maureen and meet you. When will she be back?"

"I'm expecting her any minute."

"Then would it be terrible if I dropped in for a drink now?"

"Of course not. I'm sure Maureen will want to see you."

"I won't stay long. I can't anyway. By the way, is it all right if Mummy and Dad pick me up at your place? We're going on to dinner together."

He said it would be a pleasure. She said she'd be there in under half an hour and hung up. He'd just finished dressing when he heard Maureen's key in the lock. He hurried out into the living room and she came toward him, dropping the mink coat he'd given her for their first anniversary.

As always when he saw her, his heart seemed to turn over and all the obsessive jealous anxieties vanished like nightmare demons on awakening.

"Andy darling, I'm dreadfully late. I'm so sorry. It's maddening, but someone called up. She's just back from the West Indies." She threw her arms around him and kissed him. "Clever boy, you're already dressed for Bill's party."

"Who was the friend?" said Andrew.

"Oh, it wasn't a friend," said Maureen. "It was my cousin. You know about her, darling. The Thatchers' daughter. My Cousin Rosemary."

TWO

She saw at once from his face that something was wrong. There was nothing slow about Maureen. Her hands were still on his arms; there was even a little of the smile left lingering around her lips. "Darling, what's the matter?"

He didn't really know what he was feeling—a sort of numbness. "Your Cousin Rosemary just called," he said. "She'll be here any minute. She's dying to see you and she wants to meet me."

For a moment his wife's eyes were dead, but only for a moment. Then she laughed. "How wonderful. I might have known. I've always been a lousy liar anyway. Oh, darling, it couldn't have been more silly. I do apologize. Bill Stanton called. His maid was sick and he was desperate about the party tonight. I was the substitute maid."

"If you were at Bill's—why Cousin Rosemary?"

Maureen made a little grimace. "Because I'd sworn I'd stay home all day, because it seemed so weak to let Bill talk me into it, because . . . Oh, Andy, you know why."

"Do I?"

"Darling, I'm not blind. You never say anything, but it's there, isn't it? Now you know I was at Bill's—not because he's Bill, of course. Anyone else would be the same—but now you know, you're—well, worried, aren't you?"

She still had her arms around him, drawing him closer. Her lips were very near his.

"Andy, now it's come out into the open, let's talk about it."

He felt cripplingly embarrassed.

"I know now," she went on. "You're so strong, so sure of yourself, but inside there's something. It's your mother, isn't it? It's what your mother and Ned between them did to you. They made you think you're the dreary one, poor old Andy who nobody could ever get excited about, not even his wife."

It was uncanny that she had been so perceptive, and as painful as if a dentist's probe had stabbed down onto an exposed nerve.

"Andy, forgive me, but it had to be said because it's getting out of hand. Look what it did to me today. As I was coming home in the taxi, I suddenly thought: I can't tell Andy I've spent all the afternoon with Bill, I simply can't . . ."

Her hair, smelling faintly of jasmine, was insidiously soft against his cheek.

"Listen, Andy dearest, I love you even more now than when we were married. You're the easiest person in the world to love. And if how I feel isn't obvious to you, then it's partly my failure too. Maybe all this dashing around to parties . . . Darling, if you hate all that it can stop in a minute. You know it can. Oh, Andy."

He put his arms around her, feeling split in two. Part of him was glowing, reassured, hungrily eager to believe her. But there was the other part. Why should Maureen be the one Bill Stanton asked to help him? Bill Stanton was an attractive bachelor on the town with a stable of girl friends. Why Maureen?

"Andy." His wife was looking up at him. Her eyes, so close to his, seemed huge, green as emeralds under the thick canopy of lashes. "Darling, we won't talk again—not if you'd rather not. But it's all right now, isn't it?"

"It's all right," he said.

He was relieved but a little surprised too that she could be

so quickly satisfied. She broke away from him and glanced at her watch.

"My God, the hour. And Rosemary'll be here any minute. Come, darling, talk to me while I change."

She grabbed his hand and they went together into the bedroom. He sat down on the bed, watching her as she slipped out of her clothes. He was still there, smoking a cigarette, when she came out of the shower and, dropping the towel, rummaged around dressing for the evening. All the time she was chattering amusingly and slightly maliciously about Bill Stanton. Finally she took her red-leather jewel box out of the drawer, unlocked it and selected the diamond earrings he'd given her as an engagement present, the earrings which, thanks to Ned, still lacked a matching bracelet.

She was just ready when the buzzer rang and Andrew went to let in Rosemary Thatcher.

From the European finishing school and the fact that she was the Thatchers' daughter, Andrew had been expecting something sleek and expensive. He couldn't have been more wrong. Cousin Rosemary was very young; she had the right clothes; she obviously went to the right hairdressers; almost certainly her teeth had been straightened by the right orthodontist, but that was all, visually, that could be said for her. She wore heavy-lensed glasses and, although she had the assured good manners which come with being a child of the very rich, the first impression was one of almost pathetic homeliness.

Andrew got drinks. They all sat down and she and Maureen started to gossip. They didn't seem quite as pleased to see each other as Andrew had imagined. Rosemary in particular was ill-at-ease and almost constantly her eyes behind the glasses kept moving with shy curiosity to him. At first he assumed she was merely trying to decide what sort of a

bargain Maureen had got herself. But as the oblique scrutiny continued, he began to feel uncomfortable.

At one point, when her interest was especially obvious Maureen said, "Well, do you approve of my mate?"

"It's incredible," said Rosemary Thatcher. "I mean, the likeness. It took my breath away the instant I walked into the room. He's Neddy exactly—a grown-up Neddy."

"So you know my brother?" said Andrew.

A brilliant smile lit up her face, bringing it a quite unsuspected prettiness. "Oh yes, I know Neddy." She gave a self-conscious laugh. "We're going to be married next month."

Because she'd said it, Andrew had to believe it, but the statement was staggering to him. That Ned, with his horror of emotional entanglements and his genius for sliding out of them, should have fallen for anyone at all was improbable enough, but that it should be—Cousin Rosemary!

He heard Maureen's voice, rather edged, saying, "But Ned was here only a few days ago. He didn't say anything about it."

"I know," said Rosemary. "It's all still a secret. I wasn't supposed to say anything either. But when I saw your husband looking the way he looks—I just couldn't resist. It doesn't matter though. Neddy can't really mind you two knowing, can he?"

She leaned forward and took a cigarette out of a box on the coffee table, waggling it vaguely the way girls do when they're used to having someone else light cigarettes for them. Andrew went over with a lighter.

"We met at Hialeah," she said, "at the races. I was there with friends and he came into the box. A few days later we flew to St. Thomas and chartered a yacht. We've been sailing from island to island. It was an absolute dream. Can you

imagine, Maureen? Me doing something as enterprising as that?"

Andrew was feeling far too many things to sort out at the moment, but paramount was "we chartered a yacht." Who chartered a yacht? Ned? With what? Instantly he thought of his mother and the five thousand dollars.

He glanced at Maureen. As he'd suspected, she had on her "Ned" face, that special closed look.

"But why the secrecy?" he said.

Rosemary flicked ash into a tray. "It's Neddy's idea. He wants everything to be done properly. You see, Mummy and Dad haven't met him yet and, although I'm not Dad's real daughter—Mummy was married before—he's always been mad keen to have an heir and I'm the next thing to it. Making sure I marry the right boy is terribly important to him."

Andrew said, "And they don't know a thing about it?"

"Not yet. Not that we're really worried, of course. After all, how can they fail to be crazy about Ned? Everybody is. And then he's the son of that wonderful woman with all the husbands. Dad met her once. He was very impressed."

In a chilly little voice Maureen said, "So just what is Ned's plan?"

"It isn't really a plan. It's just that I'm having dinner with Mummy and Dad tonight. I'm going to give Neddy a big build-up and then break the news. You see, they love me; they want me to be happy. Once they realize, I'm sure . . ."

The door buzzer rang.

"Heavens," said Rosemary. "They're here."

Maureen looked bewildered.

Andrew said, "I forgot to tell Maureen your parents were picking you up."

Rosemary clutched Maureen's knee. "Maureen, have lunch with me tomorrow—both of you, so we can talk."

"But . . ." began Maureen, her face taut and distracted.

"Please." Rosemary turned a pleading gaze on Andrew. "You will, won't you? One o'clock at Pavillon. I'll pay. I insist."

The buzzer sounded again. Andrew glanced at Maureen. She refused to catch his eye.

Wishing almost anything but this had happened at this particular moment, he said, "All right."

He went to answer the door.

The elder Thatchers didn't stay long. Andrew had met them several times and wasn't too mad about them. They were always very kind to Maureen but to Andrew it seemed to be the special sort of kindness reserved for poor relations. Mr. Thatcher looked like a clever, distinguished and rather formidable banker. Mrs. Thatcher was gracious and unadorned, with a very grand manner. She expressed herself "delighted to see dear Maureen's little place at last." It was a charming neighborhood. Her bridge club was right around the corner. They both made a few too many polite remarks about the "décor" and then whisked Rosemary off because they "hated to keep the chauffeur waiting."

By then Andrew and Maureen were late for Bill Stanton's party and had to leave immediately. In a way it was a relief to Andrew because it postponed the full-dress discussion which he was sure Maureen would be dreading as much as he. But it couldn't be left altogether up in the air. In the taxi he put out a feeler.

"I suppose we'd better get Ned's version."

"Of course."

"You never know. He may be in love with her."

"Ned?" Maureen exploded. "In love with poor Rosemary? In love with himself, you mean, as the son-in-law of a multimillionaire." She put her hand on her husband's knee. "I'm

sorry, darling. I do hate being beastly about Ned. But when it's the Thatchers! They're my family."

"I know."

"And Rosemary's marriage is the most important thing in the world to them. Ever since I can remember, it's been: When Rosemary finds the right boy . . . If they ever heard about the Las Vegas affair, for example! Oh dear, what a mess."

Her hand slipped into Andrew's. "Darling, let's agree on one thing at least. Whatever happens, we won't let it come between us." She leaned toward him and kissed him. "I love you," she said.

The party at Bill Stanton's was a big catered buffet. Bill was by the door, very smooth and toothy in a red dinner jacket.

"Ah," he said, "the most beautiful woman in New York and her spouse."

"The most beautiful maid," said Andrew.

"Maid?" Bill echoed. "Are you renting her out these days for a little light housekeeping?"

"Oh, Bill, look, there's Gloria," said Maureen and, looping her arm through his, dragged him off to greet a new arrival.

Andrew pushed his way through the crowd and got a drink from the bar. He could feel his hand a little unsteady, feel the hordes of unwelcome demons once again plunging and tumbling through him. "Maid? Are you renting her out these days for a little light housekeeping?" Bill hadn't got the allusion and Maureen had instantly pulled him away. To break up the conversation?

As Andrew wandered around, avoiding acquaintances, he counted the hired waiters. One, two, three, four—and the barman. With five in help, what difference could it have made whether Bill's maid was sick or not? Then . . . then . . .

The tension in him was getting out of control. Across the room he saw his wife standing in a group of people, laughing, chattering, dazzling as she always dazzled. She caught his eye and beckoned. He went over to join her. The moment he reached her, she put her hand on his arm and, still chattering and laughing with the others, kissed him on the cheek.

It could have been a coincidence. Bill could have been distracted by the other guests. At just that moment Maureen could have wanted to greet Gloria—whoever she was.

Some people he knew came up and carried Andrew away. He talked to them. Eventually he ate the inevitable turkey and ham with the inevitable television actress whose show he hadn't caught the week before. The evening wore on and he was suffering more than he'd ever suffered before, helplessly, like a doctor with cancer recognizing every symptom of his disease and yet unable to check them. Looking back as through a distorting mirror, he could see a veiled motive behind everything. In particular, her decision not to go with him on his business trip to Scandinavia two months ago was goading him. She had seemed so reasonable at the time. There was the extra expense. He was going to have to work so hard. She would so much rather wait for their first trip to Europe until they could go properly, just the two of them, just to have fun. Had she meant it? Had it been that? Or . . .

YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE IN NEW YORK WHO DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT YOUR WIFE.

Maureen and Bill Stanton? Why not? They'd known each other long before Andrew had met her. But then . . . if it had been Bill, why hadn't they got their signals straight? Maybe it hadn't been that at all. Maybe she'd been somewhere quite different. Maybe when she'd been caught out in the Rosemary lie, she'd clutched at Bill because she knew, as

a cynical old crony, he would be more than ready to cover up for her—provided she could brief him in time.

Oh, Bill, look, there's Gloria.

Andrew glanced around the room. He couldn't see Maureen anywhere. He went into the other reception room. She wasn't there either. He started to search the apartment. He was just outside the door of the bedroom where the guests' coats were kept when he heard her voice inside. It was hoarse with urgency.

"You've found it?" she was saying. "Thank God, I was going out of my mind that she . . ."

He was already moving into the room. It was too late to turn back even if he'd had the will power. Maureen was at the telephone on the dressing table. The instant she heard someone she spun around. She saw her husband. Her face went quite blank. Then she was smiling a vivid welcoming smile.

"Hello, darling." She turned back to the phone. "Well, thank God it all turned out all right. I knew it would. It's senility creeping on, sweetie. That's what it is. Good night."

She put down the phone. Still smiling, she shrugged her shoulders. "Gloria Leyden," she said. "The idiot. She swore she'd lost her sapphire clip. I made her go home and of course it was just as I supposed. That was her roommate. She told me Gloria found it right there on her dressing table."

Andrew stood looking at her, frighteningly unable to control himself.

"Andy," she said. "What is it?"

"Who were you calling?" he said.

"But I told you. Gloria Leyden. I don't think you know her. She shares an apartment with Mary Cross. You remember, the girl I was rooming with when we met. She . . ."

"Rosemary," he said. "Bill's sick maid. Gloria Leyden's sapphire clip."

"But, Andy . . ."

She moved around the bed and put her hand on his arm. He jerked his arm away. Two people came into the room, a man and a woman whom he vaguely recognized.

"Ooops," said the woman. "Pardon us. We've just come to get our coats."

They found their coats and left. For a long moment the Jordans stood looking at each other.

Then in a very soft voice, Maureen said, "Andy, poor darling Andy. So it's as bad as that. All right. If you don't believe me, call her."

"Call a woman I don't even know?"

She gave a little laugh. "It would sound rather peculiar, wouldn't it? 'Excuse me. You don't know me but am I right in understanding from my wife . . . ?' "

She broke off. Her lips started to tremble, her lashes were quivering. Suddenly she was crying. "Oh, Andy, Andy dear . . ."

Demons, thought Andrew, can perhaps be exorcised by tears, for at that moment when the whole world had seemed plunged into Stygian darkness to him, everything quite simply was all right again. He put his arms around her. He kissed her cheek, her hair, her mouth. She clung to him, kissing him back.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Oh, Andy . . ."

"I thought jealousy was just something in *Othello*."

She drew away, looking up at him, the tears glistening on her cheeks. She giggled. "And Desdemona doesn't even have a handkerchief."

Andrew took the handkerchief out of his pocket and gave

it to her. She had been calling Gloria Leyden. She had spent the afternoon helping Bill Stanton. She had lied about Rosemary only to spare him from himself. Of course she had.

Hadn't she?

She had dried her eyes and was pushing the handkerchief back into his pocket. "Come on home, darling. We've had enough of this party."

In the taxi she said, "Andy, about Ned."

Ned had been so far from Andrew's thoughts that it was a wrench to get back to him.

"I've been thinking all evening," she said. "Maybe it'll be all right."

At any other time, that would have astonished him.

"Yes," she said. "After all, that Da Costa thing did only happen once and we'll never know the true story. Maybe he's tired of chasing around with all those glamour babes. Maybe he is honestly trying to settle down. He could be, couldn't he?"

Andrew thought of the five thousand dollars. "Maybe."

"And then there's Rosemary. I can be more realistic about her than her parents. She's a nice girl, but after all, whoever she gets to marry her, that money's bound to figure, isn't it? All things considered, she might do a lot worse than Ned. We'll call him when we get home and . . ."

"No," said Andrew. "Not tonight."

Suddenly it was of vital importance to him that they should be alone. The climate was finally right. He could tell her about the anonymous letter, about the myriad doubts and indecisions. At last they could get back to where they had been.

She shot him a quick glance. "But, darling, do be sensible. It's still early and we've simply got to talk to him so we'll know where we stand with Rosemary at lunch tomorrow."

"No," he said.

She slipped her arm through his. "All right, dear," she said.

When they got back to the apartment, the sound of dance music was seeping faintly through the door.

"That's funny," said Maureen. "We didn't leave the phonograph or the radio on, did we?"

They went in. A single light was burning in the living room and the phonograph was whispering cha-cha-cha. A girl Andrew had never seen before, a sleazy, disarrayed blonde with a pony tail and a lot of flesh bursting out of a red dress, was sprawled on the couch. Ned was sitting on the floor at her feet, his head resting against her hip.

When he saw his brother and sister-in-law, he tried to get up. He didn't do it very well. He tried again and came unsteadily toward them. The white straw of his hair was mussed. He was smiling a vague, drunk smile. He looked about sixteen, a muddled, friendly, drunk sixteen.

"Hi," he said. "Lovely to see you lovely people. You know Shirley, of course. Shirley . . . Shirley . . . Shirley . . . No, don't tell me. It's on the tip of my tongue."

THREE

The invasion was so barefaced that Maureen and Andrew simply stood there in the hall. Luckily, the blonde, belying her appearance, was as embarrassed as they. She jumped off the couch, grabbed up her arsenic-green coat from a chair and was out of the apartment before anyone had said anything at all.

Maureen recovered first. "Well," she said, her eyes flashing ominously, "so much for me and my mellow reflections. How in heaven's name did he get in here anyway?"

Andrew had figured out that much. During their summer vacation Ned had come into town when his own apartment was sublet. Andrew had left a key for him and had never thought of asking for it back.

Ned was watching him, the hair falling over his forehead, still smiling the bemused, friendly smile. "So," he said. "No more Shirley."

"Too bad," said Maureen. "I'm sure I'd have adored her. I'm sure Rosemary would have too. She'd probably have invited her to be one of the bridesmaids."

Ned's grin went.

Andrew said, "Your girl friend was here this evening drooling over your dream excursion from island to island. That's one romance you've certainly loused up, isn't it?"

"To a fare-thee-well," said Maureen. "Merely speaking, of course, as the narrow-minded cousin of your intended."

"Maybe you planned it that way," Andrew said. "Method Twenty-three for shedding unwanted fiancées."

"But, Drew . . ." Ned's hand went out to his brother. "You don't understand . . ."

"That you love her?" suggested Maureen. "That in Cousin Rosemary you've finally found the girl of your dreams?"

The phone rang. Maureen answered it.

"Hello . . . Oh, yes." She listened, her profile getting progressively grimmer. "Saturday? Well, I mean . . . Yes, yes, we'll be there . . . Look, I'm terribly sorry but I can't really talk now. I'll call you in the morning . . . All right. Good night."

She put down the receiver.

"That," she said, "was Aunt Margaret. You'll be delighted to hear that Rosemary's told them her great news and both she and Uncle Jim are thrilled. They've invited us to a little family gathering on Saturday to celebrate the engagement."

She glared at Ned and then at her husband.

"I'm sorry, Andy, but from here on, this is your problem. I have nothing whatsoever to say to your darling baby brother, but, so far as I can see, I'll have a great deal to say to Rosemary tomorrow. Good night, Ned, and while you're about it you might as well say good-bye to an approximate eight million bucks as well."

She went in the bedroom and slammed the door.

Ned took a step after her and stumbled into a chair. Andrew could never remember being so mad with him before. He longed to kick him out of the apartment and forget him. But he knew that someone had to pick up the pieces, and someone, in Ned's life had always meant him. He made some instant coffee in the kitchen, and when he came out with it, his brother was sitting on the couch, solemnly folding a page

he'd torn off a theater program into a paper dart. Ever since their childhood, whenever he'd been caught out in something, Ned had always fiddled around making paper darts while he drifted off into some secret inner world of his own.

"Here," said Andrew. "Drink this."

Ned had finished making the paper dart. He dropped it on the coffee table and looked up. To Andrew he seemed completely sober again. It didn't take much to make Ned drunk and he could snap out of it. His eyes were as clear and vivid as the Caribbean sky, the dark tanned skin of his face was glowing with health. It was his looks and his good nature which made him everybody's darling. Not his brain and certainly not his character. No one, let alone Andrew, expected Ned to shine in either of those categories.

Ned took the cup and sipped from it. "Is she going to tell Rosemary?"

"Why not?"

"About Las Vegas too?"

"What's to stop her?"

"But she can't. Rosemary's just a kid. She's never done anything, never got involved. Rosemary's not going to understand."

"You should have thought of that before Shirley."

"Shirley?" Ned picked up the dart again, studied it thoughtfully and then, crushing it into a ball, tossed it across the room. "But, Drew, she wasn't anything. I was in some crummy bar, waiting for Rosemary to call. I was all tensed up. It wasn't just her telling her parents; it was you too. I knew she'd been here earlier. I'd made her swear not to say anything, but I was sure she would. I know Rosemary. She can't keep anything to herself, not when she's happy. I was sitting there thinking: 'My God, Rosemary's going to blurt it all out and Maureen's going to be bitchy and bring up Las

Vegas and everything's going to be loused up.' I waited and waited. Rosemary didn't call. I was drinking and that blonde —Shirley—was sitting there on a stool, tossing back stingers because her dinner date hadn't showed. 'Stood up,' she kept saying. 'Stood up again by a lousy wire salesman from Harrisburg.' She was a mess. And then, at last, Rosemary did call and it was okay, okay with you, okay with the Thatchers. Boy, the relief. I was on top of the world."

He broke off, running his finger around the rim of the coffee cup.

"And there was that poor, sad blonde slobbering into her stingers, 'I'm through. When you're stood up by a lousy wire salesman from Harrisburg, you're through.' And she clung to my arm and kept saying, 'Don't leave me. For God's sake, don't everyone leave me.' And I could imagine her night after night, slopping around the bars, getting the brush-off, and I thought: 'What the hell. If she needs a little warmth, if it'd give her morale a boost to have someone show a little interest—what the hell.' " He looked up at Andrew again with the earnest expression his brother knew so well, his "Drew-will-understand" look. "I couldn't take her to my place. I've got a friend there sleeping off a hangover on the couch. So I figured, since you'd left word you'd be out late . . . Gee, Drew, under the circumstances anyone would have done the same thing. You've got to see that."

The exasperating part for Andrew was that he did see. After all the years he'd put in, he was an expert on his brother's screwy personal vision. Giving a beat-up blonde what he thought she wanted, just because he was happy and she wasn't, was as natural to him as giving a buck to a phony beggar. Understanding didn't make Andrew any less mad, but as always with Ned, the issue became blurred.

Andrew sat down next to him on the couch. "You expect Maureen to fall for this Good Samaritan angle?"

"No."

"Or Rosemary?"

"No," he said. "That's why you've got to stop Maureen."

That was all Andrew needed—that bland assumption that he would take his brother's side against his own wife, that there was nothing at stake anyway except a minor point of protocol.

"For God's sake," he said, "the Thatchers are her family. It's Rosemary she's thinking of."

"And that's thinking of Rosemary? To louse everything up for her when we love each other?"

Ned turned to him and, to Andrew's astonishment, his brother's face was transfigured. It was the same sudden brightening which had come to Rosemary's face at the mention of Ned's name, the spontaneous glow which had obliterated almost all her homeliness.

"Drew, that's what you've got to see. It's something I never thought would happen. I always figured about me—well, I don't know. But from the first moment I saw Rosemary sitting there at the races, that funny, homely little girl with the great big glasses as if she was hiding behind them because everything outside was so much more wonderful and exciting than she was . . ."

He got up, lit a cigarette and started walking back and forth.

"Times come," he said, "when you see, when suddenly you're not you, you're outside looking in. I sat down next to her and started to talk, the same old crap I always talk—Venice, Hollywood, countesses, lousy Portuguese playboys. And I listened to myself and I thought: 'What are you trying to prove? That everyone's crazy about you? That you're IN?

In—what?' The lousy rat-race that Mother used to be in? Remember? Postcards from Antibes, cables from some jerk's castle in the Arlberg? *Happy birthday, darling Neddy. Too bad I can't be there. Love, Mother?* Was that it? Was I as much of a goon as that, just dashing around trying to catch up with Mother?"

He ran a hand through his hair.

"And there was Rosemary, sitting, listening, eating up all that crap as if I was the seventh wonder of the world, and I thought: 'The poor little rich creep, she doesn't have a chance. Any phony plastered with suntan oil on the Lido beach could gobble her up in a second.' And then I thought: 'Well, what chance have you got either—being dear little Neddy-boy all over the globe? In a couple of years your hair'll start falling out or you'll lose your waistline or they'll find themselves another boy, and there you'll be, slobbing around the bars, being stood up by some old cow of a Brazilian widow and . . .' And I knew then that Rosemary needed me and I needed her. Two babes in the lousy, stinking wood."

He came back to the couch and sat down by his brother, gripping his arm.

"Drew, I mean it. She's my chance. I love her. I've got to marry her."

With that incoherent, freakish explanation sounding in his ears, Andrew looked at his brother, feeling that, for all their intimacy, this was perhaps the first time in their lives that Ned had ever really tried to communicate. And, for the first time too, he felt he could see behind his brother's glamorous irresponsibility to a legacy of loneliness and insecurity which, after all, wasn't so different from his own. For Andrew this was such a totally novel way of looking at Ned that he was taken off his guard. He was touched

and, against everything he and Maureen had assumed, he honestly believed that Ned was in love with Rosemary Thatcher.

"Drew," Ned was saying. "Please. You've got to help me. You've got to stop Maureen."

It was then, when Andrew was on the verge of succumbing, that he thought of his visit to the Plaza. He said, "What about the five thousand bucks and Mother?"

For a moment Ned looked baffled. Then the quick, familiar grin came. "Poor old Ma. So she went gabbing to you. I figured she would."

"What did you want it for?"

Ned shrugged. "Oh, we don't have to go into that now."

Andrew could feel him sliding away from him. "Oh yes we do," he said. "Was it for that yacht which wafted Rosemary and you through the Lesser Antilles?"

"The yacht?" Ned echoed. "Oh no, it was Rudi Marsatti's yacht. I borrowed it."

"Then why did you need five thousand bucks badly enough to try to squeeze it out of Mother?"

Ned picked up the coffee cup in both hands and swallowed the contents, which must by then have been stone-cold. "What did I want it for? Oh, expenses. You can't expect me to let Rosemary pick up all the tabs."

"But you've got your own money."

Ned put the cup down and shot his brother a quick, almost crafty glance from the corner of his eye. "If I tell you something, you won't blow your top. Promise?"

"What is it?"

"I guess I'll have to sooner or later. Any day now the executors of the trust fund will be calling you. In Florida I was palling around with the Entragas. They're crazy about the horses. Maria got a real hot tip—right from the owner.

An outsider—forty-to-one. It couldn't fail. I was kind of low on funds. There was this guy who pals around with the Entragas—some kind of fancy gangster, I guess. I borrowed the dough from him. Ten thousand. Put it on the horse to win. The goddam horse fell and broke a leg. This guy—well, he got kind of tough. His ten thousand bucks—or else. There wasn't anything to do. He dragged in some shyster lawyer. I bound over to him the next two years of my income. Drew, I'm sorry. I know I was an idiot. But it was a sure thing, Maria said. A one hundred percent sure thing."

For a moment Andrew couldn't bring himself to say anything. Then he asked, "All this happened before you met Rosemary, or after?"

"Oh, just a couple of days before, I guess."

Andrew got up. He said, "Well, you certainly had me going for a while, didn't you?"

"But, Drew, you don't understand. It didn't have anything to do with me and Rosemary."

"Oh, no."

"Well, maybe it did. Maybe it—it was just something else to make me see what a blind alley I was in. But Rosemary and me, that's something quite different. It's love. I love her. Cross my bloody . . ."

"Get out of here," said Andrew.

"But, Drew, if Maureen tells her . . . if you don't stop Maureen . . ."

"Get out, I said."

Ned got up. He stood looking at his brother. "You mean it, don't you?"

"You know I mean it."

Ned gave a little resigned shrug. "Well, that's the way it goes, I guess." He patted his brother's shoulder. "Okay. Be mad. I don't blame you. You'll get over it."

He smiled a brief, affectionate smile. He went into the hall, put on his coat and left.

Andrew stood looking at the bedroom door, his exasperation against his brother growing in intensity. If it hadn't been for Ned, by now he would have dissolved the barrier between him and his wife. But, after all this, would the climate still be right? Would he be able to . . . ? Suddenly he could hear the familiar, dreaded voice once more.

Maid? Are you renting her out these days for a little light housekeeping? . . . Oh, Bill, look, there's Gloria . . . You've found it? Thank God, I was going out of my mind . . . You are the only one in New York who doesn't know about your wife . . .

Andrew Jordan went into the bedroom.

FOUR

Maureen was in bed, sitting up against the pillows with the radio playing softly. She switched it off.

"He's gone?" she asked.

"Yes."

She patted the bed beside her. Andrew sat down. She put her hand in his.

"Well, darling, let's have it."

He told her the whole ridiculous and shabby story.

"So," she said. "The little monster. Then I suppose we'll have to disillusion poor Rosemary, won't we?"

"I suppose so."

"Darling, there's no need for you to be there. It'd only make you miserable. I can handle it alone." She kissed him. "Come to bed, dear. We don't have to think about Ned any more tonight."

When Andrew came out of the bathroom in his pajamas, she had turned off the light. He slipped into the bed with her. Instantly she moved close to him and put her arms around him.

"Now, Andy, the important thing. Tell me everything. We've got to get it right."

Her lips were on his cheek. Her body, pressed against his, was warm, relaxed. None of the embarrassment he'd feared so much was there. As he held her in his arms, he found he could speak of everything, the anonymous letter, all his humiliating suspicions and insecurities, and in telling, in the

sound of his voice murmuring close to her ear, a wonderful release started through him as the poison of months was drawn out drop by drop.

"When we come home late and you don't . . ."

"Andy."

"I could see myself. I could see it was a disease. I knew the letter was just some crazy crank. But when I'd call and you weren't home, when you wouldn't come to Norway . . ."

"You thought there was someone else? Oh, my darling, if only you'd spoken about it."

"I was ashamed."

"I'm the one who should be ashamed."

"And tonight with Rosemary. And—and when you were on the phone . . ."

"To Gloria. Poor muddle-headed Gloria Leyden. Oh, Andy, I'll know now. We'll both know. And whenever, if ever, it happens again, we can handle it, can't we? We can just look at each other and giggle it away."

Andrew could feel her eyelashes fluttering against his cheek.

"And it's my fault, darling—being so giddy, dashing about all over the place. It's senseless, I know it is. But ever since we knew about not having a baby . . . It's that. You know it is, don't you?"

The marvelous sense of intimacy restored had reached its zenith, for after the day she'd come home from the doctor with the news that there were complications which made it highly dangerous for her to have a baby, Maureen had hardly mentioned the subject again. Andrew had tried to hide his own great disappointment, but she had handled it with such brittle imperturbability that he'd assumed it had been something less than a tragedy for her. There, without his suspecting it, had been yet another barrier of misunderstanding.

He brought his hand up to stroke her hair. "I never realized it was so bad for you too."

"Bad? Oh, darling . . ."

"Maybe if you went back to Dr. Williams?"

"I did. Two months ago. I never told you. I wanted to put it all out of my mind."

"Then why don't we adopt a baby?" said Andrew, coming out with his secret wish.

"Adopt one?"

"Why not? I can start looking around tomorrow."

"Oh, darling, soon perhaps. But not yet, not now. There's so much else now . . ."

When they slept, it was in each other's arms. At some time of the night Andrew awoke drowsily. It was the hour of the demons, the moment of ordeal, where, for months now, the fiends had come squeaking and jibbering. But this night Maureen's head was resting on his chest; there was warmth, gentleness and peace, as if no sheath of skin existed between them, as if they were one organism, their blood coursing from the same heart. Andrew had got his manhood back.

"This is the happiest moment of my life," he thought and went to sleep again.

In the morning Maureen was up before him. It hadn't happened for weeks, not because Maureen was haphazard but because Andrew had insisted it was pointless. When he went into the living room, his breakfast was laid out on the coffee table. The mail was propped against the percolator. He opened it. There was nothing but circulars. He was glancing at an ardent plea to broaden his culture through book clubs when Maureen, in a white silk robe, came in from the kitchen with a plate of bacon and eggs. She slid onto the couch next to him and kissed him.

"Darling, you would rather I handled Rosemary alone, wouldn't you?"

He had forgotten all about Ned and Rosemary.

"I don't see why you should have to," he said.

"No. It's easier for Rosemary, I think, if it's just girls together. I'll call you at the office right after the lunch. Oh dear, it's a bore, isn't it? But it's got to be done. Darling, don't worry about Ned. You know he'll have forgotten all about her in a week."

When Andrew left, she went to the door with him. She clung to him, kissing him, as if he were about to take off for a submarine trip under the Arctic Circle. At the office, Miss Minter, bringing in his mail, said, "My, what's with you today? Someone left you a million dollars?"

Around eleven, his mother called. "Andrew, some people, Hatchard or something, telephoned me. They want me and Lem for dinner on Saturday. Apparently Ned's engaged to their daughter."

"Well . . ." began Andrew.

"What do you mean—well? Either he's engaged to her or he isn't. It's all very odd. They say they've met me. I don't remember any Hatchards."

"It's Thatcher," said Andrew.

"Whatever it is, I don't remember. Are they well-to-do?"

"Multimillionaires, I believe."

"Well, that's a comfort. But I do wish Ned wasn't so tiresome. I called him, but of course he doesn't answer his phone. Andrew—explain it all to me."

For once it was a relief to Andrew that his mother was so totally uninterested in anything that didn't involve her. He was deliberately evasive, merely suggesting that the engagement and the dinner date were tentative and that she should wait for a confirmation. That more than satisfied her.

He'd expected her to ask, as she usually did, what she should wear if she had to go to the Hatchards', but instead, she said, "Oh, here's Lem. He's just got up. Poor darling, he had a terrible night. That wretched heart. Andrew, please don't go on and on babbling. I really don't have the time to listen to any more. Perhaps we'll drop in this evening on our way to the Raffertys'. Yes, Lem, yes, darling, of course I'm coming."

Because she'd called, Ned was back in Andrew's thoughts. Now, in his new euphoria, he no longer felt the slightest resentment toward his brother. It was the touching moments of the night before which came back to him, Ned's absurd effort to boost the beat-up blonde's morale, his broken confession: "Rosemary's my chance. I love her. I've got to marry her." Wasn't it possible that he had, after all, been telling the truth—his sort of truth? Wasn't Ned perfectly capable of losing ten thousand dollars to a gangster and thinking himself crazy about a homely rich girl without there being any conscious connection between the two facts? Andrew's love for his brother, so often marred by exasperation or envy, was at its simplest and most protective. Poor Ned, it was too bad reality was reality and that Maureen would have to bring him down to earth. But she was, of course, morally obligated to the Thatchers. Once again he blessed his wife for taking the whole thing off his shoulders.

But all through the morning, the tension of the lunch was with him. He himself went out to lunch with his accountant, rather distractedly absorbing chicken cacciatore and sales figures. Although his only afternoon appointment was with an out-of-town client at three-thirty, he got back to the office early because he was afraid of missing Maureen's call. By three o'clock, it still hadn't come in, but it didn't

worry him. Cousin Rosemary had probably taken it hard. Maureen would have to nurse her through the afternoon.

At quarter past three, he was preparing himself for the client when the door of his office flew open and Rosemary Thatcher came hurrying in. She had a wild, disheveled appearance, bringing an atmosphere of disaster as if she were some fugitive from a fire or a subway accident. Only the glasses seemed to have an individuality of their own, large, gleaming, dominating the drawn little tight-lipped face.

"Please," she said. "Oh, please stop Maureen."

She must have been running. Her voice came in choking gasps. Andrew had visions of her fleeing from Pavillon ("I'll pay. I insist") with the dogs of hell hot in pursuit. He went around the desk and tried to make her sit down, but she pushed his hand aside.

"No. Listen. You've got to. She told me about Neddy—everything, the thing in Las Vegas, the trouble in Florida, the—the blonde he brought to your house last night. She thought it would knock me out. As if I didn't know Neddy, as if I hadn't imagined far more lurid things about him than that, as if it could make any difference anyway when I love him, when it's just because of all those idiotic escapades that he needs me."

She was gazing up at him through the glasses with owlish intensity. "I told her it wouldn't make the slightest difference to me whether Ned had robbed a bank or killed a dozen people, but she just couldn't get it. She said I was crazy and that if I didn't have any sense, then she'd have to have it for me. She said she'd go to Mummy and Dad . . ."

Her hand gripped his arm. It was a tough, male grip for so small a girl. "And she will unless you stop her. So please, please, make her see it's none of her business, that she can't go pushing in, destroying, ruining . . ."

Andrew looked down at her. This very young fury by love possessed was far removed from Ned's "babe in the woods" who needed his protection.

"Call her," she demanded. "Now. She's gone home. I made her promise to think it over for a few hours. She had no choice anyway, as I pointed out to her, since Daddy's in a board meeting all afternoon and Mummy's at her bridge club. But she will go to them, I know her. So you've got to stop her, because it's absurd. You don't know Dad. Mummy's all right. But Dad's from the Dark Ages. If he heard all those things about Neddy, he'd—he'd go into a decline. And it wouldn't change anything because I'm going to marry Ned anyway. I'm of age. I have my own money. What difference does it make if Neddy's broke, when I've got my own money? Mummy and Dad can't stop us. Nobody can. But if Maureen sticks her nose in, she'll just hurt them, bewilder them, make them desperately unhappy."

She swung away from him to the phone and put her hand on it. "Call her. Please. Now."

It was melodramatic and a little ridiculous, but such ferocity of purpose in so young a girl was also rather touching to Andrew.

In a voice which he tried to make as avuncular as possible, he said, "But, Rosemary, I don't think you understand Maureen's position. She's devoted to your parents; they're almost like mother and father to her. She knows how important your marriage is to them. She's got to be level-headed and try to decide what's best for everyone."

Rosemary laughed. "You think that's what her motive is?"

"Of course."

"That's funny—coming from her husband. Haven't you learned anything about Maureen yet? Maureen worrying about Mummy and Dad? Maureen trying to decide what's

best for everyone? Maureen never did anything unless there was something in it for her. She hates me. She always has, because she was the pretty one and I was the homely one and yet I was the one with the money. It's spite, that's all it is, spite and envy and worse than that. It's her big opportunity. At last she can get in with Mummy and Dad. 'See how Rosemary's let you down. See how I'm the good one, the sweet one, the one you can trust . . .' "

Anger came so quickly to Andrew that it was almost out of his control. He could feel his hand quivering with a desire to slap her. But that was the moment when a scurrying Miss Minter came in to announce that his client was in the outer office. Proportion was restored. His anger seemed as childish as Rosemary's savage accusation against his wife.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm afraid you'll have to leave now."

"But you'll talk to Maureen. You'll stop her."

"Aren't you being a little unrealistic coming to me about all this?"

"But Neddy's your brother."

"And Maureen's my wife. Oddly enough, we don't happen to share the same opinion of her. I think you might as well know right now that if she decides to tell your parents, I for one will be solidly back of her."

Rosemary Thatcher stood glaring at him, her little pink tongue coming out to moisten her lips. "You fool," she said. "You poor pathetic fool." She turned away from him, her glasses dazzlingly reflecting the window, and swept past Miss Minter out the door.

"My!" said Miss Minter.

"My—indeed," said Andrew.

His client walked into the office then and, even if he'd planned to call Maureen, the opportunity had gone.

It was after five when the client left. Andrew let Miss

Minter go and stayed on clearing up some work which had to be ready for the next day. Rosemary hadn't succeeded in marring his new mood of warm, confident happiness. In fact, now his anger had subsided, he found he rather admired her. Whether Ned knew it or not, he had run into a girl who was more than capable of subduing him, and, since she had money independent of her parents, it looked as if she was going to have little difficulty in getting him to the altar, whatever Maureen might happen to feel about it.

Well, so, fine, thought Andrew. It might be the making of Ned.

When he left the office just before six, the flower shop in the building was still open. He bought a large bunch of red and white carnations and took a taxi home. As he went up in the self-service elevator, the fragrance of the blossoms made a little private world of spring for him, and suddenly it came to him that although Maureen had promised to call and hadn't, he had felt not the slightest qualm of uneasiness, nor had a single demon stirred. There was the proof. The cure was complete.

The Jordans' apartment was on the top floor of the building. Andrew got out of the elevator. Holding the carnations, he brought out his key to put it in the lock, but as he did so, he noticed that the lock was scratched and the wood around it chipped. He put his hand out to touch it and the door opened of its own accord.

Anxiety springing alive, he hurried down the hall to the living room. He was confronted with chaos. The pillows had all been pulled off the couch. The drawers of his desk were open, spewing out papers. In the center of the carpet, a golden dress—one of Maureen's evening dresses—lay sprawled in a twisted heap.

The anxiety tilted over into panic.

"Maureen!" he called.

He ran into the bedroom. His wife lay on her back on the bed. She seemed as grotesquely shapeless as the golden dress tossed on the living-room floor. One leg was dangling over the edge of the bed, the other was crushed under her.

Andrew dropped the carnations. He went to the bed. Lying beside her was a gun—the automatic he kept in the bedside-table drawer. He saw it in the same second that he saw the gaping mouth, the flat, staring eyes, the two wounds, one in her left breast, the other further down and to the right.

"Maureen."

Her left hand, palm upward, was resting on her knee. The wedding ring wasn't there. Instead there was a pink circular mark around the ring finger. Andrew leaned forward and touched the hand. There was no sensation of touching Maureen. It was like contact with some cold anonymous thing stumbled against in a dark room.

Andrew Jordan knew then that the worst thing which could possibly happen to him had happened.

FIVE

In the first dazed moments it was as if he were dead too, or almost dead, lying beside his wife on the rumpled white bedspread, knowing with some last flicker of intelligence that horror had struck, but no longer sure what the horror had been or to whom it had come.

He did whatever he did. Later he had no memories at all for that period, but he must have taken in the shambles around him of opened drawers and suits and dresses scattered at random, because, when he was back in the living room, beginning to think and feel again, his first coherent mental image was of one of his sports coats hanging by an armhole from the knob of the bathroom door. He was sitting on the pillowless couch. It wasn't meant to be sat on that way. It humped his knees up in front of him. He looked at the crumpled gold evening dress and thought: "My tan sports coat is hanging by its armhole from the knob of the bathroom door." Then, for a moment, the insulation of shock was stripped away and the reality of what had happened burst in on him with full violence.

Maureen was dead. Hoodlums had broken in. She had surprised them. They had shot her with his gun.

It was rage that he felt before grief. His hands wanted to smash out wildly, pointlessly. Then grief came with the cold, bitter knowledge of his loss. Maureen was gone. How was he going to live without Maureen?

The light from the lamp beside him seemed as blinding as

a searchlight. He put a hand up to shield his eyes. He knew he must start what had to be started. Until he moved, nothing would move, the nightmare pall of death would continue to hang motionless here with the blinding light and the golden dress, there in the bedroom with his coat on the doorknob, the rumpled bedspread and Maureen's eyes—no, not eyes, stones, green flat stones . . .

His hand was still covering his face when he heard the footsteps. His heart gave a leap of joy. It hadn't happened after all. It had been a hallucination. Maureen was coming to him out of the bedroom.

"Andrew. Andrew . . ." The voice and the footsteps, multiple footsteps, clicking, clumping. "Andrew, really! Don't you know you should never leave your door open in New York? They say Naples is the most dangerous city in the world but it's nothing to New York these days—absolutely nothing. It's . . . Andrew!"

He looked up into his mother's piercing blue eyes. She was wearing a mink coat. Ruby earrings glinted. Her little hand was resting on Lem's arm as he loomed, big, beaming his handsome slightly uneasy major's smile, at her side.

"Andrew—what's the matter?"

He knew they were there. He knew who they were. He knew everything about them except what to do with them.

"Andrew. That dress on the floor . . . all this confusion . . . Andrew, tell me."

He got up. His knees felt as if he had been in a hospital bed for weeks.

"Maureen!" he said.

"Something's happened to her?" said his mother. "Where is she?"

"The bedroom," he said.

"Go, Lem. Into the bedroom. Go and see."

"Sure, chickie."

Lem hurried away. Andrew could feel himself losing balance, and dropped backward so that he was sitting on the couch again. His mother sat at his side. Her hand gripped his arm.

"Andrew, what have you done to Maureen? Tell me. You must tell me."

Done to Maureen. He heard that. He knew it had to be refuted. Not even his mother could . . . He tried to think of the right words.

He heard his voice saying, "Get me a drink."

She fluttered away. Dimly Andrew thought: "When has anyone ever asked Mother to get anything?" She was back in a flash, holding a tumbler.

"Here. It's whiskey. Straight."

He took the glass in both hands. He raised it to his lips and gulped. Through the glass, he saw that Lem had come back. He could see his stepfather's face, distorted by the glass into a Halloween pumpkin ghost with a painted mustache and two round buttons for eyes.

"She's dead."

"Maureen?" cried Mrs. Pryde.

"She's lying on the bed . . . shot."

Mrs. Pryde spun back to Andrew. "Andrew!" she said.

It was amazing how, in spite of his dazedness, Andrew could catch every overtone in his mother's voice. "Andrew!" That exact accusatory timbre echoed back through his life to his earliest childhood. "Andrew!" meaning, "Of course it was you and not Neddy who broke the window." "Andrew!" meaning, "For heaven's sake, don't maul me about. Can't you see I'm dressed for the evening?" And now, "Andrew!" meaning, "Why have you let this dreadfully embarrassing thing happen to me?"

He looked up at her over the glass, realizing, with nothing but a faint, abstract surprise, that for all the pretended understanding of his later years, he'd never forgiven her.

"She's dead," Lem was saying. "The bedroom's in a state of chaos too. It's burglars. They must have broken in and killed her."

He put his hand on Andrew's shoulder. It was heavy, and improbably comforting.

"You just came home, didn't you, Andrew, old boy?"

"Yes."

"And you found her?"

"Yes."

"Poor Andrew. What a ghastly thing. What an appallingly ghastly thing."

Andrew was still looking at his mother. Her pretty metal face had no change of expression at all.

"Andrew, have you called the police?"

He shook his head.

"Why not?"

Lem's voice came: "Chickie dear, he's in shock. Can't you see? Poor fellow, he doesn't know what he's doing."

"If he doesn't, then someone's got to. You call them, Lem. Call this minute. We don't want them to think we sat here for hours doing nothing. Oh, dear, it's incredible. Quite incredible."

Lem called the police. He came back to the couch. He was clumsily gentle with Andrew. He wanted to put the pillows back so that he could lie down but Andrew knew he had to fight the stifling lethargy rather than give in to it. Lem got him another drink. He sat sipping it. The rage was coming back. The hoodlums would have to be caught. They would be made to pay. A violently sadistic vision came of two indeterminate thugs, heads shaved, bodies strapped to electric

chairs, screaming as the voltage roared through them. Andrew clung to it as the only antidote to despair.

His mother demanded a martini. Martinis were the only drinks she ever touched. Even then, there had to be the elaborate ritual of chilled glass and flaked lemon peel. Lem went in and out of the kitchen preparing it. He brought it to her. She put a cigarette into a long jade holder. Lem lit it. Then he got a drink for himself. It was all done in dumb-show—the television with the sound cut off, Mrs. Pryde puffing the cigarette, tilting the martini glass, Lem standing beside her, Andrew sitting on the couch.

"Lem."

"Yes, chickie."

"You'd better call the Raffertys. Just say we're sorry but we can't come after all. Don't tell them anything. Don't say a thing."

"No, dear."

Lem called the Raffertys.

"Andrew."

"Yes, Mother."

"Where's Neddy?"

"Ned?"

"I called him after lunch. I told him we were dropping in here on our way to the Raffertys'. He said he'd try to join us . . . Andrew."

"Yes, Mother."

"He seemed very upset about the Hatchard girl. Maureen was causing trouble, he said. I didn't understand. Why should Maureen . . . ?"

"Chickie," said Lem. "Not now."

Through the open front door Andrew could hear the clatter of the elevator opening. There were voices, footsteps.

It was like an army advancing. Andrew put down his drink. The apartment was suddenly full of policemen.

Whatever they did they did without him and around him. There were at least three of them if not four. Mostly they were in the bedroom but occasionally one or two of them would be lumbering about the living room, big, red-faced men, moving with the cautious purposefulness of bird dogs. Every now and then a flashbulb flared. In the babel, Andrew was constantly conscious of his mother's voice, high, imperious, as if she were dealing with hotel clerks or customs' officials who didn't quite understand who she was.

He knew he was in shock, but he was coherent enough in his mind to realize it was wiser to pretend an even greater confusion than he felt. That way they would leave him alone, give him a little more time before he had to face the reality of Maureen's death.

It seemed like hours—and probably was—that he sat alone on the couch. Then his mother and Lem and another man came over to him.

His mother said, "Andrew, this is Lieutenant Mooney."

Lem said, "Andrew, old boy, you all right? Can you answer a few questions?"

"Yes," he said.

Lem handed him a lighted cigarette. He took it and inhaled, looking at Lieutenant Mooney, who had sat down in a chair opposite him. The lieutenant was big, with a big square face out of which small but very blue eyes watched with a wary scrutiny. A typical cop, bringing with him a whole alien world of bleak squad rooms, white-gloved hands directing traffic, a wife and kids in . . . where? thought Andrew madly . . . Queens? . . . Sunday poker games in floral sports shirts and slacks.

"Okay, Mr. Jordan?" he said.

"Yes," said Andrew.

"We're checking on valuables—objects which could have been stolen."

"Her jewel box," said Mrs. Pryde. "She must have had a jewel box. Didn't she have a jewel box, Andrew?"

"Yes," said Andrew. "A red-leather box in the right-hand top drawer of her dressing table."

"You see, Lieutenant," said Lem. "It's not there now. They took it—and the money from her pocketbook."

Lieutenant Mooney's big face still loomed in front of Andrew. "Anything else, Mr. Jordan? Any money kept any place?"

"No," he said. "I don't think so. There's her mink coat."

"It's on the floor in the bedroom," said Lem. "They dropped it. When they shot her, they got scared. They just ran with the jewel box and the money from her pocketbook and whatever rings she was wearing."

Memory returned to Andrew of his wife's hand, palm upward, fingers curved, the pink circular band where the wedding ring had been.

"Andrew!" It was his mother's voice, sharp, disciplinary. "You just came home from the office in the ordinary way and found her, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Have trouble with the front door?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes. I saw marks on the lock. I leaned my hand against the door and it opened."

"This was just before Lem and I came," said Mrs. Pryde. "It was, wasn't it? Just a few moments."

"Yes," said Andrew.

Lieutenant Mooney's large hands were on his large knees. "What's a bunch of carnations doing on the bedroom floor, Mr. Jordan?"

"I brought them for my wife," he said.

Heavy, short-lashed lids flicked over the blue eyes. "Had a quarrel?"

"Quarrel?" echoed Mrs. Pryde. "Why on earth should they have had a quarrel?"

"Husbands bring their wives flowers when they've quarreled," said Lieutenant Mooney.

"How absurd," said Mrs. Pryde. "How utterly absurd. My husband brings me flowers every day."

Lieutenant Mooney ignored her. "Had you quarreled with your wife, Mr. Jordan?"

"No," said Andrew.

"And there wasn't anyone else who could have wanted to harm her?"

"No."

"That your gun, Mr. Jordan?"

"Yes. I kept it in the bedroom for protection."

"You got a license?"

"Yes."

"Then the way you figure it, Mr. Jordan—hoodlums broke in, they found your wife here, she made a grab for the gun, they got it and shot her?"

"Of course," said Lem. "That's what he thinks because that's the way it happened."

There was a clattering sound. Two men in white coats had come in with a stretcher. The lieutenant got up and left Andrew. His mother and Lem closed ranks. Andrew knew people from the morgue had come for Maureen. He knew too that his mother and Lem were hoping he didn't realize it. Soon they carried the stretcher out again with a sheet thrown over it. Lem and his mother went away. The cops came back into the living room. One of them picked up the golden dress and carried it into the bedroom, carefully stepping over Andrew's legs as he passed him.

Andrew heard his mother's voice again, clear and irritated. She and Lem and the lieutenant were back.

". . . really, it's too disgraceful, Lieutenant. The poor boy! Persecuting him at a time like this! Don't you realize how he feels? Don't you have any sensitivity?"

Lieutenant Mooney came to rest solidly in front of Andrew. He said, "You got anything more to tell us, Mr. Jordan?"

"No," said Andrew.

"Okay. Then I guess that should do it for tonight. But I'll want you tomorrow at ten o'clock at this address."

He handed Andrew a card. Andrew put it in his jacket pocket.

"At ten, Mr. Jordan. Okay?"

"Yes," said Andrew.

"I'm leaving a man here. Got to go over this place with a fine-tooth comb. Your mother's fixed it for you to sleep at her place, she says."

He was holding out his hand. "And I'm sorry, Mr. Jordan. This is tough for you. You have my sympathy."

Andrew took the hand.

"Good night, ma'am. Good night, Mr. Pryde."

They all went away except one cop, who stayed in the bedroom. Mrs. Pryde sighed. She took out her jade holder and had Lem light a cigarette for her.

"Well, they could have been worse, I suppose. Andrew, it's all arranged. I've called the Plaza and got a room for you."

"It's much better that way, old boy," said Lem. "Wouldn't want to leave you hanging around here."

"Just sit quietly," said Mrs. Pryde. "Lem and I will pack some things for you."

They disappeared into the bedroom. Andrew got up. What did he want? A cigarette. He took one out of a box on the

coffee table, lit it and, moving to a chair against the far wall of the room, sat down again. Shock and his mother's unlikely presence had had the strange effect of turning back the years. He felt like a child again, a little boy in knee pants sitting obediently as he had been told to sit, while his mother packed the wrong things—always the wrong things—for him to take to a friend's house for a shore weekend.

A sausage of ash had formed on his cigarette. He got up, brought an ashtray and balanced it on the arm of his chair. As he flicked ash into it, his elbow jogged it and sent it spinning off the chair arm. He got up and pulled the chair away from the wall. There was the ashtray with ash scattered around it. Lying beside it was a neatly folded paper dart.

He picked up the dart. On its broad end, its tail, he read the name of a book club . . .

In his mind he was back again on the couch with his breakfast tray in front of him. He was opening the mail. He was reading the circular from a book club. It had come this morning, so the dart could only have been made today.

Ned must have been here today.

"I called Neddy," the echo of his mother's voice came. "He seemed very upset about the Hatchard girl. Maureen was causing trouble, he said."

Suddenly the sanity-preserving image of the hoodlums, shaven-headed, strapped to electric chairs, became blurred. Ned . . . Rosemary . . . *You've got to stop Maureen.*

The taste of the cigarette in his mouth was sickening. It was, he realized, the first unmuted physical sensation he'd had since that moment by the bed when he realized his whole life was destroyed.

His mother and Lem came out of the bedroom. Lem was carrying a little overnight bag of Maureen's.

His mother said, "Andrew, what on earth have you got in your hand?"

He crushed the dart into a ball and put it in his pocket.

"Nothing," he said.

"Well, do come along then," said his mother. "It's almost ten o'clock and I'm faint with hunger."

SIX

Andrew awoke next morning with no bearings. He didn't know where he was or what was happening. Then simultaneously he realized that the phone was ringing, that he was in a room at the Plaza and that Maureen was dead.

He reached for the phone. Lem's voice, bluff, hollowly avuncular, said, "Andrew, old boy, it's eight-thirty. I thought I'd give you a call. You're due at the station house at ten."

The station house. The card Lieutenant Meehan? O'Malley? had given him last night.

"The lieutenant just called us. He wants your mother and me too. But later. Your mother says come up here for breakfast."

Andrew thought of his mother decoratively seated at a room-service breakfast table with the decorative view over Central Park behind her.

"No," he said. "Thanks, but no."

"But, old boy, your mother says . . ."

"Tell her I'm all right. And, Lem, call the office later on. Let them know I won't be in today."

He took a shower. Both of the shirts his mother had picked for him had buttons missing. He put one on anyway. In the pocket of his jacket, he found the card. Lieutenant *Mooney*. He found the crushed paper dart too. For a moment he stood with it in his hand, feeling below the ice of despair a faint ripple of uneasiness. Then he put it back in his pocket.

He knew he hadn't eaten since lunch the day before. He

went into a coffee shop across Fifth Avenue. A woman came in and sat down next to him. She unfolded the *Daily News*. Headlines glared at him. NORMA PRYDE'S DAUGHTER-IN-LAW SLAIN BY HOODLUMS. Norma Pryde's daughter-in-law, Mother's daughter-in-law, Maureen . . . He put down his coffee cup. He got off the stool and paid the check.

At the station house, Lieutenant Mooney was waiting for him in a drab little office with a desk and rickety wooden chairs. Outside in the squad room a radio was playing rock and roll. Big, placid, gum-chewing, the lieutenant received him quite impersonally, as if he were just another paper going across his desk. There were stilted words of sympathy, then Andrew was asked to describe his discovery of "the deceased." He told about buying the carnations, going home, finding the lock broken, finding Maureen. Lieutenant Mooney took notes on a block of yellow lined paper. Andrew was still completely icebound. Nothing had any reality or any ability to inflict pain. Either Lieutenant Mooney caught the hoodlums or he didn't. Even if he did, what would be changed?

"You haven't thought of anything else valuable that could be missing?"

"No."

"Just the jewel box, whatever money she had in her purse, and the rings she was wearing?"

"That's all I can think of that was valuable—except clothes."

"How valuable were the jewels?"

"She had diamond earrings, pearls, not much else. As I remember, the whole lot was insured for five thousand."

"Five thousand." Lieutenant Mooney looked up at Andrew, tapping with his pencil on the desk. "By the way, Mr. Jordan, it's okay for you to go back to the apartment whenever you want to. We're through."

"Thank you," said Andrew.

"And you won't have any trouble with the lock on the front door. There was nothing wrong with it."

The small, inexpressive blue eyes were watching Andrew with what seemed like the mildest curiosity. Vaguely Andrew realized he was waiting for him to say something.

When he didn't, the lieutenant went on, "I could have told you that last night, but your mother was fussing. Don't worry him, she was saying. Got to respect a mother's feelings, don't you? Someone scratched the lock and chipped the wood around it, but the lock itself wasn't broken. There was nothing wrong except that the catch on the lock was released from the inside. Get it, Mr. Jordan? Nobody busted into that apartment."

His massive jaws were chewing in rhythm to the rock and roll. He leaned a little closer to Andrew over the desk.

"If there was hoodlums, they were let in or they got in with a key. But if they were let in or had a key, why would they bother to scratch the lock and chip the wood? They wouldn't, would they, Mr. Jordan? Sure, someone took the jewel box and the money and the rings off her fingers. But that was a phony burglary. I saw it right away. Didn't need to look at the lock. Pillows pulled off the couches, drawers left open, suits and dresses tossed around. I've seen enough genuine breaking and entering. I know how it's done and how it isn't done. Even with kids, delinquents, it isn't like that."

He dropped the pencil on the desk with a little clattering sound. "There's no chance of suicide, even if the M.E. hadn't ruled it out on account of the nature of the wounds. So, Mr. Jordan, any idea how come someone murdered your wife and faked it like a breaking and entering?"

Andrew listened. He knew what the words meant. He was perfectly capable of following the logic of what the lieutenant

said. But, for the first second, he had no reaction at all. It was as if a very dull man at a very dull party had told a very dull story to which he'd paid polite attention but from which self-protecting boredom had kept him completely detached. It was only gradually that he started to feel, but once it started, it was as if he had suddenly emerged from hours of anesthesia. Since there had been no hoodlums, the disaster which had seemed as meaningless as a train accident, demanding nothing of him beyond endurance, had completely changed its nature. It had moved into an area where he could do something about it, and, because he was essentially a doer, Andrew was himself again.

Some one definite person—possibly someone he actually knew—had killed Maureen. He made the statement to himself and confronted it. Then, because he had to, he thought of Ned and the paper dart.

Lieutenant Mooney was still watching him. He had pulled a piece of tissue out of a box and almost daintily transferred into it the gum from his mouth. He crushed the tissue into a ball and flicked it into a metal scrap basket.

"Well, Mr. Jordan, any idea? Did your wife have any enemies?"

Ned an enemy? *You've got to stop Maureen.* For a second Andrew was assaulted by a thought of Ned pleading with Maureen, hysterically threatening, grabbing the gun. Almost immediately he rejected it. Didn't Rosemary have money of her own? Hadn't she made it plain that they were planning to go ahead with the marriage whatever Maureen had decided to do? Then Maureen had represented no serious threat to Ned at all. He had been there in the apartment, yes, but he would be able to explain. To go beyond that point would be to plunge into chaos.

"So far as I know," he said, "my wife had no enemies."

He realized that by holding back any reference to the paper dart he had, as it were, taken one step away from Maureen. He had changed his relationship with the lieutenant too, and for the worse. But he had made his decision and was prepared to accept the consequences.

"No enemies at all, Mr. Jordan? Nothing from her past?"

"Her past?"

"Nothing before she married you, no trouble?"

"None that I know of."

"You got on well together?"

"We loved each other."

"How long you been married?"

"Eighteen months."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"No trouble between you and her? No other woman?"

"No."

"No other man?"

As vividly as if he were actually seeing it, memory came to Andrew of the letter. YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE IN NEW YORK WHO DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT YOUR WIFE. But that had been a mere piece of psychopathic filth as removed from reality as his own sick suspicions. Lying in bed in his arms Maureen had told him so and he had believed her. To doubt her now would be as irresponsible and masochistic as to have jumped to conclusions about Ned. To doubt her, also, would be to betray the only thing that was left to him from his marriage—his belief in his wife's love.

"No," he said, removing himself that much further from the lieutenant. "No other man."

"You don't have a kid?"

"No."

"Planning on one?"

"My wife wasn't able to have children unless she had a difficult and dangerous operation which her doctor didn't recommend."

"But you were happy?"

"Yes."

"And no enemies?"

"No."

"No trouble?"

"No."

"Then you can't help me?"

"I don't think so."

"But you'd co-operate if you could? You want us to find out who killed your wife, don't you?"

Andrew glared at him contemptuously across the desk.

"Okay, okay, Mr. Jordan. No offense intended." The lieutenant flicked back some of the pages on the yellow block. "You know a Mr. Stanton—Mr. William Stanton?"

"Yes," said Andrew.

"You went to a party at his house day before yesterday. We found an invitation stuck in your bedroom mirror. I called this Mr. Stanton. He said, yes, you were there. You and your wife."

"We were there."

"People gossip," said the lieutenant. "You know how people gossip. You know a Mr. and Mrs. Ben Adams?"

Ben Adams? The name floated, faintly familiar, through Andrew's mind.

"It seems that this Mr. and Mrs. Ben Adams gossiped with Mr. Stanton. They called him up to thank him for the party, he said, and they gossiped. They had to leave the party early, they told him, and they went to get their coats in the bedroom where the coats were kept."

Andrew knew then. The Adamses, friends of Bill Stanton's

—the man and his wife. *Ooops. Pardon us. We've just come to get our coats.*

"And they said," went on Lieutenant Mooney, "I hope it turned out all right with the Jordans. They were at it in the bedroom, fighting like cat and dog. What about that, Mr. Jordan?"

Andrew had been waiting for something like this. He had realized that this plodding, unimaginative policeman would be bound to suggest that he had killed his wife because husbands were classically the first suspects. But now that it had happened, his control completely deserted him and he felt rage surging through him, rage at Lieutenant Mooney and his thick-witted cop's insensitivity, rage against Bill Stanton, against the Adamses, against a frivolous, malicious, misconstruing world in which at that very minute thousands of empty-headed sensation-seeking *Daily News* readers were titillating themselves with the slaying of "Mrs. Pryde's daughter-in-law."

"That's absurd," he said. "The Adamses were only in that room a couple of seconds. My wife and I were discussing something absolutely trivial."

"Like what?"

"It wasn't anything. Some friend of my wife's thought she'd lost a brooch. My wife had told her to go home and make sure she hadn't left it there. She had, of course. My wife had just been calling her to check."

Lieutenant Mooney kept the pencil poised over the block of yellow paper. "What was the name of this friend of your wife's?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know her. Gloria—something. Gloria Leyden, I think."

He scribbled. "I guess Mr. Stanton will know where to get in touch with her?"

"I imagine so."

The phone rang. The lieutenant picked up the receiver, listened and talked into it practically inaudibly out of the corner of his mouth. Then he put the receiver down and got up.

"The lab," he said. "The M.E. wants to see me right away. Something's come up. So I guess that breaks this for the time being. You going back to the apartment?"

"I suppose so."

"Then I'll come see you this afternoon. Around four o'clock okay?"

"That's okay."

The lieutenant gathered up the block of yellow paper and put the pencil in his breast pocket. Rather surprisingly he held out his big, red hand.

As Andrew took it, he said, "Take it easy, Mr. Jordan. I know it's tough, but take it easy. See you at four. And don't you worry. Whoever killed your wife, we'll find them. Don't you worry."

He moved past Andrew's chair, revealing large, sedentary buttocks and with a ponderous, measured gait moved out of the room.

With his departure Andrew's anger had nothing to sustain it. For a moment he sat by the denuded desk. In his mind he was back in the coatroom at Bill Stanton's party. He was feeling once again the tormenting suspicions which had seemed so difficult to bear then before the reconciliation, the restoration of understanding which, he had thought, was going to make his marriage fine again. *You've found it? Thank God, I was going out of my mind.* Gloria Leyden had found her sapphire clip. That was what it had been. That was all it had been, wasn't it?

Like the descent of an almost unendurable weight on his

shoulders, the realization came to Andrew that all through the interview he had been deceiving himself. Whatever he'd said to Lieutenant Mooney, whatever he'd pretended to believe, he still wasn't sure that Maureen had been calling Gloria Leyden. That meant he wasn't sure of anything. His marriage could have been a humiliating farce; his brother—logic or no—could have lost his head and killed Maureen. Wasn't losing his head what Ned was noted for?

Andrew Jordan was not a reflective person. This was the first time it had occurred to him that it was perfectly possible for a man to be uncertain whether the wife he had loved had loved him or betrayed him, or whether the brother he loved could be a murderer or not.

This realization seemed more terrible to him than the murder itself. He took the paper dart out of his pocket and smoothed it into shape. His tension was so extreme that he felt as if he were being split in two. He knew then that there was only one thing to do if he was to preserve his sanity. He would have to find out the truth, whatever it turned out to be, and face it.

And how did one find out the truth?

His hand, holding the dart, was unsteady. He put the dart back in his pocket, left the station house and took a taxi to his brother's apartment.

SEVEN

Ned Jordan lived on the East Side in the Sixties between Second and Third. Andrew had never been invited there. So far as he knew his brother had never invited anyone. Ned, whose life was spent on other people's yachts, in other people's hotel suites, in other people's Caribbean or Mediterranean villas, had no need for a home. All that was required was a hole in the ground into which he could creep when he was temporarily uninvited or when he was sick. When Ned was sick, he couldn't stand anyone near him.

The taxi dropped Andrew outside a decrepit brownstone. It was a forlorn, obviously doomed block. Steps with a rusty iron handrail led up to a grimy hall. Andrew pressed the buzzer beside his brother's name. The door clicked. He went three flights up peeling uncarpeted stairs.

Ned was on the landing of the fourth floor, looking down over the banisters. He was wearing a blue and white silk robe which was about as incongruous in that dump as a bullfighter's costume. The moment he saw who it was, he came running barefoot down to Andrew, tossing the mussed straw-colored hair back from his forehead.

"Drew." He grabbed his brother's arms and gazed at him, his eyes stricken. "Drew baby, Mother called me and told me. My God—what can I say?"

With his arm around Andrew, he went with him up to the fourth floor. The door of his apartment was open. It led directly into a living room of indescribable confusion, where

a body in pajamas, presumably male, was sprawled in a converted divan bed.

"Keith," said Ned. "Hung over again. Come into the bedroom."

He pulled Andrew through a minuscule passage into a bedroom where the chaos was even worse than in the living room. There was one tiny window, screened by a yellowing white shade. Fancy Mark Cross luggage was piled up beside a junky chest of drawers with one leg off. Through the open door of the midget bathroom, Andrew could see a shaving mirror and a whole horde of bottles—after-shave lotion, suntan lotion, God knew what. Ned pushed back the rumpled sheets and made Andrew sit down on the bed.

"Why the hell didn't you call me last night? How could you stand it with Ma and Lem on top of everything else? I could have helped. At least I could have coped with Ma."

He dropped down on the bed beside his brother. He was wearing nothing under the robe. He crossed bare, bronzed knees.

"Tell me, Drew. What are they doing? Have they caught the hoodlums?"

He was so exactly the way he always was that Andrew felt himself insidiously drawn into the familiar Ned atmosphere. In the shifting backgrounds of their childhood, Ned had always been his focal point, his "home," and the feeling was still there. Now he was here sitting with him on the bed, the idea of Ned having killed Maureen was inconceivable to him. But that was a reaction of mere sentiment, wasn't it? He mustn't be trapped by sentiment.

Ned was reaching over him for a battered pack of cigarettes on the bedside table. He picked it up, dislodging a heap of engraved invitations, which slithered off onto the floor. He put two cigarettes in his mouth and lit them. Then he

stuck one of them between Andrew's lips.

"Don't talk," he said. "Not if you're too beat. Just sit. Or take off your clothes if you want to. Get in the bed."

"I'm okay," said Andrew.

"You've been with the cops. Mother said so."

"Yes."

"Drew, this doesn't help. God knows. But—well, it could happen to anyone. Whatever you're doing, however happy you are, you've always got to keep that in mind. It can happen. In a second everything can get wiped out. That's how you get through life, being ready for it, not letting it throw you when it comes."

Could he have said that if he'd killed Maureen? Yes. Andrew got up. It made it easier.

"Like losing ten thousand at Hialeah," he said.

Ned grinned. It hadn't occurred to him that his brother was being ironic. Ned had no bitterness in his make-up and had no way of recognizing it in others.

"Sure," he said. "Like that. Flip the ash on the floor. It's okay."

For a moment Andrew stood dragging on the cigarette, thinking: "Maureen is dead." The pain which came with the thought made him impregnable even against Ned.

He said, "Maureen wasn't killed by hoodlums. There weren't any hoodlums. Somebody murdered her and faked it to look like a robbery."

He made himself look down at his brother. Ned was pushing his lower lip up until it covered the upper one. It was a kid's grimace he'd never grown out of—Ned pensive, Ned perplexed, Ned giving a remarkable piece of information his fullest attention. Ned, almost certainly, stalling for time until he could think up a lie.

But that didn't mean anything. Ned had been in the apartment. He would lie about that anyway.

Andrew said, "What were you doing at my place yesterday?"

"At your place?" Ned opened the blue eyes so wide that they seemed almost completely round. "At your place—me?"

"Are you going to say you weren't there?"

"Yes. I mean . . . no, I wasn't there."

"Rosemary called you, didn't she, after lunch with Maureen, after she'd come yelling into my office?"

"Sure Rosemary called me."

"And she told you Maureen was going to give her parents the full low-down on Las Vegas, Hialeah and that blonde?"

"Yes, of course she did."

"And after that," said Andrew, not as a question but as a statement, "you went around to my place to try to talk Maureen out of it."

"But, Drew . . ." Ned's voice cracked. "Drew, you're crazy. I swear . . ."

"Cross your bloody heart?"

Andrew took the paper dart out of his pocket and arranged it. He held it up between finger and thumb.

"I found this behind a chair. It's made from a club circular which came through the mail yesterday morning. When I left for the office, it was on the coffee table. I could have given it to the cops. I didn't because I don't think you killed her. I could be wrong. That's what I'm going to find out."

Ned, lying back on the bed, the blue and white bathrobe dropping away from him, was gazing up at the dart with a sort of dazed wonder. Then, very gradually, his mouth moved into a sheepish grin.

"Gee," he said. "Imagine. Making that goddam dart and not even remembering."

"That's better."

"But, Drew, I . . . I hated having to lie to you. I swear I wanted to tell you, but . . ."

"When were you there?"

"It was exactly five when I got there."

"After I'd talked to Rosemary?"

"I thought about what she'd told me and finally I figured I'd better go see Maureen. Not that it mattered. We're going to get married anyway. Rosemary has money of her own, more than enough to tide us over until I get my income back. She explained that to you, didn't she?"

"Yes."

"So you've got to see. Whether Maureen talked to the Thatchers or not wasn't important except that it'd have made them upset. It was just that I figured, well, Rosemary's so fond of her parents, she'd have felt much better if I could have talked Maureen out of it."

"You told Rosemary you were going?"

"No. I didn't tell anybody. I got there at five, as I said. I rang the buzzer downstairs. No one answered. I figured she hadn't come back yet. I went upstairs. I remembered the night before, how mad you'd both been about that blonde. I thought if I hung around outside the apartment, maybe when she came back she wouldn't let me in. I had the key you gave me. You know that. So I went in to wait. I sat on the couch in the living room. I must have sat there maybe twenty minutes. I got kind of restless. That's when I made that dart, I guess. The circular must have been there on the table and I must have . . . Anyway, after a while I figured, 'This is funny. Rosemary said Maureen was going straight home. Maybe she's back and asleep,' I thought. The bedroom door was shut. I opened it and went in and . . . there she was lying on the bed, shot with the gun beside her."

He'd drawn his legs up under him. He leaned a little closer, putting his hand on Andrew's knee.

"Drew, I don't have to tell you what I felt. My God—lying there dead. It was your gun. That little German job with the engraved butt. I was with you when you bought it. Remember? There she was and everything was so like normal. I mean the lights were on, it was all so neat, everything as if she'd just tidied it all up. I stood there. I didn't know what to do."

"So you faked it to look like a burglary?"

"Yes. That's what I did. I opened a lot of drawers, threw a lot of dresses and suits around, tore up the couch in the living room, took the money out of her pocketbook and then . . . Drew, I had to—to make it look convincing. I took the rings off her fingers, that aquamarine she had—and the wedding ring. I've got them. They're right here."

He jumped off the bed and rummaged through the clutter on top of the chest of drawers. He turned back to Andrew, holding out the two rings.

"You see? I did all I could. I even scratched the front-door lock and tried to beat up the wood around it. If I'd had the right equipment, I would have busted the lock. Remember how I used to fool around with burglar alarms and skeleton keys as a kid? But I didn't have anything with me and I guess . . . oh, well, I did my best but the cops have experience. They can tell the real thing from the phony."

Andrew looked at him as he stood in front of him, naïvely earnest, his suntanned hand cupped to hold the aquamarine ring and Maureen's wedding ring.

"And the jewel box?"

"Jewel box?" Ned blinked. "What jewel box?"

"Maureen's jewel box. That was gone too. What did you do with it?"

"I didn't take any jewel box. I didn't even think about her having one. Just the money from her pocketbook—about eleven dollars—and the rings. Here—take them. They're yours. I'll give you the eleven bucks too if you like."

Andrew took the rings. Was this the truth? Couldn't it be? Didn't it fit with Ned: Ned muddling, Ned making a fool of himself, Ned trying to lie about it as long as he could get away with it—but that was all?

He said, "Why did you think you had to fake it to look like a burglary?"

"Anyone can see that. It was much better to have the cops believe it was hoodlums who did it than . . . than . . ."

"You?" suggested Andrew.

"Me? Why me?"

"Or Rosemary?"

"Rosemary!" Ned looked thunderstruck. "Why in heaven's name would the cops think Rosemary wanted to kill her?"

"To stop her from telling her parents about you."

"When she's of age? When she has her own money? When it didn't make any difference one way or the other? Cops wouldn't be as dumb as that."

"Then—why?"

Ned looked awkward. "Does it matter? I mean, if it's better you didn't know?"

"Ned, for God's sake."

Ned picked up the crumpled cigarette pack from the bed and felt in it. It was empty. He crushed it and tossed it on the floor.

"After all, it was your gun. And then, Maureen being the way she was . . ."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, you know. It wasn't any of my business. I wasn't married to her. And, of course, you were crazy about her, I

realized that. If you hadn't been crazy about her, you'd never have put up with her bossing you, dragging you out every night to those crummy parties, off half the day doing God knows what. Surely you can see, with Maureen being the way she was and you . . . God, Drew, I know you always let people play you for a sucker, Mother and me I guess, too. But I thought . . ."

Andrew looked at him, astounded. "Are you saying you faked that burglary because you thought I killed Maureen?"

Instantly Ned was all concern. He put his hands on his brother's arms. His face was a picture of dogged affection and trust. "Gosh, Drew, I don't think so now. I swear I don't. But right then, with the shock of it and all, when I saw her lying there with your gun beside her and—and the letter . . ."

"What letter?"

"The letter she wrote to Rosemary, lying there on the bed beside her, right there by the gun."

He put his hand in the pocket of his robe and brought out a piece of paper.

"I kept it. I thought I'd better. Rosemary must have given it to her at lunch. It was right there beside her. I picked it up. I read it and I thought . . . Drew, I wouldn't have blamed you. Honestly. You know that, don't you? I wouldn't have blamed you for a second."

He was holding the letter. Andrew took it from him. It was typewritten on a single sheet of paper and dated nearly two years ago, just before his marriage. At the bottom, he saw his wife's familiar, boldly scrawled signature.

The letter said:

Darling Rosemary,

I'm sure you didn't expect to hear from me and I imagine this little breeze from the past will cause only a ripple in the

splendors of Miss Pratt's establishment for the education of the daughters of the plutocracy. But since you're my only cousin—and *such* a good friend—I do feel you would like to be brought up to date on what's happened to me. When your dear mother threw me out of the Thatcher mansion—you did know I was thrown out, didn't you?—I expect you were terribly worried for me and had dire visions of my slipping back into the wrong-side-of-the-track oblivion from which I had sprung. Well, I'm delighted to be able to set your mind at rest. It's extraordinary how welcoming Manhattan can be to a penniless girl if she's a little charming, a little ingenious. You must try the experiment some day and find out how the Big City welcomes a *rich* girl. I'm sure you'll have nothing to worry about because surely Miss P. works her magic not only on the *minds* of her girls but on their figures, too. And you'd be amazed at the attractive eyeglasses they make these days—even bifocals.

But I'm straying from the point, aren't I? The point is that I've become a model and I've really got quite a horde of attractive men at my feet. I could have taken my pick from a round dozen, but—to put your mind at rest—I've finally settled for one. Doesn't it make your bosom swell with pride for me to hear that I'm engaged to Andrew Jordan, the oldest son of that very grand woman with all the husbands (and all the money) who impressed your father so much, remember? He's no great brain, of course, and no great beauty, and just between you and me I must admit he's a tiny bit of a bore. But what intelligent person puts romance before security in matrimony? Certainly not your mother, who, as you know, has always been my model and ideal of womanhood and who, in marrying Uncle Jim, must have resigned herself to a life of boredom quite as undiluted as any Andrew Jordan can provide.

Well, darling, I do hope this news brings you as much pleasure as I think it will. And I do hope, by the way, that this letter

gets to you. It'd break my heart if it didn't burst like a guided missile into Miss P.'s genteel academy, which is *so* well known that no one seems to have the proper address. Good-bye, Rosemary darling. Think what a weight this will take off your mind. Now you don't have to worry any more financially or socially about that sad little poor relation of yours.

Loads of love,
Maureen

Andrew read the letter slowly and carefully. He took in every malicious phrase, every overtone of diseased spite and envy. He could feel the effect of them seeping through him as if some poisonous vapor were exhaling from the paper. But, against all probability, there was no sense of surprise or shock, nothing but a feeling of recognition.

He had wanted, among other things, to find the truth about his marriage. He had found it.

"Drew." Ned's voice came through to him. "When I realized you hadn't seen it, I didn't want to show it to you. But—well, you asked, didn't you?"

"I asked," said Andrew.

"That's why I faked the burglary and took the letter. It was for you. My God, if the cops had read that letter . . . You see, don't you?"

"Yes," said Andrew. "I see."

Ned's arm was around his shoulder. "You mustn't let it get you down, Drew. It's tough, I know it is, but face it. She was a scheming little bitch. All right. Lots of guys marry scheming little bitches. Accept it. She was a bitch and now someone's killed her. That makes it easier. Don't you see? She's been killed, but who cares?"

"Who cared?" thought Andrew. Lieutenant Mooney cared. That was his job.

He's no great brain . . . and no great beauty . . . between you and me he's a tiny bit of a bore . . .

He wasn't merely looking at those phrases, he was hearing them spoken in Maureen's soft, clear voice which had—hadn't it?—seemed to him like the voice that would come from a white rose if a white rose could talk.

He sat down on the edge of the bed. Still holding the letter, he put his hands up to cover his face.

EIGHT

There were confused noises from the living room, grunts and thumps. A young man in pajamas, with black tousled hair and a sleep-crumpled face, strode into the room.

"Christ," he said, "all this yakking. How can a guy get a little sleep around here?"

He barged into the bathroom and slammed the door. Andrew brought the hands down from his face. He heard the hiss of the turned-on shower.

He said to Ned, "You knew Maureen felt this way about me?"

"Gosh, Drew, I didn't know, of course I didn't, but I always had her pretty well doped out. Maybe I should have said something to you. I thought of it, but you were so nuts about her and after all those years of giving the babes the brush-off, you seemed so happy, so changed. I figured, Who am I to judge? Maybe that's what he wants, maybe it isn't like I think anyway."

Ned had known. Mother had known. Everybody had known? Bill Stanton? The Adamses?

The boy in the shower—Keith?—had started to sing. In a big sour baritone he was booming "From the Halls of Montezuma." Andrew felt the self-destructive rage gnawing at him again. He fought it. Rage wasn't going to help. What was going to help?

YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE IN NEW YORK WHO DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT YOUR WIFE.

Wasn't it obvious now that the anonymous letter had been written not by an enemy of his, as he had supposed, but by someone who had known Maureen for what she had been? An enemy of Maureen's? Then . . .

"Drew, I'm so terribly sorry. If only there was something I could do."

Ned hadn't shaved. In the drab light seeping in through the yellowing shade, the stubble on his chin was golden. As Andrew looked at him, all his old love for his brother flooded through him, filling the vacuum left by Maureen.

"You stuck around and faked that burglary, when you could have scrammed out and saved your own skin. That was something, wasn't it?"

Ned looked awkward. "Maybe it was dumb of me. I was so scared, mixed-up, but I figured . . ."

Andrew got up and put his hand on his brother's arm. "Thanks," he said.

"To hell with that. It wasn't anything. It's you that matters. Drew, you're not going to let the cops see that letter, are you?"

He wasn't, of course. He'd already decided that, already accepted the fact that from now on Lieutenant Mooney could no longer be any kind of ally.

He said, "I'm not going to let the lieutenant see the letter —or the rings. They've been reported missing."

"Then—then what are you going to do with them?"

Andrew looked down at his wife's wedding ring. "Get rid of them. Down a drain into the sewage system. Anywhere."

"Drew, if it makes it any easier for you, I'll tell them everything I did. Honest."

"It wouldn't make it any easier for me, would it?"

"I guess it wouldn't. Drew, I imagine the cops will be here soon, won't they? After they've interviewed Ma, they're

bound to come here. Interviewing Ma! For God's sake, she'll louse it all up if she's given half a chance. Does Ma know anything—I mean about Maureen being what she was?"

"I don't think so."

"Never took to her, did she? Little what's-her-name." Ned gave a small, uncertain laugh. "When the cops come here, I'll just clam up. I'll know nothing from nothing. You too. We just do nothing—just sit this out."

The boy in the shower had stopped singing. Sit it out? To Andrew a memory came of Lieutenant Mooney, large, impassive, leaning over his desk. *Any trouble between you and your wife, Mr. Jordan? . . . You know a Mr. and Mrs. Ben Adams, Mr. Jordan?* With a little chill, he realized what almost certainly would happen if he "sat it out." The only thing to do still was to find out the truth—not for Maureen any more, not for the woman who had married him in contempt and lived with him in ridicule, but because, until he found out the truth, he would be in mortal danger.

He still had the letter in his hand. He could feel its dry, smooth texture between his fingers. The letter, like the anonymous letter, was a fact, something about which the truth could be found.

He said, "This was on the bed beside her?"

"Yes. I told you. At lunch when Maureen was threatening to tell her parents, Rosemary must have brought it out as a sort of counter weapon against her. 'If you tell my parents about Ned, I'll tell your husband about you.' Something like that. It must have been. And then, somehow, Maureen must have got it away from her, tricked her out of it."

"What did Rosemary say when you told her?"

"I haven't told her. I haven't said a word to anyone. Gosh, Drew, you know I wouldn't—not until I'd talked to you."

"Where is she? Is she staying with her parents?"

Ned's lips parted. "Yes, but what are you going to do?"

"This letter belongs to her."

"You're going to ask how Maureen got it?"

"That's right."

"But you're not going to drag Rosemary . . ."

The door of the bathroom burst open. A towel twisted around his waist, the black-haired man gave a leap onto the bed.

"Hi," he said. "Top of the morning to you both. What's new? How is the world treating you? Hey, Neddy, how's about a sweet little, bonded little nip of bourbon for Keithy boy?"

Andrew said, "I'm going, Ned."

"But after you've seen her you'll be back. Drew, please, until I know what she says I'll be out of my mind."

Andrew looked at his brother's young, bedeviled face, thinking: "There's still Ned."

"All right," he said. "I'll be back."

He went down the unsavory stairs to the street. He walked two blocks. He stopped at a drain. He took the two rings out of his pocket—the aquamarine ring and Maureen's wedding ring. He dropped them through the grating. The act brought improbable relief from pressure, a sensation that was almost comfort. He had symbolically rejected his wife forever. He walked another block, hailed a cab and gave the driver the Thatchers' address.

He and Maureen had been at the Thatcher house several times for large parties, list-B parties. They lived on Sutton Place. The house wasn't big. They were so rich they could get away with not trying to impress. A butler opened the door to him. From the flicker of his eyes, Andrew could tell he'd become an oddity. To the butler, he was "the husband of that one who got herself murdered."

"Is Miss Thatcher in?"

"Miss Rosemary, sir? I don't think she is, Mr. Jordan. But come in, sir, please."

He took Andrew to an upstairs sitting room. A fire was burning in the hearth. There were impressionists, French Provincial furniture and over the mantel—a relic perhaps from Los Angeles—a large Portrait's Inc. type picture of Mrs. Thatcher in an evening gown wearing a tiara which looked heavy enough to break her neck.

It was Mrs. Thatcher who came in to him. The "graciousness" which usually antagonized him wasn't there at all. She looked tired and unhappy and kind.

"I'm sorry, Andrew. It seems rather absurd at a time like this but Rosemary's gone to the dentist. She'll be back soon for lunch. You must wait. I know how desperately unhappy she is and how much she'll want to see you and give you her sympathy—as do I."

She took his hand in hers. He thought of the venom and hate against the Thatchers in Maureen's letter. Sympathy. Could Mrs. Thatcher be genuinely offering him sympathy?

"I just want to see her," he said.

"Of course, Andrew. I feel so terribly inadequate. What can one say?"

She sat down, quiet and unobtrusive on an unobtrusive collector's-item chair. Andrew sat down opposite her.

"I do hope," she said, "that in these terrible days, you'll think of us as family. After all, we are Maureen's only relations and if there's anything we can do—anything at all . . ."

"That's very kind of you."

"You must bring your brother too. We still haven't met him, but I'm sure he'll be everything Rosemary says he is."

He could tell she was straining to think of things which would make it less uncomfortable for both of them, things

that might distract him from his "grief." He liked her for it, but he mustn't just sit there. He must use whatever there was to be used in this unexpected moment of intimacy with Maureen's aunt.

He said, "I'll bring Ned." Then, steering her back, "Maureen lived with you for several years in Los Angeles, didn't she?"

"In Pasadena, yes. For almost three years."

"Then in a way you probably knew her better than I did."

A faint flush spread over Mrs. Thatcher's cheeks. "I suppose I knew her as well as an older woman can know a very young girl."

"It must have been a shock to her losing her parents so young."

"Of course. It would be a shock for anyone. But her life hadn't been particularly happy. Her father . . . well, I don't know how much she told you about her childhood."

"Not too much."

"She probably preferred not to think about it. Her father, my brother-in-law, was one of those men who seem to want to destroy not only themselves but also the people who love them. He lost job after job. There was an alcoholic problem. My sister couldn't cope with him at all. She let herself be dragged down. Perhaps the accident wasn't such a tragedy for Maureen after all."

There was a Regency sideboard converted into a bar in a corner of the room. Mrs. Thatcher went to it, poured two glasses of sherry from a decanter and brought one to Andrew.

"Perhaps you'll think this impertinent of me, Andrew, but I'd like you to know how grateful I am to you. When Maureen left us to go to New York, I was very worried about her. I wasn't at all sure we'd been able to help her much. It was a great joy to me and my husband when we

knew she'd found you, someone good and kind and, well, someone to love her."

She had gone back to her chair. She raised her glass to him. "I hope you didn't mind my saying that. I hope it may even help a little to be told that you were able to give her the only real happiness she'd ever known."

Andrew was beginning to learn that pain can come from the most unexpected places. It could even come from a nice woman trying to be kind.

Remembering every sentence of the letter, he said, "In fact, there'd been trouble between you, hadn't there? When she left you to go to New York, it was because you'd more or less thrown her out."

Mrs. Thatcher's eyes were startled. "Is that how she put it?"

"That's what she implied."

"But it wasn't that at all, not really. There was no rejection. It was just that it seemed to me best for her that she should go."

She stopped, looking even more embarrassed. Best for her. What would make a woman like Mrs. Thatcher feel it was "best" for Maureen to leave home at nineteen unless there had been some complications of sex?

He took the gamble. He said, "It was because of that man, wasn't it?"

The flush heightening in Mrs. Thatcher's cheeks completely gave her away. "So she told you?"

"She told me some of it. Don't be afraid of hurting me, Mrs. Thatcher. I know what Maureen was. The truth can't possibly change how I feel about her."

Mrs. Thatcher looked down at her glass and then up again. "I suppose to her I was the villain of the piece."

"Not really."

"But I was, of course I was, because I was the one who—well, caught them. Didn't she tell you that?"

"That's more or less what I gathered."

"Then you do see what a dreadfully difficult decision it was to make."

As Andrew had expected, now that he had induced her to talk she was eager to present her point of view. "I don't know whether she told you his name. I hope not. I've always hoped that nobody need know, not so much for his sake as for his wife's. She's a wonderful woman and one of my best friends and she never had the faintest idea of what was going on. Oh, I blame him, of course I do, but I don't think he realized the intensity, the passion for life in Maureen. He'd got into it far, far deeper than he'd intended. And as for Maureen, she'd completely lost her head. A man old enough to be her father, a happily married man! It was only glamour, of course. After all those years of poverty and tension with her own father, a man like that, a charmer, a wealthy, prominent citizen, he must have seemed dazzling to her. But she was only nineteen. She thought it was love. I'm sure of that. That's what made the decision so heartbreaking."

She put the sherry glass down on the table beside her. Then her large, unguarded eyes returned to his face.

"I don't think I was hysterical or partisan about it. I honestly don't. I mean, I knew he'd never had any serious intention of leaving his wife; I knew Maureen's position was intolerable. That's why the only conceivable solution seemed to be to send her away. I gave her money; I tried to make her see it was for her own good. I didn't seem to get through to her at all, and she was very bitter. After she'd gone, I didn't think she would ever forgive me and I was prepared to accept it. But I'd misjudged her. One does so frequently underestimate people. When we moved to New York ourselves, she

came to see me on the very first day after our arrival and she was wonderful, truly wonderful. She'd come, she said, not only to apologize but to thank me. She sat there, actually right there where you're sitting now and she said, 'To think I hated you for making me come to New York when I realize now it was the best thing that ever happened to me because it's here I found Andrew—and love.' "

Andrew put down his sherry glass too. He was afraid his fingers might snap the stem. Some man in Pasadena—some emotionally immature tycoon he'd never heard of and who, in any case, had no interest now. But Maureen had gone to Mrs. Thatcher in gratitude, telling her she'd found love with him. She'd done that six months ago, over a year after she'd written the letter to Rosemary.

Now he had heard what Mrs. Thatcher had to say, everything was being blurred again by a wild upsurge of hope. Wasn't it possible that the spiteful bitchery of Maureen's letter had been a mere product of temporary vindictiveness over the break-up of what had seemed to her her great love affair? Even if he accepted the fact that she had married him cynically, wasn't it possible that this wounded, embittered attitude in her had gradually been cured—by his love? He thought of his wife turning to him in the taxi on the way to Bill Stanton's. "I love you." Once again she seemed to be in his arms—had it been only two nights ago?—clinging to him, accepting and returning a love which at the time had seemed utterly convincing? Did the fact of a letter written almost two years ago, have to invalidate what he had felt two days ago?

Had his rejection of his wife been a betrayal not only of her but of himself?

He looked at Mrs. Thatcher's shrewd, kind face agonizedly as if somehow the secret could be wrested from it.

"She told you she was happy and that she loved me?"

"Of course she did, Andrew."

"And you believed she was telling the truth?"

"I know she was. There was nothing really bad about Maureen, I'm sure. It had been difficult for her. There'd been a bad start, she was confused, uncertain, and, yes, for a while envious. It was probably the worst thing that could have happened to her to have been plunged so suddenly into our world of wealth and security. As I said, I think she hated us for a while. I know she did. But that was only a phase. She was a good girl, a girl with a lot of love to give when she found the right man to give it to."

She got up again and moved to him, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Andrew. I should have had more sense than to have let this come up. But since I've been foolish enough, I might as well go on. You may not realize now in the terrible shock of what's happened, but there'll come a time when you'll find it will help to know from somebody outside, somebody quite unprejudiced, that you were a good husband and that Maureen loved you with all her heart."

She had loved him with all her heart . . .

In his mind Andrew could see his wife's wedding ring glinting as it dropped from his hand down through the grating of the drain.

NINE

"Andrew."

"Yes, Mrs. Thatcher."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm all right."

The phone rang. Mrs. Thatcher answered it and chattered about bridge arrangements. The banalities, drifting through to Andrew, seemed to belong on another planet. Forget everything she'd said, he thought. Why torment himself with a hope that could only bring pain? What was Mrs. Thatcher but a conventional society woman trying to be kind? What had she really known about Maureen? Ned had known Maureen. The letter had revealed Maureen. "Scheming little bitch." Cling to that.

Mrs. Thatcher had stopped talking. She came over to him, holding out a sheet from the telephone memorandum pad.

"Andrew, I mean it. Do call any time. Maureen had the number but it's unlisted so I've written it down for you. I do wish you didn't look so tired. If only you could rest . . ."

He took the piece of paper and put it in his breast pocket, wondering dimly how things would have been if his own mother had been like this.

As he did so, the door opened and Rosemary came in with her stepfather. Mrs. Thatcher turned.

"Hello," she said. "Andrew's here, Rosemary. He wants to talk to you."

Mr. Thatcher, grave, handsome, looking unhappy, said, "Andrew, my boy, I want you to know . . ."

"No, dear," broke in Mrs. Thatcher. "Not now. You can tell Andrew how sorry you are some other time."

She put her hand on her husband's elbow and guided him out of the room. The moment they had gone, Rosemary hurried to Andrew. He watched her coming across the room, hardly remembering what she looked like, surprised all over again that Ned's girl could be so small, so unspectacular, so like a rather belligerent mouse.

"Andrew, how can you ever forgive me for being so beastly about Maureen yesterday? It's my temper. I've got a terrible temper, and when she refused to understand and insisted on telling Mummy and Dad . . ." Her mouth tightened into a thin, self-condemnatory line. "I'll never forgive myself, fighting with her, saying all those things about her to you and then—those monstrous hoodlums."

Suddenly Andrew was all right again because he'd managed to stop thinking about Maureen. She-loves-me-she-loves-me-not was a far too dangerous game. Forget it. Stick to the facts. Rosemary was a fact. Rosemary could have gone to the apartment and killed Maureen. Why not?

He said, "There weren't any hoodlums. The burglary was a fake." He added, brutally, "Ned faked it. He went there. He found her dead. He was trying to throw the police off the scent."

Rosemary reached out with her hand and caught on to the back of a chair. "Neddy was there?"

"Does that surprise you? Didn't it occur to you after you'd called him that he'd go there and try to talk Maureen out of it?"

"But . . . but . . . Maybe I thought . . . I don't know . . ."

"You didn't go there yourself, did you?"

"Me?" Her voice cracked in astonishment. "Me go to Maureen? Of course I didn't."

"What did you do after you left my office?"

"I called Neddy. You know that. But I didn't tell him to go to Maureen. I swear it. Then—then I went to a newsreel. I couldn't face Mummy and Daddy until I'd decided how I was going to handle them if Maureen . . . But that isn't what matters. It's Neddy. Do the police know he was there?"

"No. But they know the burglary's a fake."

"But why did he do it? I don't understand."

"He did it because of the letter."

"Letter." There was no interrogation in her voice. It was merely an uncomprehending echo.

"He found it lying beside her on the bed."

Andrew took the letter out of his pocket. Handing it to Rosemary, he felt as if he were stripping himself naked. She held it close to her face, then closer, then she tried it further away. With a little cry of exasperation, she went to her pocketbook, brought out another, even larger pair of glasses and switched to them. Andrew hadn't realized she was as blind as that. It made her become human to him, Ned's girl, Ned's little blind—murdering?—fiancée.

He watched while she read, feeling strangely dizzy. Lack of food?

"How did Maureen get it?" he said. "Did you give it to her at lunch?"

She didn't seem to hear him. She went on reading. Eventually she looked up, pulling off the reading glasses. It was the first time he'd seen her face without them. All the proportions were different. It was a pretty-shaped face and the eyes, unarmed, had a dazed, swimming look. They undermined him because what they were expressing at that moment was utter astonishment.

"But, Andrew, it's disgusting. I can't believe she could have written it."

That was the last thing he had expected her to say. "You mean you haven't seen it before?"

"Never."

"But it was written to you."

"I realize that. But I never got it. You must believe me. Why! If I'd got it, if I'd had it yesterday at lunch, do you think I'd have been scared of Maureen? I'd have said, 'All right, you go to Mummy and Dad and I'll show this letter to your husband.' That's what I'd have said. You don't know me. I'd have done it in a minute. So believe me, please. There isn't any point in lying. I've never seen that letter before."

A clock on the mantel—a bizarre skeletal clock which exhibited its innards under a glass bell—gave a thin, musical chime.

"Andrew, you do believe me, don't you?"

"I believe that when letters are written to people, people usually receive them."

"Don't be idiotic. I know that." She put the glasses back on. "Wait a minute." She studied the letter again. "Yes, here at the end it says I hope this reaches you. She wasn't sure of the address in Lausanne. Maybe she got it wrong and it was returned to her. Or, perhaps, after she'd written it, she was ashamed and never sent it at all."

"And kept it all this time?"

"Why not?"

"And it just happened to turn up again yesterday?"

"I don't know about that any more than you do." She dropped the reading glasses and put on her regular ones. "I only know that I never saw that letter and I can't believe she wrote it."

It was the second time she'd said that. Andrew sat down.

He said, "Why do you keep saying you don't believe she wrote it when you were telling me yesterday how much she hated and envied you?"

"Oh, it isn't because of what it says about me; it's what it says about you."

"You don't think she felt that way about me?"

"Oh, Andrew, Andrew dear, I know she didn't."

She dropped down on the floor beside his chair and, reaching up, took his hand in hers. If she hadn't been so young, the maneuver would have seemed both clumsy and phony.

"Listen," she said. "I don't know what happened. I haven't any idea. But I do know one thing. Yesterday at lunch, before she mentioned Neddy, she did nothing but talk about you. I can't tell you! How wonderful you were, how good, how kind, how much she loved you. That's how she brought up Neddy by pointing out the contrast. You were the saint. He was the bum. Don't you see? There wasn't any gloating about marrying a rich woman's son. She talked about you the way any girl would talk about the husband she loved. Why should she have lied to me?"

Still holding his hand, she looked up at him through the glasses. She had kicked her shoes off onto the Aubusson carpet. There was a hole in the toe of her right stocking.

"Andrew, I can see how awful it is for you, having read that letter, feeling humiliated, all shriveled up inside, hating Maureen and yourself. It's as awful as if—as if suddenly I discovered that Neddy didn't really love me. That's why I've got to make you understand. If Maureen really did write that letter, and I suppose she did, then she must have changed completely after she'd married you. I'm sure of it. If you'd seen her face yesterday, you'd have been sure too. It was radiant. Andrew, people can change. And now I come to think of it, I think she'd changed about us too. I know I said

she was spiteful and envious yesterday but I think I was just remembering the past and assuming she still felt the same way she felt in Pasadena. But she was never nasty. She was quite firm but sweet and gentle, and I think she may honestly have decided it was best for us all, me, Neddy, Mummy and Dad, all of us, not to be sneaky but to bring the truth out into the open. So, Andrew, I know it's not going to help much. Maybe, now she's dead, it makes it worse. But I'm absolutely sure she loved you. You'd be mad to doubt it for a moment."

Now that she was sitting at his feet, he could see only the top of her head, the neat, clean, otherwise uninteresting hair and a little bit of her glasses frame. He looked down at these random parts of her, almost hating her. Here was Mrs. Thatcher all over again. Couldn't women ever leave things alone? *She loved you. You'd be mad to doubt it for a moment.* To protect himself, he repeated the phrases jeeringly in his mind; he thought of the letter, of Ned, of all the doubts and suspicions of his married life. If he had been a dumb, gullible fool in the past, the ultimate humiliation was to let himself continue in the folly now. But with a shattering flash of self-knowledge, he realized that to give up hope was beyond his power. Whatever he chose to pretend, his love for his wife was as obsessive now as it had ever been and, against the whole body of the evidence, against far more evidence than had yet come his way, the only thing in the world he wanted was to be able to believe what Rosemary had just said.

She loved you. You'd be mad to doubt it for a moment.

He got up from the chair. Rosemary twisted her neck to look up at him. He went across the room and took a cigarette out of a jade box which stood on a coffee table. As he lit the cigarette, his eyes just happened to remain on the jade box, and an idea sprang fully born into his mind.

He swung around to Rosemary. "Maybe you're right."

She was getting up from the floor, rearranging her skirt. "Right about what?"

"About Maureen and the letter. Maybe she did misdirect it and it was returned to her or maybe she never even mailed it. Maybe, for some reason, she did keep it, and if she did, the logical place for it was her jewel box which she always kept locked. The jewel box is missing. Ned didn't take it. He told me so."

He could feel excitement bubbling up in him, a kind of madman's elation. Rosemary was wriggling her feet into her shoes. She stopped dead with one heel still sticking out.

"You mean someone could have wanted the jewel box, killed her for it, found the letter and left it beside her to incriminate you?"

"Couldn't it have been that way?"

"Yes, yes, of course." Rosemary's face was alive with interest. "Then all you've got to do is to convince the police they must concentrate on the jewel box, isn't it? There's no need to say anything about Neddy at all."

"No."

"Nor—nor about me and Neddy and Maureen wanting to interfere. Oh, Andrew, I know it's awful and selfish of me, but you're not like Maureen, are you? You don't feel you've got to tell Mummy and Dad and everyone about Neddy's stupid little escapades. They have nothing to do with Maureen, and when Mummy and Dad meet him, they're going to be mad about him. I know they are. It's so meaningless to spoil it all, to make them unhappy for nothing."

She ran to him, reaching up and putting her arms around his neck, being coaxing, almost coquettish, quite out of character.

"Oh, Andrew, I don't want to run off and be married by

some dreadful justice of the peace. I want a real wedding, a real wonderful wedding with bridesmaids and flower girls and Mummy and Dad being happy and proud and . . . Oh, Andrew, I'm a monster, aren't I, thinking about the wedding when everything's so awful for you."

A discreet cough sounded behind them. Slowly and quite unself-consciously, Rosemary disengaged herself from him. Both of them looked toward the door, where the butler was hovering discreetly.

"Excuse me, Miss Rosemary, Mrs. Thatcher wants you to know lunch is served. She also wants to know whether Mr. Jordan would care to join you."

"Thank Mrs. Thatcher," said Andrew. "Some other time."

"I'll be there in a second," said Rosemary.

The butler withdrew.

Rosemary, turning back to Andrew, took his hand in hers. "What are you going to do now? Go to Ned?"

"Yes."

"And then to the police about the jewel box?"

"Probably."

"Then . . . oh dear, I simply must dash. Mother loathes me being late sitting down." She smiled up at him. "Give my love to Neddy. And, Andrew, in spite of being so selfish and horrible, I'm so sorry for you. Honestly I am. I shall think and think about you and pray."

She hurried out of the room. Andrew stubbed his cigarette, went out into the hall for his coat and, leaving the house, hailed a taxi. He gave the driver Ned's address.

As he sat in the taxi, he felt, for the first time since the disaster, almost at peace. The murderer *could* be someone who had wanted the jewel box, perhaps even hoodlums onto whose professional theft Ned had superimposed his amateurish effort of opened drawers and scattered clothes. Maureen's

death, after all, could have been a senseless act of brutality, diminishing in no way either her or his dignity and decency as human beings. The Maureen of Rosemary and Mrs. Thatcher could have been the real one.

Couldn't she?

He took the letter out of his pocket and made himself read it through again. From that—to love? Was it possible? Wasn't almost anything possible? As he folded the letter to return it to his pocket, he noticed something he'd never noticed before. On the back of the page was an address jotted down in pencil: 177 West 23rd Street. That had been Maureen's address when he'd first met her. But was that Maureen's handwriting? He looked at the sevens, each of which had a neat little European tick on its upright. No, Maureen had never written sevens like that.

Then who had written it? The murderer? But the address was almost two years out of date, far too far in the past for it to have any significance now. He slipped the letter back in his pocket, thinking about the jewel box. Put Lieutenant Mooney onto the jewel box. It would steer him away from Ned and, with any luck, toward the murderer. There was everything to gain and nothing to lose.

When the taxi left him at Ned's house, an elderly janitor was struggling up the cellar steps with a trash can. Other cans from the apartment house were already ranged in a squalid row along the rusty iron railing. Andrew was making for the steps when in one of the cans something red, almost hidden beneath a paper sack of garbage, caught his eye. He stopped. Then he leaned forward and, spilling trash onto the sidewalk, pulled the red object out of the can.

It was broken and flattened as if it had been smashed with a hammer, but it was perfectly identifiable.

It was Maureen's red-leather jewel box.

TEN

For one second, stunned by astonishment and anger, Andrew stood looking at the wrecked box in his hand. Then he glanced at the janitor. The old man's back was turned to him as, panting, he dragged the can up the cellar stairs. Andrew pushed the broken jewel box into the top of his coat. He went up the steps to the front door and pressed Ned's buzzer. The door clicked. He hurried up the stairs.

Ned was waiting on the landing of the fourth floor. He had shaved and changed into slacks and a T-shirt. He was holding a spoon and a cereal bowl full of baked beans. When he saw Andrew, his face broke into its vivid, welcoming grin.

"What a relief. I thought it was the cops."

Andrew stood glaring at him.

"Well, Drew, how was it with Rosemary? What did she say?"

"She sent you her love."

Andrew grabbed his brother's arm, shoved him into the apartment and shut the door behind them. In the living room a vague effort had been made to restore order but the drapes were still drawn over the single window and the lamps were on. There was no sign of Keith. Andrew brought the jewel box out of his coat. He held it up for his brother to see. It had two drawers. The front of the bottom drawer was dangling down on a thread of fiber.

"Lying little bastard," he said.

For a moment Ned's sunny grin remained intact. He had dipped the spoon into the baked beans and was holding it suspended halfway toward his mouth. Then, the grin disappearing, he gave a little whistle.

"Where did you find it?"

"Right outside in a trash can on the sidewalk."

"That old jerk of a janitor. He's not meant to bring the garbage out until after dark."

"And the police can't see in the dark?"

Andrew put the jewel box down on a table next to a half-drunk glass of milk. Baked beans and milk. Ned's lunch. He thought of the countless times Ned must have lunched off caviar and champagne on yachts, in villas, in fashionable restaurants. Ned, the glamour boy. Ned, the slob.

"Okay," he said. "This time—the truth. T-R-U-T-H."

"But, Drew . . ." Ned had moved around him and had squatted down on the daybed in front of him so he could be seen, so the frank, blue-eyed, loving-little-brother expression would show. "I told you the truth. Everything I said was true. It's just that I didn't mention the jewel box."

"That's all."

"That's all. I should have. I almost did, and after you'd gone, I realized what a dope I was. But . . ." Ned made a gesture with the cereal bowl. It was chipped, Andrew noticed. "Drew, can't you see? There were Maureen's jewels. Everyone thought they'd been stolen. You'd get the insurance. It seemed silly just to waste them. I know a guy. Of course, he wouldn't have given a big price, but it would have been something . . . and with me so broke . . ."

He let the hair fall over his forehead. The dazzling smile came, which was, no doubt, the smile which disarmed all the celebrities and millionaires, the smile which got him reinvited to the "amusing Moorish villa just north of Malaga."

"Gosh, Drew, you know the financial jam I'm in. I didn't want to come to you for a handout again, not after Las Vegas. And Mother hadn't come across. And my friends—you try borrowing a nickel from the rich sometime."

He was watching Andrew's face, waiting confidently for the capitulation which had always come in the past. Andrew looked at him, the muscles in his jaw stiffening.

"So," said Ned. "I guess it was a pretty crazy idea, wasn't it? It was dumb to throw the jewel box in the trash, too. I didn't know what else to do with it. But you've found it. It's okay now. So let's just forget about it. I've got all the stuff here. What are you going to do with them? Put them down another drain?"

Andrew went to the window and tugged back the drapes. Daylight flooded the room, making its squalor almost grotesque. Moving back to his brother, he tripped over a pair of large suede shoes. Keith's?

He said, "Did you kill her?"

"My God—for the jewels?"

"For the jewels—and to stop her going to the Thatchers."

"But, Drew, I told you. Rosemary's got her own money. There wasn't anything the Thatchers could do."

"They could have disinherited her. Rosemary having money of her own and you being son-in-law of a multimillionaire are two different things."

Ned jumped up from the daybed. "But you don't understand. Money, running around in the stinking-rich crowd—all that's what we want to get away from. We've got it all fixed. Rosemary's crazy about Mexico. We're going to get a little place. She's going to paint and I'm going to try to write. Okay, cheating the insurance company was a lousy idea. I only thought of it this morning anyway. I probably wouldn't

have gone through with it. I . . . Drew, all I told you's the truth. The whole truth, I swear it."

The spoon was standing almost straight up in the congealing beans. He put the cereal bowl down on the table by the broken jewel box.

Ned! thought Andrew wearily. "Okay, get the jewels."

Ned's face was radiant again. "Sure, sure. I've got them all together in the bedroom."

He ran into the bedroom. Andrew sat down on the daybed. Ned came out of the bedroom with a manila envelope.

"Here they are. All of them."

The envelope was open. He tilted it and slid the jewels into Andrew's lap. As he did so, there was an explosive sound from the kitchenette.

"Christ," he said, "the coffee pot's blown up again."

He hurried into the kitchenette. Andrew sat looking down at the jewels in his lap. He seemed to have reached a point beyond pain. The pearl necklace, the ruby brooch he'd given his wife evoked no memory of her at all. The ambiguity which once again was surrounding her—she loved me, she loved me not—had somehow made her unreal. The jewels were merely objects which, if they had been the motive for a murder by hoodlums, would have made it easier but which now, thanks to Ned's idiocy, were just something to be got rid of.

Because it was only Ned's idiocy, wasn't it? Every moment seemed to involve a choice and, now he had got over his anger and bitter disappointment, he knew he had made that choice. Ned was Ned. He took advantage of amorous Brazilian widows, he got out of his depth with fancy Florida gangsters, he had crackbrained schemes for cheating insurance companies, he was naïve enough to believe in an earthly

Mexican paradise with Rosemary painting and him writing (what?), all love and tamales.

But he hadn't murdered Maureen.

Was that a foolish, sentiment-blurred older brother's decision? Maybe. No. He didn't think so. No Ned, no hoodlums. So he was back to the anonymous letter? Someone from her past? A threat? A struggle for the gun?

The diamond earrings he'd given Maureen as an engagement present were still in their little beige Cartier box. He opened it. The earrings did bring a pale flicker of sensation. Like photographs faded almost to invisibility, images came of Maureen when he'd presented them to her, Maureen just before Bill Stanton's party, taking them out of the box, deliberately choosing them to establish a bond.

I love you even more now than when we were married. You're the easiest person in the world to love.

Mrs. Thatcher—Rosemary. *She loved you. You'd be mad to doubt it for a moment.* The hope was back, the wild, destructive hope which, if it was proved justified, could bring nothing but despair.

He fingered one of the earrings. Automatically he tried to dislodge it from its bed. It was stuck. He tugged harder and the whole upper part of the lining came off with it. Lying beneath it was a folded piece of newspaper. He took it out and unfolded it. It was a photograph, neatly cut from a tabloid, of some sort of street accident. The rather blurred figure of a blond woman was being either supported or grabbed by a policeman. Jumping around them were three tiny dogs. One of the dogs seemed to be hanging by its teeth from the policeman's pants' leg. A caption beneath the picture read:

DOG BITES COP. Three chihuahuas, belonging to Miss Rowena La Marche, 215 West 61st Street, savagely attacked the cop

who came to their mistress' aid after her collapse on Central Park West. Miss La Marche was sent to Bellevue for observation. And for the three chihuahuas—a dog psychiatrist?

He looked at the picture blankly. Why on earth would Maureen have cut it out of the paper and hidden it in the earring case?

Rowena La Marche
215 West 61st Street

He heard Ned coming out of the kitchen and slipped the photograph into his pocket. Ned was grinning, completely at ease again.

"Christ, the mess. Coffee grounds on the ceiling. I'll clean it up later." He sat down on the daybed next to Andrew. "Drew, I'm sorry. I really am. What are you going to do?"

Go to Lieutenant Mooney? Admit Ned had faked the burglary and kept the jewels? What had seemed a solution before was quite out of the question now.

"When the lieutenant comes," he said, "you don't know anything."

"Okay." Ned looked down at the jewels. "And them?"

"I'll keep them. Later, if I have to, I'll get rid of them."

Andrew glanced at his watch. Two o'clock. Two hours before Lieutenant Mooney. Rowena La Marche. The woman must have had some connection with Maureen. And with her death? It was a long shot, but what other leads did he have? 215 West 61st Street.

He put the jewels in his pocket and got up.

Ned said, "You're not leaving?"

"I'm leaving. I'll take the box. I'll dump it somewhere."

He went to the table and slipped the broken box into the manila envelope. Ned came across to join him.

"Drew, I know how you're feeling. It's bad, isn't it? I

mean, even though Maureen was a dirty, scheming little bitch, it's . . ."

Andrew couldn't face Ned on Maureen again—not then. He said, "Call me after the lieutenant's been here."

"Sure, okay."

On leaving the house, Andrew walked across town to the Plaza, went up to his room and packed his overnight bag. He had vaguely expected his mother to take care of the bill but she hadn't. He checked out and walked along the Park to Columbus Circle. When he reached West 61st Street, a sanitation truck was collecting trash. As he passed it, both men were up on the truck. There was still a half-empty garbage can on the sidewalk. He dropped the box out of the envelope into it and went on. He was quite sure that neither man had noticed him.

215 turned out to be an old brownstone even more dilapidated, if possible, than Ned's. In the stale-smelling hallway, Andrew consulted the buzzers. Apt. 3 rear. Rowena La Marche. He pressed the buzzer and, after quite a while, the front door clicked. He started up the sad stairs with their heavy Victorian mahogany rail. New York, he thought, the Wonder City of Tomorrow. Above him, dogs were barking, little shrill dogs yapping in a frenzied treble. The chihuahuas? When he reached Rowena La Marche's door and rang the bell, there was a hysteria of yips inside and the crash of small bodies against the woodwork.

The door was opened by a woman. She was a big, fiftyish woman in a crumpled baby-blue housecoat. Three chihuahuas, still screaming, were leaping up and down around her, tugging at her skirt. Her hair was very untidy and dyed a glittering platinum. Make-up and lipstick, rather haphazardly applied, made the strange masklike effect of one face superimposed on another. She didn't seem very steady on her feet but she was

smiling the wide, hopeful grin of the gregarious and the lonely.

"Hi." She had to shout it over the yapping of the dogs. "It's all right, dears, all right. He's a friend." She beat vaguely in their direction with one arm and surprisingly they quieted down. "Hi," she said again and the smile of welcome stretched even wider. "Come on in."

It was only when she lumbered to let him pass that Andrew was sure she was drunk, not melodramatically drunk but sodden drunk, the sort of drunk which begins with a nip of gin on arising. *Miss La Marche was sent to Bellevue for observation.*

"It's a mess," she said. "What with the dogs peeing all over the place. Can't blame 'em though. If your mother was too bone-lazy to take you for a walk in the park, you'd pee all over the place too, wouldn't you? Sorry I can't offer you a drink. Never keep it in the house. Never touch it."

They were in the living room with the chihuahuas skimming about their legs like butterflies. Everything was pink and baby-blue and everything that could be was ruffled. It was the lovenest of an old Ziegfeld girl, which hadn't been redecorated since the cornerstone of Radio City had been laid. Rowena La Marche, smiling, bemusedly affable, brandished a hand whose fingers were vivid with chipped tangerine nail polish toward the pink couch.

"Sit down, young man. Sit down."

Cautiously she maneuvered herself into a chair. Andrew sat down on the couch, putting the overnight bag down on the floor at his side. The three chihuahuas gathered into an ominous line in front of him. One of them snarled.

"No, darlings," said Rowena La Marche. "A friend. I told you. A good friend."

Instantly all three dogs leaped up into Andrew's lap,

scrabbling at his shirt front with their paws, trying to lick his face.

"Bores," said Rowena La Marche. "They're the bane of my existence. But everything's got a right to live, hasn't it?" She leaned toward him, peering, her heavily mascara-ed eyes narrowing to slits of myopic strain. "Pardon me," she said. "But do I know you?"

"No," said Andrew. "I'm Andrew Jordan."

Instantly her expression changed, but it changed so many times and so quickly that, before he could decide whether she was registering shock, fear or delight, she was back smiling her muzzy, friendly smile.

"Gee," she said, "not Maureen's husband?"

"Yes," he said.

"I read it in the papers. It's terrible. It's simply terrible. If you knew how I've been feeling." The two faces started to crumble and disintegrate. She reached down beside her large behind and pulled a handkerchief out from under the chair pillow. "Maureen." She started to dab at her eyes. "Poor, poor Maureen."

She was sobbing then with the maudlin luxuriousness of the very drunk. The chihuahuas stopped trying to lick Andrew's face. Aligned in a row on his lap they sat watching her indifferently.

"Maureen," sobbed Rowena La Marche. "She was my friend. My only real friend in the world. There'll never be another Maureen . . ."

ELEVEN

Incoherently, through the sobs, she went on and on. Andrew could follow the thread. She had worked as a sewing woman in the garment district. Maureen had modeled for the firm. Maureen, only Maureen, had been kind to her. She'd got sick. She'd had an operation. Maureen, only Maureen, had gone to see her in the hospital. After that she'd been too frail to work. Who cared about her then? Who had come regularly to see her, always bringing flowers and candy? Maureen had never let her feel she was an old unloved woman to be cast aside. Maureen, with nothing to gain . . .

The chihuahuas were asleep on Andrew's lap. He sat listening, faintly disgusted, pitying, but, worst of all, torn once more by bewildering doubts. Here was the Thatchers' Maureen again, Maureen the ministering angel, the only friend to the old defeated sewing woman. And yet neither the sobs, the words, nor the voice quite rang true and, every now and then, as Rowena La Marche looked over at him, there seemed to be a calculation in the narrowed eyes or, more accurately, a kind of desperation. Was it caused by fear of him? Or was it merely an inner conflict between the desire to melodramatize herself to someone and the need for a drink which couldn't be taken as long as he was there?

The choked, prattling voice was saying, "And she'd come here, Mr. Jordan. Every Thursday afternoon she'd come. Just to sit. Just to talk and sit. And she'd sit there where you're sitting and do you know what she'd talk about? You.

All the time, you, her husband, her wonderful husband. There was love. You don't have to tell me. I know what love is. I've always had a lot of love. Maureen, I would say, Maureen dear, that's why you're so kind to me. You've got love, and those who have love have loads of love extra to give away."

Once again the eyes inside the encircling mascara flicked their odd furtive glance at him.

"To think of it. Hoodlums—dirty bums from off of the street, breaking in and destroying all that love."

He said, "When was the last time you saw her?"

"Oh, I didn't," she said quickly. "Not for a month, I didn't. And it had never happened before. Not a glimpse of her for a month. I was worried at first. Then I figured, Dear Maureen with all those parties, all those grand friends, how can I expect her to keep it up regular? But she'll come, I said to myself. When she's good and ready, she'll . . ."

The voice disintegrated into a hopeless moan. She was dabbing all over her face with the handkerchief. Suddenly the three chihuahuas woke up. They didn't get off Andrew's lap. They merely all sat up, all gazing toward the door, all wriggling in what seemed an ecstasy of anticipation. Andrew looked beyond Rowena La Marche to the door and, as he did so, it opened and a man came in. The three dogs leaped off his lap and ran to the man, beside themselves with joy. Rowena La Marche jumped up and swung around. Andrew got up too, for the man who had come into the room was his stepfather.

Lem was jauntily dressed as usual with a black chesterfield and a black homburg. He had a gift-wrapped package under his arm. In the first moment he had stooped to pat the chihuahuas. It was only when he unbent that he saw Andrew.

"Andrew!" The expression on his face was an extraordinary combination of astonishment and panic.

"Yes," said Rowena La Marche, twisting and retwisting the sodden handkerchief with chip-nailed fingers. "Look, Lem. Look who's here."

With a sickly version of the smile he reserved for his wife, Lem put the package down and came to Andrew, holding out his hand.

"Well," he said, "what a surprise. I had no idea you knew my sister."

"He came," panted Rowena La Marche. "He just rung the bell and there he was. And I've been telling him. About Maureen, I mean. How good she was, how time and time again she'd come when there was no need, just to bring me a little gift, just to cheer me up. I've been telling him she was an angel—an angel straight from heaven."

She turned back to the chair and sank into it. All the dogs bounded into her lap, competing for the best position, snarling and nipping at each other.

There was a Lalique glass clock on the bookshelf. It said, 3:15. Andrew remembered Lieutenant Mooney.

"Yes," Lem was saying in a hushed, funereal voice. "Rowie's right, old boy. Wonderful what Maureen did for her. Absolutely wonderful. And I'll bet she never even let you know. Maureen wasn't one to boast about her charities. Not Maureen, was she, Rowie?"

Andrew knew then that he hadn't believed a word either of them had said. He also knew that he hadn't the faintest idea of what this was all about.

"I see Rowie, of course," Lem was saying. "I come as often as I can." The smile, intended for Andrew, was far too bluff. "When I can sneak off from your mother, that is. Your mother's a fine woman, old boy, but—well, I don't think she and Rowie would have much in common. So, when I can, I

come over, cheer Rowie up a bit. She hasn't many friends. No one but me, really, and Maureen . . ."

It was Rowena La Marche who made Andrew decide to leave, not that he felt anything could be achieved by staying. But her face was in torment now and he knew what that meant. There had to be a nip from the bottle and, until he left, her pride or her alcoholic's self-delusion of sobriety would prevent her from getting it.

It had been a meaningless interview and Andrew left it that way. He picked up the overnight bag. Lem took him to the door, prattling almost as incoherently as Rowena La Marche. Andrew could tell, although his stepfather lacked the courage to approach the subject directly, that he was longing to beg him not to let his mother know about these fraternal interludes in his life.

"Terrible for you, old boy. Absolutely terrible. If any of us can help, we're ready at any time. Me, Rowie—any of us. Just call on us, old boy. Is that a promise?"

Me, Rowie—any of us. Who were "any of us?" The chihuahuas?

The dogs didn't come to see him off. As Lem closed the door behind him, he could still hear them whimpering and snarling on Rowena La Marche's baby-blue lap.

He took a cab back to the apartment; he unpacked the overnight bag and, after some hesitation, slipped the jewels into the back of one of the highboy drawers. That would have to do for the moment. The police had tidied the place up. It was painfully the same as it had always been and the familiarity brought Maureen more vividly back to him than ever before. She seemed, ghostlike, to be everywhere, hovering just beyond the line of his vision, as if she were trying to communicate with him, to reassure him, to beg him to believe in her.

His head had started to ache. He knew he would need all his energies for the ordeal with Lieutenant Mooney. He went into the bathroom for aspirin. Maureen was there too.

You are the easiest person in the world to love.

At four o'clock precisely the lieutenant appeared. Bulkily impressive, he came into the living room and sat down without taking off his coat.

"Well, Mr. Jordan, find the apartment okay? They fixed it up all right for you?"

The heavy walk, the impassive face, the almost clumsy slowness of the lieutenant's gestures were all intended to give the impression of a kindly routine cop, Andrew realized that, but the effect didn't quite come off. The small blue eyes were much too intelligent.

"I don't plan on keeping you long right now, Mr. Jordan. A couple of questions, that's all. I've just been to see your brother. Didn't have much to say for himself. It seems he does a lot of traveling. Hasn't been seeing much of you and your wife since you married, he said."

"Not too much."

"Your mother said about the same thing. Guess as a family you're not too close."

The lieutenant was fumbling in the pocket of his topcoat. He brought out a thick dog-eared leather notebook.

"I didn't let your mother know that it wasn't hoodlums who did it. A fine woman like that—you've got to respect her feelings as long as it's possible. I'm holding it back from the press too—for the time being."

Without looking up, he flipped through the book.

"Mr. Jordan, about this woman you said your wife called from Mr. Stanton's party, this woman you said lost a sapphire clip—Gloria Leyden."

He did look up then and the faintest gleam in his eyes—

a second's revelation of triumph—warned Andrew of what was going to come.

"You had the name right. Gloria Leyden. I got her address from Mr. Stanton. I went to see her before I talked to your brother. She lives with another girl, Mary Cross, who used to share an apartment with your wife. Miss Cross was out but Miss Leyden was there. She said she was at Mr. Stanton's party. She said she left early, too. But when I asked her if she'd lost a sapphire clip and whether your wife called her up later to check, she—Mr. Jordan, I think you got a bit screwed up there. Miss Leyden never lost no sapphire clip. Your wife didn't call her either."

Thanks to the warning, there'd been time for Andrew to steady himself. All right. Maureen hadn't been calling Gloria Leyden. That had finally been established. It meant she probably hadn't been spending the afternoon helping Bill Stanton, either. But, instead of the pain which this proof of her untruthfulness would once have brought he felt the faint excitement of facts fitting into a pattern. The anonymous letter—a threatening enemy—a blackmailer. Why not? Wouldn't that explain all the small, bewildering mysteries of their married life? Someone had known about the Pasadena affair—or some other later episode in New York. Maureen, faced with a blackmailer, had tried to handle him alone. A blackmailer, an ever-increasing pressure, and finally a struggle for the gun.

Once the idea came, he was stubbornly sure he was right, and there flooded through him aching pity for his wife and a bitter hatred for her unknown persecutor.

The lieutenant was watching him. The gleam of triumph in his eyes was even more evident now. Andrew knew exactly how to interpret it. So far as Lieutenant Mooney was concerned, he had been caught out in a lie. Here was the old,

most familiar of police patterns, the husband who had quarreled with his wife (weren't the Adamses witnesses of the quarrel?), the husband who was desperately trying to lie because he had killed the wife.

The lieutenant's tongue emerged between his lips. It was very pink. "Well, Mr. Jordan, do you still say you and your wife weren't quarreling at that party?"

"We weren't quarreling."

"And you still say your wife called this Gloria Leyden?"

"That's what she told me."

"You went into that room and there she was on the phone? You said, 'Who are you calling?' And she said, 'Gloria Leyden'?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear any of the actual words she used on the phone?"

"I did. She said, 'You've found it? Thank God, I was going out of my mind that she . . .' Then she saw me and stopped. I thought she was talking to Gloria Leyden's roommate about the clip."

"But she wasn't, was she?"

"It looks that way."

"Her explanation of the call to you was a lie. Why was she lying?"

"I haven't any idea."

"Because she'd been calling someone she didn't want you to know about?"

"That could be one reason."

"One reason? What other reason could there have been?" Lieutenant Mooney's voice took on a minatory boom. "Mr. Jordan, you said there was no trouble between you, no secrets, no other woman, no other man. Do you still say that?"

What was to stop him saying, "I believe my wife was being

blackmailed"? It seemed such a logical step to take that he felt his lips parting to say the words. Then, just in time, he realized that the only way to put up a convincing case for a blackmailer was to produce the letter to Rosemary, which would make himself a far more plausible suspect than any hypothetical blackmailer.

Feeling the sweat trickling down his armpits, he said, "There was no trouble between me and my wife. So far as I know there was no trouble in her life at all."

"And yet she lied to you about a telephone call?"

"My God, how many wives lie to their husbands about telephone calls?"

"And get themselves murdered?" Lieutenant Mooney rose. He stood looming over Andrew, looking down, wooden-faced, holding his yellow pencil in his thick, red hand. "Okay, Mr. Jordan. Let's review this situation. A couple of people at a party—people with no ax to grind—say they saw you quarreling with your wife. You deny it. You say your wife was calling a girl friend about a missing sapphire clip. The girl friend denies it. Your wife gets killed. Someone tried to fake it to look like hoodlums, but it wasn't hoodlums. Then what was it? Someone with a grudge against your wife? You deny anyone had a grudge against her. Someone who came out of her past? You say there was no one in her past. Okay. What are we left with? A wife who got herself killed for no reason?"

Andrew returned his gaze. "At the moment it looks that way."

"That's all you've got to say?"

"That's all."

For a moment Lieutenant Mooney stood watching Andrew, the hint of triumph still in his eyes, as if this cumbersome near-accusation must have some miraculous effect on him.

When nothing happened, he gave a stolid little shrug and, still standing, consulted his notebook once more.

"One other thing, Mr. Jordan. You told me your wife's doctor said she couldn't have kids without a difficult and dangerous operation."

"That's right."

"I guess you know the name of this doctor?"

"Yes, it's my mother's doctor, Dr. Mortimer Williams."

"Did you ever accompany your wife when she went to consult Dr. Williams?"

"No."

"But you have his telephone number?"

"I can get it."

Andrew went into the bedroom and found the number in Maureen's telephone book. He returned to Lieutenant Mooney, who wrote the number down.

"Okay with you, Mr. Jordan, if I use your phone?"

"Naturally."

There was a phone in the living room but Lieutenant Mooney got up ponderously and, going into the bedroom, shut the door behind him. Andrew thought of the jewels in the highboy drawer and it seemed completely insane to him that he hadn't thrown them, like the wedding ring, down a drain. He started to pace up and down the room. Maureen seemed to be everywhere, slipping invisibly out of the kitchen, gliding toward him from the hall. She had been killed by a blackmailer, killed in a pathetic attempt to conceal from him a truth which, in their new love, could so easily have been forgiven. And here he was, instead of helping the police to bring her murderer to justice, lying, stalling, worrying about his own skin and Ned's . . . Suddenly what he was doing seemed contemptible to him. To hell with the consequences. He must tell the lieutenant. He . . .

Lieutenant Mooney came out of the bedroom. Moving even more leisurely than ever, he lumbered across the room. He reached Andrew. He stopped in front of him.

"Well, Mr. Jordan, looks like you got a bit screwed up again. Dr. Williams says your wife's one of his patients, yes, but there was nothing wrong with her that would keep her from having a baby, he says—no need for an operation, nothing."

He blinked. It was the slow, lethargic blink of a cow standing under a maple tree, chewing the cud.

"I'd figured as much already," he said. "I'd figured it when the M.E. called me up to the lab this morning. He'd completed the autopsy. He wanted me to know that your wife was two months pregnant."

TWELVE

Lieutenant Mooney sat down again, never taking his eyes from Andrew's face. In the first second Andrew was too staggered to have any coherent thought or feeling.

The lieutenant's voice came again. "You didn't know that your wife was pregnant, Mr. Jordan?"

"I didn't know."

"Kind of odd, isn't it? Pretending to you that she couldn't have a child and then being two months pregnant?"

It was bewildering how time seemed to have lost all continuity, how fragments of the past were constantly superimposing themselves on the present. Andrew seemed to be both standing there opposite the lieutenant and lying again in bed with his wife . . .

". . . *it's my fault, darling, being so giddy, dashing about all over the place. But ever since we knew about not having a baby . . . It's that. You know it is, don't you?*

"*I never realized it was so bad for you too.*"

"*Bad? Oh, darling . . .*"

"*Maybe if you went back to Dr. Williams?*"

"*I did. Two months ago. I never told you. I wanted to put it all out of my mind.*"

"*Then why don't we adopt a baby?*"

"*Oh, darling, soon perhaps. But not yet, not now . . .*

From the present, Lieutenant Mooney's quiet voice impinged. "You're sure your wife told you she couldn't have a baby, Mr. Jordan?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"She lied about Dr. Williams; she was two months pregnant; and she didn't tell you. You got an explanation for that?"

With a pain more violent than any he had yet experienced, the truth came to Andrew. It was the truth, it had to be. Maureen arriving in New York, hating the Thatchers and a world which had destroyed what had seemed to her to be her great romance with the "prominent citizen of Pasadena," Maureen imagining herself utterly disillusioned and cynical, eager for revenge against society for what it had done to her. *Find an eligible man, any eligible man, marry him, let him support her. Marry Andrew Jordan. Why not? Marry Andrew Jordan, but don't love him and, beyond anything, don't get stuck having a child by him. Lie about Dr. Williams.* Hadn't that been it? Maureen, at nineteen, thinking she could be what she could never have been because, as Mrs. Thatcher had said, she was a "good girl with a lot of love to give"?

The lieutenant's blue gaze was still fixed on his face. Andrew was very conscious of him and of the perils he represented. But at that moment he could only think of the picture he had created of his wife. Maureen, the would-be "realist" gradually discovering that it didn't work, that her husband was a human being, that he loved her, that love could breed love. The change? And after the change someone showing up from her past who had known of her cynical motives for marrying which she now so bitterly regretted, someone who had persecuted her, made her life a nightmare of deception. And then, as if that had not been difficult enough, there had come the other thing rendering her dilemma even more excruciating. She was having a child and she wanted the child but how possibly could she find the courage to explain to her husband that she had tried to be a monster and failed?

Not yet—not now. At that moment, lying in his arms, she had surely almost found the courage. And she would have found it, perhaps the very next day—if she had lived.

Distorting everything, the rage was back and a sense of irreparable loss because the death of Maureen had deprived him not only of his loving wife but of his child too. His child, the thing he had wanted more than anything in the world!

Vaguely he became aware again of the lieutenant and of the present. How long had he been standing there saying nothing? He had no idea. He only knew that Lieutenant Mooney continued to sit in front of him, watching him from the blue unwinking eyes, as free from impatience as an inanimate object.

The lieutenant's voice sounded, "Well, Mr. Jordan, I'm waiting. Have you got an explanation as to why your wife was pregnant and kept it from you?"

Tell him? What? That Maureen had married him despising him, lying to him and then, through his "great" love for her, she had changed and grown to love him too? Tell him that the baby she had been carrying was his and yet she had not had the courage to admit it? For the first time he was testing what he himself believed against what the world would believe. Who, except himself, would believe that? Ned? He could see his brother's outraged stare. "Pregnant? After lying about Dr. Williams? Who was her lover? My God, the filthy little bitch." No, not even Ned.

Certainly not Lieutenant Mooney.

He thought of the lies, the evasions, the half-truths with which he had already parried the lieutenant's questions, and dimly, because most of his attention was still fixed on Maureen, he felt a net closing around him.

"I know it sounds odd," he said. "If I could make it seem less odd, I would. All I know is that my wife told me she

couldn't have children and I had no idea she was pregnant."

"And there's nothing you can think of that would explain that?"

"Nothing."

The gleam of triumph was glinting again in the lieutenant's eyes. "Does it occur to you, Mr. Jordan, that your wife could have been one of those neurotic women who're scared of having babies? Maybe that's why she lied to you. And then when she found out she was having one, she kept it from you because she was planning to get rid of it. That's one explanation. Do you buy that?"

Exhaustion was welling up inside Andrew. He sat down on the arm of a chair. "I don't know."

"Of course, if it wasn't for the two shots, she could have got so scared and mixed up about the kid that she killed herself. But it wasn't that way, was it? Somebody murdered your wife." The lieutenant looked down at the leather-bound notebook, flicking through the pages. "By the way, Mr. Jordan, I talked to your secretary at the office. She tells me you let her go at five and said you were staying on to clear up some work. Now maybe you stayed on and maybe you didn't, but your office is twenty minutes away from here on a slow walk and the M.E. sets the time of the murder between four-thirty and six."

He shut the notebook. He got up. He buttoned the buttons of his topcoat. It was too tight for him. He must, thought Andrew, have put on weight since he bought it.

"Mr. Jordan, there is one explanation for this death which I think you might go along with. Your wife told you she couldn't have a baby. You believed her. You were crazy about her. Then you found out she had a lover and that she'd been lying to you and that she was having a baby by the other man."

He was smiling. When he smiled his eyes almost disappeared under the heavy lids. It gave his usually uncomplex face an Asiatic inscrutability.

"Do you buy that as a motive, Mr. Jordan? After all, that's all we need—a motive, isn't it? It was your gun, your apartment, your wife, and you could have been there at the time."

Andrew had known that sooner or later this would come and, paradoxically, now the lieutenant had actually put it into words, some of the pressure was released. As he returned the policeman's gaze, he realized that whatever his own expression might be—calm, worried, indignant, incredulous—it would to the lieutenant seem automatically an expression of guilt. His headache was worse. Nothing seemed to matter very much.

Cumbersomely the lieutenant was stuffing the notebook into his topcoat pocket. Without looking up, he said, "That's one question you're not going to answer, is it, Mr. Jordan? Okay. I don't blame you. But before we go any further, I don't want you to be getting any wrong ideas about me. I'm not one of those cops who jump the gun. I think what I think and I take my time. I gather evidence. And then, when I'm pretty sure of the way the land lies—I take action."

He was holding out his hand and smiling his Fu Manchu smile again. Andrew took the hand. The lieutenant withdrew it and started to put on heavy leather gloves.

"The M.E. has released the body, Mr. Jordan. You can make the funeral arrangements whenever you want. And if you get any ideas, you know where to find me. You'll be seeing me soon anyway so—until the next time."

He raised one big gloved hand in a conventional gesture of farewell and started slowly and deliberately toward the front door.

Against all reason, it was harder without him. It was as if

the lieutenant had been some sort of buffer between Andrew and his feelings. Now he was alone it seemed incredible to Andrew that on the very day after his wife's death he could have been ready at the first opportunity to suspect the worst of her, to reject her, to lie to the police. And for what? To save his own skin when already, in spite of all he had done, he had been accused of her murder? The wraith of Maureen, the obsessive image he had created of her, still seemed to be floating around him—not the Maureen he had known but the Maureen who had been concealed from him, the terrified little girl behind the dazzling façade, struggling with problems which had been far too big for her, problems which he should have solved for her but which he had, in fact, only heightened. Yes, there was that to face, too. Through his own weakness, the contemptible insecurity which he could so glibly blame on his "unhappy childhood," he had been for Maureen not a pillar of strength but that most despicable of all things—a jealous husband.

His head was aching unmercifully. He went into the kitchen and made himself a drink. He came out with it into the living room, hating himself with a futile self-hatred and, above all, hating the murderer of his wife.

The persecutor . . . the blackmailer. Who? Someone he knew?

There was the sound of a key in the front-door lock. He turned sharply to the hall. Ned, in a raincoat and no hat, was letting himself in.

"Hi, Drew."

His brother stood in the hall, taking off his raincoat. The sun-whitened hair gleamed; he was grinning his broad, friendly grin, brilliant white teeth against honey-brown skin. Ned his only friend, the one person in his life for whom there was affection left—Ned who had assisted at his first be-

trayal of Maureen. "Scheming little bitch." As his brother threw the raincoat on a chair and started toward him, Andrew felt himself closing chillily against him.

"I was waiting outside, Drew. I knew the cop was here. The moment I saw him leave I came on up."

Ned had reached him; he was putting his hands on his arms. The grin which was almost always automatically there, unless there was a reason for extinguishing it, had gone. The blue eyes were veiled with worry.

"Did he tell you he'd been to see me? He was at my place just before he came here. That's why I hurried over. I had to. It was too important just to telephone. Drew, he thinks you did it."

Andrew sat down on the couch. The ice in his highball jostled against the glass with a high musical ringing sound. He remembered the day when the glasses had arrived and Maureen, happy as a little girl, had flicked at one of them with her fingernail, making the sweet chime come.

Wildly expensive, I'm afraid, darling. But they're exactly the same as some Aunt Margaret has.

His brother was looking down at him earnestly. "He didn't actually say it, Drew. He was too smart for that. But he thinks you did it. I'm sure of it. Did he come out with it to you? Did he actually accuse you?"

"He accused me."

"My God."

"He didn't arrest me. He just accused me."

There was nothing in Ned's expression but love and anxiety, no inkling of any understanding of what Andrew was feeling. Ned had never had any faculty for realizing what other people might be thinking of him. He just felt fond of them and assumed they felt fond of him.

He sat down on the couch, putting his hand on Andrew's

knee. That was always Ned's way too, as if it was only through physical contact that he could establish a bond.

"Did you get rid of Maureen's jewels?"

"No, they're in a drawer in the highboy in the bedroom."

"My God, he could have found them."

"He didn't."

"And if he found them . . . For Christ's sake, we never figured on this. I mean, even without the letter, without knowing that I faked the burglary, without anything, that goddam son-of-a-bitch still thinks you killed her. Drew, do you want me to tell him everything now? I will, you know that."

His face, close to Andrew's, was so completely yielded up to affection that Andrew felt the resentment fading away and in its place came an odd muddle of shame and love. What could you do about Ned? Hate him because he'd disliked Maureen, because, from the start of the marriage, he'd felt there were sides to be taken and had whole-heartedly plunged in on the side of his brother? *Scheming little bitch.* What did it matter how Ned felt about Maureen? He had come to his own terms with his wife now. That didn't have to involve estrangement from Ned.

He looked at his brother. *Do you want me to tell him everything?* He meant it, Andrew was sure of that. This Ned who was ready to rush to his defense with the police was the same Ned who had rushed to his defense against Maureen.

He put his hand on his brother's. "There's no point in your telling the lieutenant anything."

"But, Drew, if he thinks you did it."

"I didn't do it."

"But if he thinks . . . Drew, will he arrest you?"

Andrew had never taken the thought that far. Would there come a time when Lieutenant Mooney did actually

arrest him? Arresting innocent people? Did it happen? Probably it happened. Because he hadn't been ready for the idea, it brought a chill of panic.

"Maybe," he said.

"But we can't let that happen."

"How can we stop it?"

For a moment Ned sat beside him on the couch. Then he got up and started pacing the room. As he turned to glance back at Andrew, Andrew noticed that his lower lip was pushed upward, half covering the upper lip. Ned's trick. Ned pensive—Ned thinking up a lie?

"Drew, if I knew something . . ."

Andrew was alert again, wary, feeling an unfocused anxiety. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means . . ." Ned stopped his pacing. He moved until he was standing in front of Andrew. "Drew, I hadn't wanted to tell you. I didn't want anyone to know. So long as there was no need, I thought: 'To hell, let things ride. Don't mention it. That's the best way.' But now, if they are going to arrest you . . ."

He paused. "Isn't it better anyway? Whatever happens, doesn't it make more sense if the two of us . . . two heads . . .?"

He broke off again, watching Andrew with the intense concentration of a little boy. It was the old familiar "Drew will know what to do" look which took it for granted that Andrew would make the decision even though he hadn't the faintest idea of what the decision was about.

"It's pretty bad. I mean, if it has to come out, it'll raise a stink from here to Hawaii. It . . ."

Impulsively Ned's hand went into his breast pocket. He brought out a stiff, folded piece of paper.

"It was in the jewel box. In the bottom drawer. When I got the box home and opened it, I found it along with the

jewels and everything. The moment I saw it I realized how hot it was. I figured, 'Don't let anyone see it, not even Drew. Keep it and then—maybe, give it back to him. Not for his sake, of course, but for Ma.' Poor old Ma, poor old Mrs. Jordan Eversley Mulhouse Pryde."

He held the paper out to Andrew. Andrew took it and looked at it. It was the photostatic copy of a marriage license dated November 5—more than a year ago—at City Hall between Lemuel Patrick Pryde and Rowena Robertson.

"You see," Ned was saying. "Look at the date. November fifth. Lem married Mother in California on December twelfth. Only one month later, for God's sake. How could he possibly have got himself divorced from this Rowena Robertson before he married Mother?"

THIRTEEN

Rowena Robertson—Rowena La Marche. There was no mystery any more about 215 West 61st Street.

As Andrew looked at the license in his hand, he thought of big blowzy Rowie, lumbering around that sordid little apartment. He thought of Lem strutting in with the gift-wrapped package, being greeted by the chihuahuas as the Head of the House. He thought of his mother too, and, even then when so much else was crowding in, he felt an awed incredulity, tinged with the faintest touch of malice, that the tormentingly inaccessible goddess of his childhood should have become the prey of a seedy bigamist who kept a pink and blue lovenest just a few blocks from "her" hotel.

Ned was saying, "Maureen never told you about this, did she?"

"No."

"Then she was using it against Lem. What else could it possibly have been? The little bitch, she was a blackmailer too."

That, of course, was how Ned would see it. There had been a time—only that morning?—when Andrew would have seen it that way, too. But now it was quite different. If Lem had married their mother bigamously, why couldn't Lem also be the person who had been blackmailing Maureen? Why couldn't Maureen, driven to despair, finally have turned and fought back? It wouldn't have been difficult for her to have followed him to 215 West 61st Street, to have extracted the

truth from the pathetic, gin-sodden Rowena. Once she'd got a copy of the marriage license and the photograph of Rowie's squalid alcoholic collapse on the street, she could have confronted him with them and he could have killed her.

Lem, the bigamist. Lem, the blackmailer. Lem, the murderer. Here was a solution in which he could believe. At last his rage had something on which to focus.

He got up and went to the phone. He dialed the Plaza and asked for Mr. Pryde. He got his mother.

"Andrew? What a coincidence. I was just going to call you. Listen, Andrew, about the funeral. Several ladies have spoken to me. It's shocking that we have to be so vague. Surely those policemen can't hold it up indefinitely. I want you to speak very sharply to that Lieutenant O'Malley."

"It's Lieutenant Mooney, Mother, and it's all arranged. He's just told me they're releasing the body."

"They are? Then you must come here immediately. There's so much to discuss. Andrew, I know this is painful, but it's got to be done. Can you come right away?"

"Is Lem there?"

"Of course. Where else would he be? He's just come in from his club."

His club! "All right, Mother, I'll be right over."

Andrew dropped the receiver.

Ned, at his side, said, "Drew, do you really think Lem did it?"

"I think he did it."

"But we can't be sure, can we? There isn't any proof. He had a motive, of course, but if Maureen was doing that to him, she could have been doing much worse to dozens of other people." Ned gave a pale little smile. "I mean, we've got to be fair. If they try to arrest you, then we'll have to tell about Lem. Of course we will. It's much better for it to

be Lem than you. But you will be careful, won't you? If there's any chance that we're screwed up about this . . . Poor old Ma, she isn't at all well these days. She'd rather die than admit it, but I'm sure of it. So, unless you simply have to—don't tell her. It'd knock her out. It'd . . ."

Andrew put the license in his pocket and went out into the hall for his coat. He was in no mood to listen to Ned being "understanding" about their mother. All he wanted was to get his hands on Lem Pryde.

Ned went down with him to the street, hatless, in his thin raincoat. The February evening was bitter, but Ned, although he spent most of his life following the sun, never seemed to feel the cold. He strode along at Andrew's side as they hunted a taxi.

"I'm having dinner with Rosemary, but we'll be through early. We'll go back to my place and wait for you. You'll come, won't you, and let us know how you make out?"

"All right."

"And Drew, I mean it. Please be quite sure before you do anything. Old Lem's a bit of a crook, of course. I've always realized that. But he makes Ma happy, and she's got to have some sort of a male in tow. Besides, can you actually see Lem killing anybody? I mean, to kill someone you've got to have a certain sort of character and Lem . . ."

A taxi swung into the street. Andrew hailed it. As he got into it, Ned, standing at the curb, was still being "understanding" about Lem.

It was Lem who let him into the suite at the Plaza. Beyond, in the living room, Andrew could hear his mother's tinkling, melodious voice talking to someone. Lem was looking grotesquely uneasy.

"Listen, old boy," he whispered," you're not going to tell your mother about—er—my sister, are you? There are rea-

sons. Very good reasons, I assure you. I'll explain it all later."

"I'm planning on that," said Andrew.

His stepfather looked even more uncomfortable. He fluttered, if so large and military a figure could be said to flutter, then he strode ahead of Andrew into the living room, announcing in a voice of a professional mourner, "Norma my dear . . . here's Andrew."

Mrs. Pryde was perched on the edge of a daffodil chair, facing the window. It was too late for the paraphernalia of tea but she had a martini in one hand and her jade cigarette holder in the other. In a chair opposite her was Mr. Thatcher, who rose when he saw Andrew.

"Ah, here you are, Andrew," said Mrs. Pryde. "Lem darling, get Andrew a martini. Andrew, you know Mr. Thatcher, don't you?"

At least she'd got the name right this time, thought Andrew. She turned back to Mr. Thatcher, smiling radiantly. She was being *The* Mrs. Jordan Eversley Mulhouse Pryde, graciously permitting herself to be admired by yet another smitten male. Although she was as decorative as ever, there was an ethereal almost transparent quality to her skin. Perhaps Ned was right about her not being well. Andrew thought of the marriage license in his pocket and, remembering his earlier malice, felt ashamed. Poor Mother.

Mr. Thatcher, grave and personable as ever, was watching him from brown, sympathetic eyes. "I hope you don't think this is unfeeling, Andrew, but I dropped in to see your mother about your brother and my daughter. Rosemary seems quite dramatically in love, and she's eager, in spite of this terrible tragedy, for the marriage to take place as soon as possible. Since I have never met Ned and Mrs. Pryde has never met Rosemary, I thought the least we could do was to start comparing a few notes."

Mrs. Pryde said, "I'm sure that your daughter is perfectly delightful, Mr. Thatcher."

Lem brought Andrew's drink. His hand was very unsteady. His thumb nail as he handed the glass over was glistening with spilt martini.

Mr. Thatcher said, "Well, Mrs. Pryde, I must be moving on. I'm sure you have a lot to discuss with your son and we seem to have arranged everything anyway. We'll all meet at our house one day next week and then, unless there's some very unforeseen development, we old folk will be able to give the young people our blessing."

From the slight hardening of his mother's lapis-blue eyes, Andrew realized that his mother hadn't liked that "old folks" very much. Mr. Thatcher's tact wasn't as infallible as he'd imagined. But the radiance persisted. Mrs. Pryde rose and, looping her arm through Mr. Thatcher's as if they were about to take a stroll on the *plage* at Deauville, accompanied him out into the hall. Lem had sat down. He was sweating. He took the fussily arranged handkerchief out of his breast pocket and started mopping his face.

Mrs. Pryde came back alone. She had left the Deauville characterization in the hall. Very brisk, she moved to the couch and seated herself, smoothing her full skirt into an elaborate succession of folds.

"Now, Andrew, about the funeral. Lem and I will arrange everything for you, needless to say. But there's so much to discuss . . ."

As the voice flowed on, Andrew sat patiently, merely waiting for the moment when he could be alone with Lem. For the past few years Mrs. Pryde had given up the role of glamorous international beauty in exchange for that of the impeccable *grande dame* whose duty it was to uphold standards of behavior which were so "woefully" disintegrating

around her. Andrew was used to it, but while she went on about the funeral arrangements as if she were planning for Maureen's coming-out as a fashionable debutante, her remoteness from reality seemed to him to border on the insane.

"I think it'll be more suitable in Hartford." Hartford was where all Andrew's father's family were buried. Suitable! he thought. But if this helped her, if she could imagine herself into a state where nothing indecorous seemed to have happened in her orbit—all right, let her play it that way for as long as she could.

At length she paused and glanced at the tiny platinum watch which glittered on her wrist above the bolder flash and sparkle of her beringed fingers.

"Well, Andrew, I'm afraid there's no more time now. I must bathe and change. We're going to the theater. We simply have to. I got the tickets months and months ago. And I hate having to gobble my dinner. But you do agree, don't you? She must be moved immediately. And then the funeral in Hartford on Monday?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Lem dear, you're already changed. Why don't you give Andrew another drink? I won't be more than half an hour." She patted Lem's shoulder and disappeared into the bedroom. Lem's glass was empty. He almost ran to the bar and poured himself another martini.

As he came back to Andrew, he said, "Andrew, old boy, about Rowie . . ."

"Yes," said Andrew. "Let's talk about Rowie. You're not divorced from her, are you?"

Lem came to a dead stop. His mouth drooped foolishly open.

"You married Mother less than a month after you married

Rowie. Maureen knew, didn't she? I've got her copy of the license in my pocket."

As Andrew had suspected, the gallant major of the Errol Flynn movie had been defeated in the first skirmish. He watched his stepfather trying desperately to assemble some kind of façade. All that came was a pathetically inadequate attempt at man-to-man sophistication.

Lem sat down in the chair opposite Andrew, gulping at his drink. "So—so you're the one who found that license? That's a relief, old boy. I don't mind telling you I've been scared, damn scared that the police might have got hold of it." A drop of sweat splashed down from his mustache onto one corner of the wide, propitiating smile. "That wouldn't have been very pleasant, would it? Not if it had all got into the papers. Think of it from your mother's point of view. A fine, respected woman like that . . ."

"What about thinking of it from my point of view?" said Andrew.

"Yours, old boy?" Lem tried hard to look ingenuous. "You can't think . . . I mean, what could it possibly have to do with the hoodlums who killed Maureen?"

It was only then that Andrew remembered Lieutenant Mooney's "respect" for his mother which had kept him from telling the Prydes that there had been no hoodlums. So maybe, just maybe, Lem's ingenuousness was not fake.

He said, "You'd better tell me the truth."

"About Rowie and me?" Lem glanced uneasily at the bedroom door. It was closed. The sound of running water was faintly audible from the bathroom beyond. "Of course, old boy, I know what it looks like on the surface. That is, what it'd look like to some of those old fogies who're still knocking around. But when you hear, you'll understand, I know you will. After all, poor old Rowie. Got to have some loyalties in

life. Can't just throw her away on the garbage dump, can one, what?"

His fake British accent had never been so exaggerated. Andrew imagined he felt safer hiding behind it. Lem took another gulp of the drink, still grinning fatuously.

"Poor old Rowie. Known her all my life. You should have seen her years ago. Boy, that was a real woman. Not that she isn't handsome still, of course. Damn fine figure of a woman with some flesh on her bones. There's the bottle, of course. Had a bit of trouble with it recently, but then it's been a tough life for her, a tough uphill struggle."

As he outlined it to Andrew, the story of Rowena La Marche's life seemed more like a tough downhill struggle, with all the toughness stemming from her relationship with Lem. Rowie, who had once been an actress, had apparently been in love with him for years and had for years been working at one job or another with the sole objective of financing Lem's so-called career as an actor. It was a long, sordid saga of Lem's abandoning her at each smell of success and of his returning to her when he was down and broke again. Eighteen months before, his career had seemed to be over once and for all. Sick and destitute, he'd come crawling back to Rowie and, as always, Rowie had welcomed him with open arms and nursed him back to health.

"You can't imagine how good that woman was to me, Andrew. An angel—an absolute angel. She'd been sick herself, lost her job down in the garment district, but do you know what she did? Went out to scrub floors. Literally, old boy. Every evening she'd go off with some team of women cleaning out offices, and there'd never be any complaints. Always she'd be there in the morning bringing me my breakfast tray, cheerful, always with a joke, best little nurse in the whole wide universe. Gave up the drink too. Laid off com-

pletely. Of course I suppose there wasn't too much cash lying around, but she did it and, well, you must understand. Had to repay her somehow. Couldn't accept all that and just walk out, could I? Only a bounder would do that. So, since it meant so much to her, since it was the one thing she'd always dreamed about, when I was up on my feet again, I took her down to City Hall and made an honest woman of her."

He laughed. It was a little giggling laugh of pride that he should have been so richly loved and pride that he had given the woman who loved him so rich a reward.

"So that's the way it was, old boy, and you'd have thought it would have set her up permanently, wouldn't you? But you can never tell with women. A couple of weeks later she was hitting the bottle again. Really hitting it—pink elephants and everything. Poor old thing, collapsed on the street, got herself lugged off to Bellevue for a spell. And that's when it happened. I mean, the call from Hollywood. It wasn't really a call, just some friends of mine high up in the industry. They'd always admired my work. They offered to pay my passage out, put me up and give me another chance to break in. Old Rowie was in Bellevue. She didn't need me, so off I went. There wasn't any work as it happened, but after I'd been there just a couple of days, staying with the big-shot friend of mine, I met your mother . . ."

He seemed quite innocent of embarrassment now. To him obviously they were just men of the world forced by circumstances into an intimacy for which their "sophistication" was more than a match.

"You know something, Andrew? Never in my whole life had I come across a woman like your mother. I mean, the real thing. Oh, there'd been movie stars, of course, women the average man in the street only dreams about, but not a

woman like your mother. Not the real thing, not the top drawer. I think I'm being accurate when I say it was a revelation, changing my whole life. And when she seemed interested in me, why, suddenly I knew that this was what I was always cut out for. Everything else, all the up-and-down struggle had only been marking time. I thought of Rowie, of course. Poor old Rowie. Used to send her postal cards every day. But, well, I knew Rowie would understand. She was never one to expect the impossible from a man. I knew she'd rather die than ever stand in my way. I hadn't mentioned her to your mother, of course. Anyone could see Rowie wasn't the sort of woman your mother would appreciate. So when the time came, when—well, it's possibly a little caddish of me to bring this up, Andrew old boy, but it was your mother who proposed to me."

He beamed. "Right there in Malibu under the biggest damn moon you'd ever seen and . . . well, you know her. You know how she's used to getting what she wants when she wants it. Before you could say knife, it was all fixed. We were driving to the Mexican border. We were married in Tia Juana at eight-thirty the next morning."

He threw out his hands, exposing plump palms which, to go with his battle-toughened military characterization, shouldn't have been so plump and smooth.

"You see, old boy? It was done almost before I had time to take it in and, after all, who suffered from it? A technicality, that's all—a mere technicality. When I came back here to the Plaza, old Rowie was out again. I expected it to be a bit tricky explaining to her, but women are funny. You know something? She didn't mind about your mother at all, only so long as I promised not to divorce her. You see, that was the one thing she'd always wanted—to know that she was, conventionally speaking, my wife. And that's all she needs

now. She's got those chihuahuas. She's crazy about them. I go see her as often as I can and I always take her some gift, some little fool trinket that women like. It was working fine. And it would have gone on working for all parties concerned if it hadn't been . . ."

He broke off and his heavy handsome face was flushed now with righteous indignation. "I hate to say this, Andrew, but we've got to handle this situation like adults. Everything would have been fine and dandy if it hadn't been for that . . . that sly little, scheming little . . ."

He broke off again. "Old boy, let's get this over once and for all. I don't know how much you've found out. But it's time you faced up to it. The best thing that ever happened in your life was when those hoodlums fired those two bullets into that crooked little bitch of a wife of yours."

FOURTEEN

Andrew had been expecting something like that. Whatever Lem had or hadn't done, he would realize that his only hope for whitewashing himself lay in blackening Maureen. He sat saying nothing, watching as his "stepfather" shifted uncomfortably back and forth in his chair.

"This isn't going to be easy, old man. I mean, she had you fooled, didn't she? At least at the beginning. And I don't blame you. I was quite struck with her myself when you first brought her around here. Always so charming, making such a fuss of your mother. Andrew's certainly picked himself a juicy little peach, I thought. But that was only at first. I soon got her number. That one's out for something, I told myself. Your mother saw through her too, didn't she? Never fell for her. It takes a real thoroughbred to smell out the phonies."

He glanced once again at the closed bedroom door. "Yes, old boy. That little girl's up to something, I used to say to myself, and I tried to figure out what it could be. Could she have discovered that your mother was planning to leave her money to Ned? You know and I know that it's a perfectly just arrangement since you inherited your father's business interests. But was that it? I wondered. Was she throwing her charms around in the hopes of getting the old girl to change her will? That's how I finally had it doped out and, as things turned out, I wasn't far wrong."

He took a final gulp of the martini. The twist of lemon peel

disappeared into his mouth. He spluttered and picked it out from between his teeth with his finger and thumb.

"You see, old boy, it all broke about eight months ago—through Rowie. Can you imagine what that wife of yours had been up to? She'd been following me when I went out in the afternoons, and then, one day, she showed up at 215 when Rowie was alone. Poor old Rowie, probably she'd had one or two. She's a trusting soul anyway. Maureen got the whole story out of her in a trice and then she started on me. The very next day—it was a Thursday, your mother's regular afternoon for Dr. Williams and her allergy injections—she called from downstairs. I invited her up and she walked in here waving that photostatic copy of the marriage license."

Andrew had decided not to interrupt. It was best to hear Lem out. So far everything fitted. Lem had omitted to mention his own efforts at blackmailing Maureen. He was posing as a victim of unmotivated aggression. But that was reasonable enough. If he were in Lem's shoes, it was the version he would have used himself.

Lem seemed plunged in thought. At length he shook his head. "Poor old Rowie, can't really blame her for losing her nerve. She can't lie. Never could. You could tell that today. All that stuff she made up for you about Maureen being her friend, coming to visit her, bringing her gifts—a child of ten could have seen through that. She only met Maureen that once and she hated her. For my sake, of course. I never realized old Rowie could hate anyone until a couple of days after Maureen had been there, when I walked into 215 and there she was cutting capitals out of newspapers and sticking them onto a piece of paper. Anonymous letter, you know. She admitted she'd already sent you one. That's how mad she was with Maureen. Of course I soon put a stop to it. Anonymous letters—really! There are some things in life you don't

stoop to. Poor old Rowie, she was quite ashamed when I explained, but she'd only been trying to get back at Maureen for my sake."

That, then, was the explanation of the letter. Whatever else was false, Andrew could believe in that. He could see Rowena La Marche lumbering around with scissors and glue while the chihuahuas yipped and scrabbled at her skirts.

YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE IN NEW YORK WHO DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT YOUR WIFE.

"Let me see, old boy, where was I?" Lem was leaning a little closer to him, indicating the constant strengthening of their intimacy. "Oh yes, that Thursday. There was Maureen tripping into the apartment, pretty, smiling, just the same as ever. You should have seen her. You should have seen how smooth she was. 'Look what I've found,' she said, waving that copy of the marriage license. Wasn't it embarrassing? She was sure, of course, that I must have had terribly good reasons for committing bigamy, but think how terrible it would be for poor Mrs. Pryde if it should ever come out—particularly when my *other* wife was such a colorful character. And—can you believe it?—she produced some wretched tabloid picture of poor old Rowie's collapse on the street? She must have gone to the library or somewhere and dug it up."

Lem shook his head to indicate his astonishment at the perversities of life. " 'Yes,' she said. Wasn't it lucky that the person who had found out about it all happened to be her, because she, of course, was my friend just as I was her friend. And, since she was so sure I was her friend, she was positive that I would want to help her rectify a flagrant breach of justice. I agreed, didn't I, that it was criminal of Mrs. Pryde to be leaving all her money to that no-good Ned when Andrew was the elder son and obviously the one who should

get it. That's when she waved the marriage license again and, still smiling as cutely as any little movie starlet, she said, 'Do I make myself plain? You're going to see the old woman changes her will and changes it fast, or if you don't . . . What's the penalty for bigamy in New York State? Three or four years, isn't it? After all, you must realize my position,' she said, 'You don't think I married Andrew for his brains or his beauty, do you? I married him because I assumed he'd one day be a rich man and that's what he's going to be.' "

You don't think I married Andrew for his brains or his beauty, do you? Those were almost the identical words which had been used in the letter to Rosemary. Andrew felt a shiver of panic. My God, was it possible after all that . . . that . . .?

"Can you imagine?" Lem was smiling his hearty military smile. "Really, when she laid it on the line like that, for a moment I felt like laughing in her face. I honestly did. I thought it was a joke or something. I mean, you know your mother, old boy. Can you imagine anyone trying to influence her about what she does with her money? Me going to her, me saying, 'Look, chickie, you'll be dead soon. Why don't you write a new will and leave all the lot to that nice Andrew? But I didn't laugh. Oh no, I wasn't that much of a fool. I saw what I was up against and I played along with her. 'All right,' I said. 'I'll do my best but it'll take time, of course.' That seemed to satisfy her. She went away and, because it had all seemed so crazy, I thought that perhaps that was the end of that. It wasn't, of course."

Andrew was gripping the arms of his chair. Lem reached over him and took a cigarette out of a box. He hardly ever smoked and like all non-smokers made a big production of it, lighting the match with a flourish, sucking at the cigarette, puffing out smoke.

"Every Thursday afternoon from then on, whenever your mother left for her allergy shots, Maureen would show up. Each week I stalled; each week she threatened. Finally, needless to say, she saw the whole thing was a farce. She came right out and admitted it. She said, 'I must have been mad thinking you'd have any influence on the old woman. I must have been mad wasting my time trying to get money for Andrew when there's so much more I can get for myself.' "

Lem brandished the cigarette in the air. "That's when she switched to the jewels."

"Jewels?"

"Sure," said Lem. "Mind you, I'm telling you all this because I trust you, Andrew. You mustn't get the idea that I ever suspected you were in on it with her. It would never have occurred to me, not even if she hadn't made it plain she was strictly on her own. But the moment she outlined what she had in mind about the jewels, I knew I was licked. You see, I'd got to know her by then. I knew she was as tough and as dangerous as Al Capone and this idea was so simple, so smooth—well, old boy, give the devil his due, I'd call it a stroke of genius."

His plump hand stretched out and came to rest momentarily on Andrew's knee. "You know how your mother always likes me to choose what jewels she's to wear. Well, here was Maureen's plan. I was to persuade your mother that it was dangerous to keep her jewels here in the suite. I was to convince her it would be much better to check them into the hotel safe, where they'd be adequately protected. And then, every day I could decide which jewels she'd need, go down to the safe and bring them up for her. Get it? That was to give me complete control over the jewels, and once I'd arranged it that way I was to take one major piece each week and give it to Maureen. She knew some crooked jeweler. I

don't know who it was but it was someone. Each week she'd take a ring or a clip to this guy, who'd take out the major stones and replace them with copies. Each time she came for a new piece she'd bring me back last week's piece with the phony stones inserted. And, Andrew, you know something? By the time she got herself bumped off, that little charmer of a wife of yours had all your mother's biggest stones stashed away—the rubies from those earrings, that big emerald in the ring she always wears, those diamonds in the clip old Mulhouse gave her. Doesn't know it, of course, poor old girl, but there she is, the great Mrs. Pryde, walking about like a peacock, flashing her rings and her bracelets, flashing a lot of colored glass, a lot of worthless junk . . ."

Lem's major's smile had become a rueful smirk of admiration. "Yes, got to hand it to that wife of yours. I could have wrung her neck, of course, but—what could I do? Absolutely bloody nothing. She had me just where she wanted me and she knew it."

He paused. "Well, old boy, you wanted the truth. There it is. That's the saga of poor old Lem Pryde and his dear little daughter-in-law."

For a moment, while Lem had been talking, Andrew had felt the panic surging through him, threatening once and for all to sweep him away into despair. Could Lem have invented a story like this? Would he dare to lie about the jewels being replaced when he must surely realize that all Andrew had to do to expose him was to take one of the so-called "duplicated" pieces to an expert for assessment? No, the jewels must certainly have been substituted. Then—then Lem was telling the truth? Maureen had been what he claimed she had been? Everything he'd struggled to believe about his wife had been nothing, after all, but self-deception?

There was a long agonized moment before he realized that,

even if the jewels had been tampered with, it didn't necessarily implicate Maureen. At Mrs. Pryde's death, everything except a "little something for Lem" went to Ned. Why couldn't Lem have decided to feather his own nest while there was still time? If he had taken the jewels himself, what could be more ingenious than to invent this story which put the blame on Maureen?

Andrew got up from his chair. His relief at having once again staved off despair was far stronger than any anger he felt toward Lem. He stood looking down at his "stepfather."

"So that's your story."

"Sure, old boy, that's it."

"I don't believe it."

Lem's eyes, their whites marbleized by prominent red veins, were bulging with astonishment. "You don't believe—what?"

"That Maureen chiseled those jewels out of you."

"But—but . . . What do you mean you don't believe it? Can't you see how it explains everything? It wasn't just some little two-bit hoodlums who broke into your apartment on the off chance of picking up a few trinkets. Don't you realize what happened? That crooked jeweler of hers tipped off the big boys that she had almost eighty thousand dollars' worth of jewels stashed away. That's why they came and that's why, when she put up a fight, they shot her. My God, the stakes were real stakes. Almost eighty thousand dollars' worth of jewels in that jewel box of hers."

"In the jewel box?" Andrew could hear the hoarse distortion in his own voice.

"That's right, old boy. That's where she kept them. She was always telling me about the jewel box. I think she got a kick out of rubbing salt in the wound. She used to say, 'If you feel so bad about this, Lem, why don't you break into the apartment one day and steal them back. You'll find them

right there in a red-leather jewel box in the top right-hand drawer of the highboy in the bedroom.' And when she'd say it, she'd giggle, because she knew, of course, that I was about as dangerous to her as a mouse with its teeth extracted."

Lem got up too. He threw his arm chummily across Andrew's shoulders.

"So you can imagine how I felt yesterday at your place, old boy, when your mother sent me into the bedroom and I saw her lying there. Brother, was I frantic. I dashed to that top drawer. The moment I found the jewel box wasn't there, I realized what had happened, of course. It's too bad we can't tell the cops. If they knew about those jewels, they'd be putting a hell of a lot more effort into trying to locate those hoodlums. But we can't tell them, can we? I'm sure you agree. Why, if it all got smeared over the cheap press, it'd kill the old girl, wouldn't it? Poor old thing, she'd be a laughingstock to all her friends."

As Lem stood smiling at him, conspiratorial, shameless and yet without the slightest indication of guilt in his expression, Andrew felt himself teetering on the edge of an abyss. Lem knew exactly where Maureen had kept the jewel box. How was that possible unless . . . Wait a minute. Yes, of course, Lem had been there the night before when he'd told the lieutenant about the jewel box. So that didn't mean anything and, since he still believed that the police accepted the hoodlum theory, Lem was merely adding a plausible end to his lying story by pretending that the jewels which he himself had been hiding away had, in fact, been taken by Maureen and put into the jewel box which had been stolen by the "hoodlums." That had to be it. It was inconceivable that there could have been eighty thousand dollars' worth of his mother's jewels in that box. If there had been, Ned would have found them and Ned would have told him and . . .

Ned . . .

His face must have given him away, for Lem said sharply, "What's the matter, old boy? You think we ought to tell this to the police? That's crazy. Of course, maybe it'll all have to come out eventually, but at the moment there's absolutely no need to say anything. They're looking for hoodlums anyway. All this means is that the hoodlums were bigger-time than they realize."

"There weren't any hoodlums," said Andrew. "The burglary was a fake. The police have known it from the beginning."

"Then . . ." the skin of Lem's face was turning a greenish gray. Little bubbles of sweat were breaking out on his forehead. "But there must have been hoodlums. There . . . Andrew, what are you trying to say? You can't think I killed her. Me—killing her to get your mother's jewels back? Are you out of your mind? Me killing anyone? You don't know me. Just the sight of blood, a cut finger, and I'm dizzy, half-fainting like a woman."

He made a clutching motion toward Andrew's arm. "Andrew, listen to me. I didn't kill her. I swear it. You've got to believe that, old boy. Don't waste your time thinking about me. It's the jewel box. That's the thing. I'm telling you there was eighty thousand dollars' worth of stones in that box. Okay, you say there were no hoodlums. So there were no hoodlums. But somebody stole that box, and whoever stole it killed her. Don't you see? That's what we've got to do. We've got to find out who took that box."

They stood looking at each other. Andrew's headache was back, raging in his temples. The desperate fight to go on disbelieving his stepfather had sapped almost all his energy, and yet he had to continue with the struggle because to

believe Lem now would be to accept Maureen as the lowest, most contemptible of blackmailers and Ned as a . . .

"Andrew." Lem's voice came through to him. "Haven't you any idea who could have taken that box? Think. For God's sake, think. What if she'd had a partner, some guy who was in with her on the jewel racket, a boy friend, perhaps, a . . . Yes, that's it. I'm sure of it. You see, there's something . . ."

He broke off as the bedroom door opened. They both turned to see Mrs. Pryde coming into the room. She was wearing a gray evening dress with a stole of silver-gray fur. The dress swept full-skirted around her ankles. There were little touches of blue. Mrs. Mulhouse's diamond (?) necklace glittered at her throat. She was holding white gloves in a hand on whose middle finger gleamed Mrs. Eversley's huge emerald (?) ring. She moved toward them with magnificently assured serenity.

"So you're still here, Andrew. Lem dear, you are ready I trust. It's almost half past seven."

She started to put on a glove. They were long ones, reaching to the elbow. She was maneuvering it as dexterously as a geisha girl with a fan.

"Oh, Andrew, if you see Neddy, I wish you'd give him a message. Tell him I was charmed with Mr. Thatcher, quite charmed. And tell him he was most reasonable about the marriage arrangements. For a while he seemed to feel that I should do something to augment Neddy's little income, but when I explained that I was in no position to do so, he made a counter suggestion which I find eminently sensible. It seems he is eager to preserve his family name. If Neddy changes his name to Jordan-Thatcher—and there's no conceivable reason why Neddy could object; it's done all the time in Europe—Mr. Thatcher will be more than ready to give them a very generous allowance."

In the tumult of his thoughts, Andrew had been listening to his mother with only token attention. The last sentence struck him like a hammer.

"An allowance?" he said. "But I thought Rosemary had money of her own."

His mother glanced up from a last-minute twitch to the glove. "Oh no, dear. I made a point of asking Mr. Thatcher and he was most definite on the subject. She's completely dependent on him, and he's been very sensible with her, keeping her on the strictest basis of schoolgirl pin money. So much wiser until they reach a responsible age. But all that will change, as I said. He's promised to be more than generous."

Who cares whether Maureen went to the Thatchers or not? Ned's voice, so frank, so boyishly convincing, was echoing in Andrew's mind. *Rosemary's of age. She has money of her own. Maureen couldn't possibly have done anything to stop the marriage.*

Rosemary had said it too. They'd both been lying. Everything was adrift again.

Mrs. Pryde moved to Lem. With the pretty lightness of a girl, she put her hands on his shoulders and, stretching on tiptoe, kissed his ear.

"You're all right, chickie? No horrid little flutters of the heart today?"

Lem was beaming his complacent smile, strutting in the full splendor of admired masculinity. The public personality seemed to have been completely re-established.

"No, chickie. Fairly good form today."

"That's my boy." Mrs. Pryde turned back to Andrew. "Poor Lem, he felt very low yesterday. He had to lie down all afternoon and I read out loud to him right through from

lunch until almost six. He loves being read to. He's just like a little child."

There it was—an alibi for Lem. No one had asked for it. Mrs. Pryde had merely proffered it. Unless for some fantastically complex reason she was lying to shield him before she even knew there was any need for him to be shielded, Lem couldn't have killed Maureen.

Andrew realized what that meant. If it was no longer possible to suspect Lem of the murder, it was no longer reasonable to disbelieve his story. So this was the end of his heartbreaking journey toward the truth? His wife had been a monster, far more of a monster than even Ned had imagined.

And Ned?

Mrs. Pryde had looped her gloved hand through Lem's arm. Together they had started for the door. When they had almost reached it, Mrs. Pryde glanced back over her shoulder.

"If you want to stay a little longer and have another drink, it's perfectly all right, Andrew. But don't turn out any of the lights when you leave, will you? You know how I loathe coming back to a dark room. So gloomy."

They disappeared into the foyer. Andrew could hear the front door open and close again. He stood with the empty martini glass in his hand, gazing blindly ahead of him toward his mother's daffodil chair.

FIFTEEN

Ten minutes later Andrew was walking up the steps of Ned's apartment house. When he pressed the buzzer in the drab little foyer, there was no response, but the front door was unlocked. He climbed to the fourth floor. Someone in one of the apartments was playing a guitar. He knocked on Ned's door. Nothing happened. He would have to wait. While the mournful strum of the guitar drifted up from the stairwell, he stood with his back against the wall, exhausted, without hope, dreading what would have to come next.

It wasn't long before Ned and Rosemary arrived. He heard their footsteps and their voices. Then they came into view moving up to the landing. The moment they saw him, they were running to him, full of apologies. Had he been waiting long? Ned unlocked the front door. A single lamp was alight in the living room.

"Keith's gone," said Ned. "He left for Florida this afternoon."

"Andrew dear, you look all in. Sit down, do."

Rosemary was patting the one overstuffed chair, smiling a hostess smile as if they were married already and in their "little place" in Mexico. Ned got drinks. Once Andrew was settled in the chair, he and Rosemary sat down together on the daybed. Dimly Andrew realized he had never seen them together before. Together they looked different, both of them much more sure of themselves, almost formidable. Young love militant.

Ned was looking at him with anxious affection. "Well, did you see him?"

"I saw him."

"And he admitted he'd never got a divorce from that woman?"

"He did."

"And Maureen had been blackmailing him?"

"That's what he said."

"But what was she doing?" said Rosemary. "Getting money out of him?"

All right, thought Andrew. Give it to them. "He says she made him sneak Mother's jewels to her one by one. She took them to some crooked jeweler, who copied the stones. She kept the genuine stones and gave the pieces with the phony stones back to Lem. He says she got away with almost eighty thousand dollars' worth."

"For heaven's sake!" Rosemary's voice cracked. "And I thought I'd misjudged her. I thought she'd changed. What a fool I was."

Andrew was watching his brother. He had expected to be ready for this moment, but when he saw the flicker of lashes, the "innocent" (and hopelessly betraying) widening of the blue eyes, he felt his heart sinking.

"Okay, Ned," he said. "Where are they? Do you still have them or have you sold them already to that guy you know who doesn't give much of a price?"

"Andrew!" cried Rosemary.

Andrew kept his eyes fixed on Ned's face. For a long moment his brother sat quite motionless. Then the faintest suggestion of a smile came.

"So old Lem did know where she kept them."

"She told him."

"Well, what do you know!"

"That's why you thought you were safe putting me on to Lem, wasn't it? You knew he'd tell me about the jewels but you never dreamed Maureen would have admitted to him that she kept them in her jewel box."

The small, private, self-mocking smile still flickered around the corners of Ned's mouth. "Would you have dreamed that a dame who'd been chiseling jewels out of someone would have had the gall to tell him where she kept them?" He paused. "So that's the way it goes. You know."

"I know."

"Then you see, don't you? I mean, you see why I couldn't possibly have told you about them." Ned slipped his hand out of Rosemary's and, leaning forward, laid it on Andrew's knee. "My God, you were ready enough to suspect me of killing her when it was only a question of her own few crummy jewels. What were you going to think if you knew I had all that loot of Ma's too? I've been terrified, I don't mind telling you—scared out of my wits. You know how broke I am. You've always thought I was a crook about money anyway. Of course I never had the slightest idea they'd be in the box. I only took the goddam thing because I was trying to fake a burglary. But when I opened it and found them and realized what Maureen had been up to . . . 'Brother,' I thought, 'if Andrew finds out about this, I'm sunk.' "

He registered "being sunk," playing it up, playing it to the hilt as usual.

Andrew said, "So that's why you just kept them and never mentioned them?"

"Of course it is and I've been beating my brains out trying to figure out what to do with them. For a while I thought I had a plan. I'd give them back to Lem and have him somehow get them put back in Ma's settings. But then when the

cop started suspecting you and I knew, for your sake, I'd have to tip you off about Lem and the license . . ."

The fair hair flopped over his forehead. He shook his head to toss it back. "I guess I messed this up like everything else, didn't I? It was just that I was so scared you'd think I killed her."

"Particularly when in fact she could have stopped the wedding," said Andrew. "If she had gone to the Thatchers, it would have been the end, wouldn't it? You'd either have had to marry Rosemary without a cent between the two of you or give up the whole thing."

Ned's face went blank. "But, Drew, are you out of your mind? When you know perfectly well that Rosemary has money of . . ."

"It's rather late in the day for that. Rosemary's father has been to see Mother. Trust Mother to find out about finances. Mr. Thatcher told her the truth, which happens to be that Rosemary doesn't have a cent to her name."

"But . . . but . . ."

The look of astonishment in Ned's eyes seemed absolutely authentic. He swung around to Rosemary. Andrew turned to look at her too. Her face was crimson.

"Rosemary," said Ned. "Rosemary baby . . ."

"All right," she said. "You don't have to look at me like that, either of you. It's not such a terrible crime, is it?" She got up. She stood very small and stiff and determined in front of Andrew. "You're right. I admit it. I don't have a cent of my own. I've been lying to you and to Maureen and to Ned as well."

"But Rosemary . . ." said Ned again.

"No," she said. "Don't interrupt. I've got to explain. It's perfectly simple. Yesterday at lunch I knew I had to prevent Maureen going to Mummy and Dad. The only thing I could

think of to stop her was to make her believe that going to them wouldn't do any good. So—so on the spur of the moment I invented all that about money of my own. And then, once I'd told her, I decided to tell you too—and Neddy."

"Why Ned?" cut in Andrew.

The flush deepened. "Because—well, Neddy's such a lousy liar. I thought it would be safer to make him believe what you and Maureen believed, and he did. He believed me just as much as you did. Oh, I knew it was a wild gamble, of course. If Maureen had gone to Mummy and Dad anyway, the whole thing would have been exposed in a second. But there was just a chance that somehow or other, everything would work out."

"Which it did," said Andrew, "when Maureen was killed."

Rosemary was glaring at him through the glasses. "You think I don't realize that? Of course I do. And if you want to think I killed her, all right, go ahead. I didn't, as it happens. But that's neither here nor there. All you've got to see is that none of this applies to Neddy. Neddy couldn't have killed her to keep her from going to Mummy and Dad because he had no idea that she could stop the marriage. And he couldn't have killed her for those jewels because he couldn't possibly have known they were in that box until he brought it back here and opened it."

She moved to the couch and, standing by Ned, put her hand on his shoulder. Her eyes, fixed on Andrew's face, were furious in their intensity.

"Can't you see that? Even a moron could see that. Oh, oh, you make me so mad. You know what Maureen was now. You know she was even worse than I used to think she was. You know from that letter why she married you. You know from Lem Pryde what she was doing to him and your mother. She was a monster, that's what she was, a monster,

and you ought to be delighted that somebody killed her. And—and yet, here's Neddy, your own brother who loves you, who's tried in every possible way to help you, faking a burglary, risking his own skin, doing everything . . . and, instead of being grateful, instead of realizing where your real friends are, you're ready to believe the most horrible things . . . It's disgusting. That's what it is. Disgusting."

Her voice choked off. She dropped down on the daybed, threw her arms around Ned and burst into tears.

"Baby, baby, it's okay."

Ned was kissing her. Very gently he drew her head down to his shoulder and started stroking her hair. He looked up over her head to Andrew, grinning apologetically.

"I'm sorry, Drew. She shouldn't have said that. Sure, you ought to have suspected me. My God, all the things I've done in my time? I think you're a saint not to have turned me in hours ago. But it's just—well, I didn't kill Maureen, honest I didn't. And neither did Rosemary."

He paused. "Drew, do you want me to get you those jewels?"

Without waiting for Andrew to say anything, he eased Rosemary's head off his shoulder until it was resting against the pillows of the daybed, got up and went into the bedroom. In a few moments he was out carrying another manila envelope.

"Gee," he said. "The transfer of gems that goes on in this dump. It could be Amsterdam."

He gave Andrew the envelope. Rosemary blew her nose. She got up, straightening her skirt. She came over to Andrew.

"I'm sorry, Andrew, I really am. It's my temper, you know. It's terrible."

Andrew had opened the envelope. She looked in at the gleaming heap of stones.

"For pity's sake," she said, "what are we going to do with them?"

"What are we going to do period?" said Ned. "That cop thinks Andrew killed her. That's the important thing. That's what we've got to stop."

"But how?" said Rosemary.

How, indeed? thought Andrew. Lem wasn't the murderer. He had an alibi. To expose his mother's bigamous marriage would be cruel and meaningless. And Ned . . . Rosemary . . . Had he ever really believed that either of them had killed Maureen? He hardly knew any more. In his extreme exhaustion and battered self-esteem, he realized he had come to a point where he had lost any faculty for distinguishing what was true from what was false. He thought of Lieutenant Mooney, who "took his time," who "gathered evidence," and then, when he was pretty sure of the way the land lay, "took action." How long would it be before he took action?

The phone rang. Ned glanced at him and then at Rosemary. He hurried over and picked up the receiver.

"Yes, yes, just a minute." He looked at Rosemary. "It's for you. Your mother."

"Mother?" Rosemary went to the phone. "Hello. Yes, Mummy . . . Yes, as a matter of fact, he's right here. I'll get him." She cupped the receiver. "It's you she wants, Andrew. She says she's been trying to get you at your apartment. She called here because she thought I might know where you are."

Andrew took the phone from her. "Mrs. Thatcher."

"Thank God I've finally reached you." Mrs. Thatcher's voice sounded agitated. "This isn't good news, I'm afraid, but I've talked to my husband and he agrees that it's only fair to warn you. Lieutenant Mooney's just been here. He'd been interviewing a friend of Maureen's, a girl called Mary

Cross. Do you know her? Maureen roomed with her when she first came to New York."

Mary Cross—the girl who shared an apartment with Gloria Leyden in the Village.

"Yes," he said. "I know who she is."

"It's because of her that the lieutenant came to us. She'd told him about Maureen's living with us. Perhaps I should have let him know about the—the episode in Pasadena. But I didn't. It seemed unnecessary to make trouble when it was all so long ago. But, Andrew, this is awfully difficult. I don't quite know how to say it, but it seems that everything I told you about Maureen this morning was idiotically wrong and naïve. According to this Mary Cross, before she married you, Maureen . . . well, she was very secretive, apparently, but this Mary Cross knew there'd been man after man . . . And not only that, when she came to me and pretended to have forgiven me, it must all have been some devious, malicious act, because she told Mary Cross only a few months ago that she hated us and—and that the only satisfaction she'd got out of her marriage was the pleasure of flaunting it in our faces that she'd become Mrs. Pryde's daughter-in-law."

Her voice was stricken with embarrassment and anxiety for him. As if it mattered! As if he were capable of any more suffering.

"Andrew, it's awful to tell you that. I know it is. But I've got to make you realize what Maureen was really like because it seems there weren't any hoodlums . . . and now that the lieutenant has heard from Mary Cross about the other men and her motives for marrying you . . . Andrew, he says she was shot with your gun at a time when you could have been there. And not only that, there's something else he knows which he wouldn't tell us about but which seems very important to him. You do see what I'm trying to say, don't

you? When he left here, he told us he was going to the district attorney. It didn't sound good and . . . well, we thought we should try to find out how the land lay. My husband happens to know the mayor. He got in touch with him and we've just had word. It seems that a warrant is going to be sworn out for your arrest tomorrow morning."

She paused. Then bleakly she added, "Andrew, I don't know whether you killed Maureen or not. It would be ridiculous to pretend that I do, but I'm pigheaded enough to be sure you didn't and honest enough, I hope, to feel terribly responsible. If she was as bad as she seems to have been, then maybe it was partly my fault. I can't let them arrest you without at least trying to warn you. And please don't think it's just because of Rosemary and Ned. That's something different. That's their own affair. It's you I want to help. Do you have a good lawyer?"

"I'll have to think."

"If you don't, my husband can get you the best one in the city. And, Andrew, isn't there something you know, anything, anything at all that might help to point to someone else?"

To her daughter, for example? Or to her son-in-law-to-be? Would her Christian charity stretch that far?

"There's nothing that adds up to much, Mrs. Thatcher."

"But . . . but . . . oh dear, what can we do?"

"You're very kind and I appreciate it. But at the moment . . ."

"But if you do think of something, if there's anything we can do, absolutely anything, you'll call us, won't you? Promise me. Call any time, it doesn't matter how late."

"Thank you."

"No, Andrew, you'd do the same thing, I'm sure."

He dropped the receiver. Rosemary and Ned were watch-

ing him in taut silence. He sat down on the arm of the chair.

"Lieutenant Mooney's been to see her," he said. "They've found out he's swearing out a warrant for my arrest tomorrow morning."

"My God!" exclaimed Ned. "Then what are we going to do?"

What was *he* going to do? It was as if he were in an echo chamber with that sentence bounding off the walls, the ceiling, the floor. Wearily he got up. He was still carrying the envelope which contained his mother's jewels. The only thing in the world that he actively wanted at that moment was for his head to stop aching.

"I'll think of something," Andrew said. He started for the door.

"But, Drew, you're not leaving."

"I'm going home. I've got to be alone for a while. I've got to think."

He turned to glance back at them. They were standing very close to each other, hand in hand again, their faces gaunt with anxiety.

Ned said, "Just remember one thing, Drew. If you say the word, I'm ready to tell them everything. Absolutely everything."

"And so am I," said Rosemary. "Of course I am."

Ned moved toward him and put his hand gently on his arm. "It's whatever you decide, Drew. Just let us know. That's all."

Mrs. Thatcher, Rosemary, Ned—all of them lavishing love and sympathy on him as if they were visitors at the bedside of a dying man.

SIXTEEN

When he let himself into the dark apartment, the feeling of Maureen was everywhere, intangible, poisonous as gas escaping from the stove. He turned on a lamp. He put the envelope of jewels down on a table. He was ravenous. He went into the kitchen. There was nothing in the refrigerator. He made himself a bowl of cereal and milk and sat on a stool wolfing it down. Maybe food would make the headache go.

Lieutenant Mooney. "I gather evidence." He'd gathered evidence all right. "Man after man." Wasn't that what Mary Cross had said? A vision came of Maureen, smiling, dazzling in this man's arms, in that man's arms. The pain that came with it was as tormenting as the headache. There hadn't been time yet for the wound to heal. His wife. The white rose . . .

The self-pity that welled up in him humiliated him. Fight it down. Think of Lieutenant Mooney. The gun—the time of death—the "other thing" which he hadn't confided to Mrs. Thatcher but which, of course, was the pregnancy. Maureen had married him as a dumb straw husband, Maureen was having a baby by one of her lovers, Maureen had been murdered in a fit of jealousy by the dumb straw husband. That was how Lieutenant Mooney saw it. That was how the district attorney would see it. And a judge? And a jury?

"Andrew, don't you know something, anything?" What did he know? No hoodlums, no blackmailer, no Lem, no Ned, no Rosemary. (Surely, no Ned, no Rosemary.) Then—what? The baby. He faced it because he had to face it. The

child hadn't been his. There wasn't one chance in a million that it could have been his. One chance in a million? No, of course. Not even that. Two months pregnant, the Medical Examiner had said. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He had left New York almost exactly nine weeks ago for those three lonely, anxiety-ridden weeks in Scandinavia. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, there had been a lover. And what had Lem suggested? A lover who'd been an accomplice in the jewel racket? Why not? To begin with, Maureen had merely been trying to get the will changed, which indicated that she had still been thinking of herself primarily as his wife. But later, when she'd switched to the jewels, what had she said? "I must have been mad trying to get something for Andrew when there's so much I can get for myself." For herself—and a lover? A lover she'd taken a few months before the Scandinavian trip, when his doubts and tensions about telephones not answered and dates kept late had started? A lover who was in with her on the theft of the jewels, and consequently an impoverished lover? At least, a cynical lover who was only interested in her provided the jewels came with her.

He put the cereal bowl in the sink. He went into the living room.

A lover? Why not? But—who? Inevitably he thought of Bill Stanton. Even if Bill wasn't himself the lover, he was the person most likely to know about him. "Oh, look, Bill, there's Gloria," dragging Bill away at the party to brief him. "Bill's maid was sick. I spent the afternoon helping him get ready for the party." At least Bill Stanton would know the truth about that. If he could get Bill Stanton to talk . . .

He ran into the bedroom, turning on the light by the bed. Bill's number was in Maureen's book. He found it. Slumped across the bed, he dialed.

"Bill, this is Andrew Jordan."

"Andrew!"

"Are you alone?"

"I'm alone."

"I've got to talk to you. I'm coming over."

"But, Andrew . . ."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

In under a quarter of an hour, he was knocking on Bill Stanton's door. Bill opened it. He was wearing a red silk robe over shirt and trousers. The face, which Andrew had never quite liked, the smooth, Manhattanish, almost handsome face, wore a typical "nothing-surprises-the-sophisticated" expression.

"Hi, Andrew. Come in."

He stood aside. Andrew went into the hall. Bill Stanton closed the door behind them. They went down steps into the sunken living room, which Andrew had never seen except at parties. Now that it was empty, it looked big and bleak and very faintly shabby—the room of somebody pretending to be more successful than he was. What did Bill do anyway? Free-lance design?

"Sit down, Andrew. Sit down. What can I offer you? Scotch? Isn't that suitably unfrivolous for a bereaved widower?"

Andrew sat down in one of the Swedish modern chairs. Bill Stanton made two drinks at the bar and brought him one. He stood looking down at him.

"Before you say anything, Andrew—just in case you're planning to waste your energy being belligerent—I'd like you to know that there was no malice in my telling that lieutenant about the Adamses. If I hadn't, they would certainly have gone to him themselves. They're a very dreary couple. Seeing themselves as witnesses to a murder rehearsal is the most

exciting thing that's happened to them since Mrs. A. won sixty-seven dollars and an ice bucket on a daytime TV quiz show."

He smiled. It was a blandly friendly smile whose friendliness Andrew didn't trust an inch.

"Does that help to establish the right mood between us? I told the lieutenant about the Adamses but that was all I told him. Only that and nothing more. You should be grateful."

Andrew, sipping his drink, watched the other man, trying to assess him. "So there is more to tell?"

"I am hardly someone who confuses a cop with a father confessor."

"And I should be grateful because you held back information from the police—for my sake?"

"Well." His lips drooping slightly at the corners, Bill Stanton sat down in a chair opposite him. "It was partly for my own sake, I must admit that. Much as I admired Maureen, once she was dead and in the domain of the cops, she wasn't quite the kind of girl one wants to be linked with. But shall we say that, whatever my motives, my discretion was of incidental benefit to you? Because, unless I'm very much mistaken, what I have to say about her would have made the cops very interested in her husband—and I imagine they're interested enough in you as it is, aren't they?"

The drooping corners of Bill Stanton's mouth were clearly indicating the malice which he had denied. Malice—and perverse curiosity too. In his special way, Bill Stanton was just as excited as he claimed the Adamses to be. The dislike Andrew felt for him was almost a physical revulsion.

He said, "They're going to arrest me tomorrow unless . . ."

"Unless you can show good reason why they shouldn't?"

"Exactly."

Bill Stanton took a cigarette out of a silver box. "While

we're on the subject—did you kill her? I would be fascinated to know. I've thought of many colorful ends for Maureen. The most probable, I felt, was death at the hands of her outraged husband."

"I'm sorry to be unfascinating," said Andrew. "I didn't kill her."

"So you're merely trying to find out who did?"

"Yes."

Bill Stanton lit the cigarette. "I hope you haven't been pinning too much faith on me as the Killer. Yesterday morning I had to fly to Chicago. I only got back early this morning. This the police already know, this the police have already checked, this once and for all lets me out. So if you do have a list of killers and I'm on it, cross me off and move on to the next name. Is there another name?"

"No."

"But there is some—idea?"

Andrew took a gulp of his drink. "Were you one of her lovers?"

"One of her lovers? So you know that much about her?"

"I know that much."

"Well, yes, before you married her I suppose I could be called one of her lovers. For a while I came dangerously near to becoming one of her husbands, too. There was quite a nasty scene once when she threatened to tell people quote about me unquote unless I made an honest woman of her. Then luckily she found out how little I had in the bank and I was perfectly safe. From that moment we understood each other, which meant, since she did happen to know about some rather tricky little adulteries of mine, that I was always available for her in any capacity she happened to need me. Dear Maureen! As I said, I admired her in many ways. But I'm afraid she never quite qualified as a truly glorious bitch.

For example, it was idiotic of her to feel she had to extort co-operation from me. I would always have been delighted to give her aid and comfort just for the privilege of seeing those nasty little wheels go around. Not that she wasn't frank, of course. That's one area in which I give her full marks. She kept few secrets from me. Some, but few and only the big ones."

"Then you knew her motives for marrying me, for example?"

"My poor Andrew, I knew them all too well. I imagine I was the very first person to hear the great news. I shall never forget her bursting in here one day, beside herself with joy, announcing, 'Congratulate me, I'm going to marry Andy Jordan. The dear sweet man's going to be very eligible indeed because his mother can't possibly last out for more than a couple of years. She's dying of leukemia.' "

He stopped with a little fake gasp of contrition. "Oh dear, you didn't know about that, did you?"

Andrew sat gripping his drink, feeling a strange, incomprehensible panic.

"I should have realized," said Bill Stanton. "In fact, I did realize. I had just moronically forgotten. You know Maureen shared the same doctor as your mother. That was far too good an opportunity for her to pass up. One day she managed to get at the doctor's files, and there it all was, the diagnosis, the prognosis, all the medical mumbo jumbo. It seems there was also a little note from your mother. I gathered it was a very dignified and touching human document, demanding that the doctor should never tell a soul that she was dying, not her children and particularly not her husband. Your wife's relish as she told me about it, her total insensitivity to the implications from your mother's point of view, was one of the examples of Maureen at her highest pitch of Maureenness."

The soft voice, so repellent in its motiveless spite, was cooing on. The panic was still in him and with it a sudden, corroding sense of guilt as he remembered the times, the dozens of times, in his childhood and later, much later, almost up to that very day, when his bitter resentment of his mother had brought vindictive daydreams of her "come-uppance." And now she was dying, tightly insulated by pride and courage, while a shabby bigamist was living off her, and her jewels had been swindled out of her by a cheap little bitch who hadn't deserved to breathe the same air she breathed.

The hatred he felt for Maureen, far transcending any reaction to Bill Stanton, was so violent that it frightened him.

"I'm sorry, Andrew, to have blurted all this out so tactlessly, but I still feel it may be an essential piece of information for you in your role as falsely accused husband. You see, that's what Maureen married. She didn't marry you. She married your mother's leukemia. And I'm afraid to say the poor dear outwitted herself, didn't she? I was the first to hear about that too. It was right after the honeymoon that she found out all the money was going to your brother. She came here in a rage. 'I'll get that will altered,' she said, 'if it's the last thing I do.' Splendidly Edwardian, she was. There should have been elbow-length gloves and Mrs. Tanqueray jet. And she tried, didn't she? She worked out some scheme. I never quite knew what it was. It was rather too important for her to confide it to me. But I do know it didn't succeed. That's when she changed."

The pale, bantering eyes were fixed on Andrew's face, the eyes of—what?—an entomologist ready to stick his pin through the rarest of Brazilian butterflies?

"Changed?" repeated Andrew.

"Yes, changed. Every now and then after that she'd drop in to see me. For no particular reason. It was just, I think, that I relaxed her, that with me she could put her feet up.

But, although she came, from then on she was always disappointingly secretive. She couldn't control her aura, though, and it was a smug, canary-swallowing aura. I knew she'd got on to something that was making the marriage pay off after all."

The jewels, thought Andrew; futile rage against a dead woman tearing him apart.

"Andrew, my dear fellow, you do appreciate my magnanimity in telling you all this, don't you? It would be much more orthodox for me to be talking to the cops instead, but it appeals to my sense of sportsmanship to throw my weight behind the losing side. The point of the change—the point of Maureen's smugness—was a man. A lover. I was perfectly sure of that even though she was admitting nothing. And then, one day just after you were back from that European trip, she called me in quite a flap and said that if ever you were to ask me I was to say she'd spent the whole afternoon with me. As it happened, you never mentioned anything, so that was that. But, well, she'd come out with it at last."

Andrew looked up from his drink, but by now he was only dimly seeing Bill Stanton. As a human being, Bill Stanton no longer existed for him.

"There was another time too, Andrew, which you must remember. It was just two days ago, at my party, the day before she was killed. You said something about renting her out as a maid and she grabbed me away from you and sneaked me out into the kitchen. 'My God,' she said, 'that almost tore it. I told him I'd spent the afternoon helping you get ready for this party. And I did, see? If he ever brings it up, you're to swear I was here all afternoon from lunch until about six-thirty.' "

Bill Stanton's mouth had twisted in a smile of delighted reminiscence. "She was really quite rattled and it was a big disappointment to me. Genuine adventuresses should never

become rattled, and I felt that, for her own good, she needed a little turn of the screw. So I said, 'Listen, sweetie, maybe all those tiny things you know about me aren't so important after all. Why don't you go ahead and announce them to an astounded world? And I'll slip over to Andrew right this minute and let him know how you've been spending your afternoon.' You should have seen her. I always thought that TV and its miracle deodorants had once and for all released American womanhood from offending. But she was sweating, literally sweating. 'Bill,' she said. 'Bill dearest, darling Bill, do this for me. Please, just this once, and I swear I'll never ask you to do anything else again ever.' "

He shrugged. "I knew she'd been with her lover, of course, and I was pretty sure that somehow it was all tied up with some crooked deal she was pulling against your mother. So, whimsical old me, I said, 'Okay, my angel, I'll cover for you on one condition. Tell me the name of your boy friend.' "

He was leaning forward. His face, vague and looming, was a face which some day was going to be smashed by someone. But not by Andrew. It wasn't worth the effort.

"When I said that, she squirmed, she hated it, but she knew I wasn't bluffing. So finally she came out with it. She said, 'You'll swear never to tell anyone.' And I said, 'Yes, dear, scout's honor.' And she said, 'Well, it's a question of killing two birds with one stone!' And she gave that sinister little Lucrezia Borgia giggle I was so fond of. 'It's always been my philosophy that love and loot should go together, and this time it's working out fine. My boy friend, as you choose to call him, is in a very strategic position. He's old Mrs. Pryde's husband.' "

Astonishment came to Andrew like a blow in the solar plexus. But even in the first instant of shock, he saw how everything could fit this way. Lem and Maureen, not enemies,

but allies. Two crooks mercilessly running roughshod over everyone—himself, his mother, Rowie, Ned. Two ghouls fighting against time to get all the jewels into their possession before Mrs. Pryde died.

He got up. Bill Stanton got up too.

"Well, Andrew, that's my small contribution to the Fund for Embattled American Widowers. I hope it may help to bring you out from the shadow of the electric chair. It makes it all more complex, of course, but nothing simple is ever stimulating, is it? Not even a murder."

Lem. Lem—the lover? Lem—the father of her child? Lem—the murderer? Lem, who had an alibi? Lem, who knew the jewels were in the jewel box which hadn't been taken by the killer? For a moment everything seemed to be disintegrating again. Then Andrew understood. Not about the alibi. Only his mother could explain the alibi. But he could see the rest. Lem, the killer, yes, but not the premeditating murderer. Lem, the petty crook, yes, but not the monster. There had been only one monster—Maureen, who had used Lem as she had used everyone else. Maureen, who, once the jewels were safely in her jewel box, had decided to shake off the lover who no longer had any usefulness. *Okay. Good-bye. Go back to your wives now, like a good boy. These jewels are mine and there's just nothing you can do about it.* Maureen taking the gun out of the bedside drawer, Maureen threatening Lem, a struggle, two shots, Lem, "who fainted at the sight of blood," rushing hysterically from the scene, completely forgetting the jewels in his panic.

Bill Stanton's high, light, mosquito voice was saying, "I imagine the next step in your investigation involves a little trip to the Plaza, doesn't it? When you leave, I suggest you turn left to Park. That's your best bet for a taxi."

SEVENTEEN

It was just after eleven. Whatever play the Prydes had been to see should be out by now. Andrew took a taxi to the Plaza. He called on the house phone from the lobby. His mother answered. Hearing her voice made the embarrassment worse. Cripplingly shy, he went up in the elevator. She opened the door of the suite for him. She was still wearing her elaborate, filmy, becoming gray evening dress. She looked tired but that was all. The blue eyes were as bright and handsome as ever, acknowledging his presence with the only just disguised indifference which had always been her greeting for him.

"Andrew, isn't this a rather odd time for a call?"

He went past her into the living room. The drapes were not drawn. Beyond he could see the vast expanse of Central Park threaded with glittering street lights.

"We've just got back." His mother had followed him. "It was an excessively dreary play. Lem's gone out again for a little fresh air. He always needs a walk before he goes to bed."

She sat down on her daffodil chair. He turned to her, tongue-tied. More than ever before with his mother, he felt like a little boy, a guilty little boy faced with the ordeal of explaining something which was quite beyond his powers.

Mrs. Pryde had produced her jade cigarette holder. Her hand, on which the false emerald gleamed, moved to take a cigarette out of a box. She looked up at him. He came over

with his lighter. She inhaled and, as the cigarette glowed, watched his face critically.

"What on earth is the matter with you, Andrew? You look quite liverish."

"Liverish." That was one of his mother's words. She'd picked it up in her English period with Mr. Mulhouse.

He sat down. He said, "Lieutenant Mooney's going to arrest me tomorrow morning."

"Arrest you?" she echoed. "For killing Maureen?"

"Yes."

"But that's absolutely ridiculous. We all know it was hoodlums."

"It wasn't hoodlums."

She had arranged herself the way she wanted to be by then. The cigarette holder was poised at the correct angle, the skirt swooped around her in a graceful curve, the light from the lamp fell in just the right way to bring out the gleam in her taffy-colored hair.

Andrew looked at her, failing to catch even the slightest indication of sympathy or even surprise in her expression.

At length she said, "But you surely didn't kill her, did you, Andrew?"

"No, Mother, I didn't."

Mrs. Pryde tapped ash off her cigarette. "Then there's nothing to worry about. It's most unfortunate, of course. But whatever one may say about this country, one still doesn't get arrested here for a crime one didn't commit."

That made him just angry enough to loosen his tongue. "Listen, Mother, I'm in this up to my neck. I've got to use any weapon that comes my way. That's the only reason why I'm bringing this up. You've got to believe that. Mother, I know about you and Dr. Williams."

"Dr. Williams?" Mrs. Pryde sat up, poker-backed.

"The leukemia, Mother. I know."

For a moment she seemed turned to metal. The bare arm balancing the cigarette holder, the slightly tilted head were rigid. The blue eyes, glaring at him, were steel eyes. In a voice like a knife, she said, "If that wretched little Dr. Williams . . ."

"It wasn't Dr. Williams, Mother." How to say it? "It was Maureen."

"Maureen?"

"She looked at your file one day in Dr. Williams' office. You've known for almost two years, haven't you? You already knew when you married Lem."

Mrs. Pryde put the jade holder down on an ashtray. She found a tiny handkerchief in her evening bag and lifted it to her face. There was no suggestion of blowing her nose. It was merely a stylized gesture exploiting the prettiness of fluttered linen.

"Well," she said, "you wouldn't bring it up unless you had to. Wasn't that what you said? Just why do you have to bring it up? Are you implying it was unsuitable of me to marry Lem under the circumstances?"

"Of course I'm not. It's . . ."

"I see nothing unsuitable about it at all. You know I have never enjoyed living alone. Certainly I didn't look forward to dying alone. I found Lem very charming, very endearing. And from his point of view you can hardly call it a bad bargain. He'd had a miserable life, hounded by poverty and failure. He adores luxury and I have been able to provide it for him. Even if it turns out to be only for a few years, I'm sure he'll be grateful and I fully intend to leave him a little something in my will."

It had always been like this with his mother. They might have been conversing in different languages.

He said, "You know I'm not worrying about whether it's a good thing for Lem or not."

"Then what are you worrying about?"

Floundering, he said, "I'm wondering whether he's worthy of you."

"Worthy!" Mrs. Pryde gave a little tinkling laugh and picked up the cigarette holder again. "Really, Andrew, you talk just like your father. Do you imagine I care whether Lem is worthy of me or not—whatever 'worthy' means? All I want from Lem is for him to be loving and attentive and there when I need him."

"But if there was something about him, if there was something I knew . . ."

"Andrew!" His mother's exclamation stopped the sentence dead. She sat watching him, the blue eyes showing for the first time a faint gleam of interest. "You're not trying to tell me about Rowena La Marche, are you?"

Andrew's mouth dropped open. Mrs. Pryde leaned forward and put one finger on his knee.

"My poor dear Andrew, have you been tormenting yourself with the supposition that I didn't know about Miss La Marche? Really, I can't understand my children. Why do they always seem to think I'm some sort of helpless, scatterbrained butterfly? A few days after I met Lem in California I had a private detective agency investigate him. One can never be too careful about things like that. I must admit when I found out he was married and had failed to mention it, I was a little disappointed. But, after all, my circumstances were rather unusual, weren't they? I thought it over and decided it was very improbable that I'd find anyone more suitable and very foolish to waste time on a divorce."

Her shoulders, by the faintest ripple, suggested a shrug. "So I did what seemed to be best and it's all turned out

very well. My detective agency assured me there would be no trouble from Miss La Marche and they've been right. As I understand it, she's rather a pathetic old thing. I expect Lem takes her a little gift every now and then, and that is as it should be."

She was still looking at him. The smile was almost affectionate now. "Poor Andrew, you and I have never understood each other particularly well, have we? I can't believe that it matters a great deal. It's always seemed most unrealistic to me to imagine that parents and children should have anything in common at all."

Andrew thought of her only a few hours before, being the absurdly correct *grande dame* making the funeral arrangements, and he knew that he would never even begin to grasp what his mother was. He knew, too, that till the day she died he would never be able to change the pattern between them.

Her smile was still registering its slight hint of affection. "Well, Andrew, is that the only thing you don't want to bring up but have to?"

He struggled to get back his sense of urgency. "No," he said. "There's something else and it's terribly important. Why did you dislike Maureen? Was it because you suspected that she and Lem . . ."

"Maureen and Lem?" No one could register appalled astonishment as effectively as Mrs. Pryde. "Are you asking me if I suspected anything romantic between Lem and that—that little nothing? Really, Andrew, I'm afraid all these disturbances have quite unhinged you."

"But I happen to know . . ."

"What?"

"That there was something between them."

"Something between them." Daintily Mrs. Pryde removed the cigarette stub from the jade holder. She put it in the

ashtray and sat studying the holder as if it gave her aesthetic pleasure. "Very well, Andrew. I never suspected this would have to happen but it seems that I've got to tell you all manner of things which I was hoping to be able to keep to myself. There was something between Lem and Maureen, yes. But it wasn't what you so vulgarly seem to assume it was. The only thing between your wife and my husband was that your wife was blackmailing him. And just in case that puts any ideas into your head, you must remember that Lem was with me all yesterday afternoon, so any chance of his having killed her is quite out of the question."

She abandoned her study of the cigarette holder and looked at him instead. "When you married that young woman, Andrew, you brought us all a great deal of trouble. You see, she found out about Miss La Marche and, since she was a confused and immoral girl, she used the knowledge as a threat against Lem. I could, of course, very easily have put a stop to it by letting Lem know I was fully conscious of Miss La Marche's existence and that there was nothing in the world for him to worry about. But poor Lem isn't very sophisticated. I knew it would embarrass him enormously and so . . . well, you will find, Andrew, when you know you don't have very long to live that the only things which matter are the essential things. In my day I was very fond of my jewels, but now they mean nothing to me whatsoever, certainly they are quite insignificant in comparison to Lem's peace of mind. And after all, Neddy will inherit quite enough without them, and, if he marries that rich Hatchard girl, there'll be no kind of financial problem for him anyway."

Once again, as she looked at him, the small, faintly mocking smile played around her lips. Then she glanced down at the ring on her hand. "Do you know? They are extremely good copies. I'm quite sure they deceive most people, which is all

that matters. But you surely don't imagine after the life I've led, after the sort of people who have been my friends, that I haven't learned to tell a false stone from a real one?"

She raised the slim, beautiful hand for him, indicating the ring. "This emerald was one of the first to go. Poor Lem, I did feel sorry for him but I'm still sure that of the two evils the one I chose was the lesser. If the poor dear man ever realized that—well, that I know what I know, it would be a crushing blow to his pride, and to damage her man's pride is the one sin a woman cannot commit."

She broke off abruptly, tilting her head to one side attentively, listening. "There!" she said. "That's the elevator. It's Lem. Strange, I can always tell when he's coming. Well, Andrew dear, I'm sorry for your problems and I'm quite sure they'll solve themselves without excessive drama. But whatever else you do, of course you will not mention any of this to Lem."

Andrew had never felt so completely at a loss. Mrs. Pryde got up from the daffodil chair. As she did so, Andrew heard a key in the lock of the front door.

"I'm off to bed, Andrew. Maybe Lem can help you with your difficulty, so talk to him, if you've got to . . . just so long as you say nothing about Miss La Marche or Dr. Williams."

She laid her hand very lightly on his arm. "Do you know? It occurred to me just the other day that, of all my husbands, Lem's the only one who hasn't bored me to death. It's comforting to be ending up with the best one, isn't it?"

For the fraction of a second her hand remained on his arm, exerting its light, almost clawlike pressure. His mother had always been mistress of the parting shot. She was letting him know, once and for all, that she had no use for his pity.

"And, Andrew, if you do have to talk to Lem, don't keep him up too late. He needs his rest."

The hand had moved. She was slipping away from him into the bedroom. Just as she closed the door behind her, Lem, humming jauntily, came in from the hall.

"Hi, chickie, still up? Still . . ." He saw Andrew then, but the bluff military smile remained completely intact. "Why, hello there, Andrew my boy. Where's the old girl? Off to beddy-bye?"

Andrew stood looking at him, fighting his way out of his mother's incomprehensible world, forcing himself to remember Bill Stanton and his reasons for being there.

"Yes," he said. "Mother's gone to bed."

"Just been taking a little stroll. Always like to get a breath of fresh air before I turn in." Lem came over and banged him on the shoulder. "Delighted you're here, old boy. Makes it a lot easier. I can finish what I was about to tell you before dinner when your mother barged in on us. A drink?"

Still humming and beaming, he went over to a table in the corner and started making drinks.

Andrew watched his broad, unconcerned back. What was he waiting for? His mother hadn't changed anything.

He said, "Remember you suggested that Maureen had a lover who was in with her on the jewel theft?"

"Sure. Of course I do." Lem turned, holding a highball in each hand. "But I've been thinking, old boy, while we sat through that boring play, and now I doubt it very much. I mean, I doubt that he was in on the jewel racket. That wasn't like Maureen, was it? Can you see her cutting anyone, even a boy friend, in on any of her deals?"

Andrew said, "I've been talking to one of her friends. It may interest you to hear that she admitted to this friend

that she did have a lover and a partner. She even told the friend who this man was. He was you."

"Me?"

For a moment Lem's large, handsome-moon face registered stupendous astonishment.

"Me her partner—me her lover? She said that?"

He stood staring with his mouth wide open. Then he burst into uproarious laughter.

"Me taking on that little she-wolf? At my age? Excuse me, old boy, excuse me. If she said it, she said it. I'm sure you're not lying and I'm sure she had her reasons. But . . . boy, that's rich. I guess I should be flattered, shouldn't I? But no sir. Not for me. Old tunes on old fiddles—your mother, Rowie—that's more my style. That's always been my style. Here, old boy." He was holding out one of the highballs to Andrew. "Take it, for God's sake, I'm going to spill the damn thing all over the carpet."

The truth? thought Andrew. Was it possible for someone to be laughing like that and be lying? He took the drink. Lem patted him on the shoulder while tears of merriment still streamed down his cheeks.

"Sorry, old boy. Disgraceful exhibition. Should be serious, I realize that. But don't give up hope. If you're looking for a lover, I think I can help. That's what I was going to tell you before dinner when your mother busted it up."

He took out a large handkerchief, mopped his face and then perched on the arm of a chair.

"Look, Andrew, I don't know who this friend of Maureen's is and I don't know why she lied to him about me, although I'd say offhand it should be pretty obvious that she was lying. Why would Maureen be such a fool as to give away the name of her real lover to anybody? Answer me that, old boy. No, that's settled. But as for her having a lover—yes, she had a

lover all right. She must have had. There isn't any other explanation for it."

He took a gulp of his drink. "Ahh, that hits the spot. You see, old boy, just about a week before she got herself killed, old Lem Pryde finally woke up. One day I said to myself, 'My God, here you are just lying down like a bloody doormat letting that little bitch walk right over you. Where's your enterprise? This is war. Why the hell haven't you been fighting back?' That's when I started to follow her."

"Follow her?" Andrew put out his hand and gripped the back of his mother's chair.

"Sure. She'd snooped on me. Why not snoop on her? That's how I figured it. A little bitch like that probably had something she was just as keen to keep quiet about as I was about old Rowie. So, whenever I got a moment to sneak away from your mother, I'd slip down to your place, wait till she came out and follow her."

His beam indicated how pleased it made him to contemplate his own shrewdness. "I followed her four or five times and finally I hit pay dirt. It was about three-thirty in the afternoon. She'd walked from your place downtown to 38th Street. She came to an old brownstone just west of Madison and turned into it. From across the street, I could see her take a key out and let herself in. 'A key,' I thought. 'What's this?' Once she'd gone in, I crossed the street and as I did so a woman came out of the building with a poodle. I knew she must have passed Maureen on the stairs, so, smooth old Lem, I took a dollar bill out of my pocket and said, 'Excuse me, madam, but the lady who just went in dropped this dollar. I wonder if you know who she is so I can ring the right buzzer and return it to her.' And the woman said, 'I'm afraid I don't know her name but she's just moved into the apartment above mine—her and her husband.' "

Lem's beam was triumphant now. "Husband, old boy. I knew I was really cooking then. So I said, 'Then at least you know the apartment number.' 'Yes,' she said, '3b.' She went off with the poodle then. I went up into the foyer. I looked at the name for 3b. And there it was—Mary Cross."

"Mary Cross!" exclaimed Andrew.

"That's it, old boy. Does the name mean anything to you? It didn't to me, but, my God, calling herself Mary Cross, moving into a broken-down old brownstone with her 'husband.' Wham! I almost decided to go right on up and confront her. Then I figured, you never knew, maybe the 'husband' was there with her and I wasn't too keen on the prospect of any fisticuffs, what? I did stick around, though, for a while, hoping she or the 'husband' might come out. But then it got time for me to go back to chickie. I figured it didn't matter anyway. All I had to do when she showed up on the next Thursday was to challenge her with it. As it happened, of course, there wasn't any other Thursday because she got herself killed."

He got up from the chair arm, took a little notepad and pencil out of his breast pocket, scribbled down an address and, tearing the sheet off, handed it to Andrew.

"There you are, old boy. You do realize I'd have told you this before dinner if your mother hadn't come in, don't you? But whatever happens, we mustn't ever let the old girl get wind of any of this. Well, since it's her lover you're searching for, I'd say you don't have much further to look."

Andrew took the piece of paper. 38th Street. The real Mary Cross shared an apartment in the Village with Gloria Leyden, there was no doubt about that. This surrealistic visit had brought him something. It wasn't what he'd expected. But when had things ever turned out even remotely the way he'd expected?

He could feel his stepfather's hand on his shoulder again. Its pressure was firm and confident, indicating the simplest affection and the most natural desire to help.

"Well, old boy, I hate to turn you out, but chickie never goes to sleep until she's read to me. She insists it's soothing, good for the old ticker. So you do understand, don't you? She's not as young as she used to be. It's a shame to keep the old thing up too late."

EIGHTEEN

Andrew took a taxi to the nondescript brownstone on 38th Street. It was just after midnight and no light showed in any windows. He went up the steps and looked at the buzzers by the door: 3b—Mary Cross. Lem hadn't been lying. He pressed the buzzer. He had little hope that anyone would answer. He rang again. Nothing happened. He tried the front door. It was locked.

There was a hotel across the street. He hurried into the deserted lobby. The thought of Lieutenant Mooney was goading him. He looked up Mary Cross in a telephone book. There was only one listed—at the 38th Street address. So the apartment did actually belong to Mary Cross, and Maureen hadn't necessarily been assuming the other girl's identity. She had merely taken over the apartment when Mary Cross had moved in with Gloria Leyden? He looked up Gloria Leyden. West 10th Street. That would be it. He went into a booth and dialed.

Almost immediately the ring was answered by a feminine voice, which said, "Look, whoever you are, you'd better be good calling at this hour."

He said, "Mary Cross?"

"Mary," the voice—Gloria Leyden's—shouted. "It's for you."

He could hear the approaching clatter of spike heels. Then another voice said, "Yes?"

"Mary Cross?"

"Yes."

"This is Andrew Jordan. I've got to talk to you."

"Maureen's husband?"

"That's right."

"Gosh."

"I'm coming right over."

"Well . . . listen, gee, I mean Gloria's washing her hair."

"I've got to see you."

"Then—then, look, there's a bar on the corner of West 10th and 6th Avenue. The Bangkok."

"I'll be there in a quarter of an hour."

The Bangkok was a dimly lit bar with vaguely oriental pretensions. It was easy enough to spot Mary Cross because she was the only girl in the handful of customers at the bar —a tall, slim, angular girl with cropped black hair. When he came through the door, she spun around to look. He went up to her.

"Mr. Jordan? Let's go sit at a table. That barman's ears—they could use them as a radar screen for the entire Eastern Seaboard."

They found a table in the pink gloom. A waiter emerged from the shadows. They ordered and the waiter went away. Mary Cross was leaning over the table toward him but even then he had only the broadest impression of her—the thin, bony face; the black poodle-cut; the large, black ingenuous eyes.

"Gosh, Mr. Jordan, I don't know what you want from me. Honest, I don't. I talked to the cops this evening."

"I know."

"I mean, maybe you've come to the wrong person. Me, I wasn't any friend of Maureen's. I hated her. I just hated that girl." The huge, gleaming eyes, hovering in the semi-darkness, seemed to have a disembodied existence of their own, like

the Cheshire cat's grin. "Gee, Mr. Jordan, you look terrible. You're in trouble, aren't you?"

"They think I killed her."

"That's what I figured. That's how I doped that lieutenant out."

"There were a lot of men in her life before me, weren't there?"

"A lot? Brother!"

"And after she married me?"

The waiter brought the drinks and went away again. Mary Cross took a swallow of her Scotch. She was obviously embarrassed. Or was it scared?

"Look, Mr. Jordan, if I could help you, I would, honest. I mean, I don't want to get involved. No girl wants to get involved, not when it's a question of the cops. But once Maureen married you and moved out of the apartment we shared, I just breathed a sigh of relief. 'Bingo,' I said. And I never saw her again."

"Never?"

"Gosh, I don't think so."

"Not even when you sublet your apartment on 38th Street to her?"

Mary Cross gave a little whistling gasp. "Gee, you know about that?"

"Yes."

"Was I mad? Boy, I'd fixed it all up real nice. It had taken me months to finally get it and fix it up like I wanted. And then, out of the clear blue sky, she calls up. Of course she offered me double the rental, I admit that. But the nerve—just calling and saying, 'Okay, I'm taking occupancy first thing tomorrow morning.' "

"You mean she forced you out of the apartment against your will?"

"I'll say."

"Because she had something on you?"

"Something on me? Gosh, just because I'd been seeing Bill a couple of times when I was going steady with George? I mean, it's contemptible, that's what it is. What was to stop me coming right back at her and saying, 'Okay, you tell George about Bill and I'll have a little talk with your husband?' But a nice girl just doesn't do those things and she knew it. That was always Maureen, taking advantage of you not being the way she was."

Her hand moved across the table and clutched his. "Listen, Mr. Jordan, you won't tell the cops, will you? I mean, I don't even have a subleting clause. You can get into trouble for that. I know a girl. She sublet without a subleting clause and, can you imagine, they almost arrested her."

Andrew said, "When did she actually take over the apartment?"

"I know exactly when. Five months ago. For five months I've had to jam in there with Gloria like a sardine, and Gloria with all her dates and tinting her hair all the time, light blond, dark blond, auburn . . . It makes you tired."

Five months. When had Maureen begun to steal the jewels? About eight months ago. Had the jewel theft then started as a solo operation, with the lover as a later development?

He said, "Did she tell you what she wanted the apartment for?"

"She told me what she wanted me to know. It was a friend, she said. An old family friend from out of town who simply had to have some place in Manhattan in a hurry. An old family friend." She snorted. "Mr. Jordan, you asked me just now if she had a boy friend after she was married to you and I said I didn't know, because, honest, I was scared telling you about the apartment. I mean, not having a subleting clause

and all. But that wasn't any old family friend from out of town. I'm here to tell you. That was a boy friend."

"You never knew his name, of course?"

"Gosh, no, not Maureen. Maureen telling you anything? But whoever he was, that wasn't any old family friend. A good-looking kid like that? Couldn't have been a day over twenty-four-five."

Andrew could feel his pulses quivering. "You mean you actually saw him?"

"Sure I saw him, Mr. Jordan. Must have been two, three months ago. It was Gloria's electric iron. Gee, the way that girl mishandles her appliances. Everything, every goshdarn thing in that apartment of hers is busted. And I had a real important date and I simply had to press my dress and the iron was busted again and I figured, what the heck, I've got a perfectly good iron of my own at home. Who did Maureen think she was, kicking me out of my own apartment, not even letting me take anything with me? Boy, was I mad, mad at Gloria and the iron and particularly at Maureen. I still had my key so I took a cab uptown. I just let myself in and there she was in the living room with this boy. She didn't introduce him, of course, she was far too cagey. But there they were, sitting on my studio couch together, with their legs tucked under them, drinking Rob Roys."

Rob Roys. At the exact moment when everything seemed miraculously to be resolving itself, Andrew felt the old chill of panic.

"What did he look like, this man?"

"Well, I told you. About twenty-four-five, good-looking, blond. Come to think of it he looked very much like you. Could have been your twin almost, but younger and the hair was kind of lighter. God, was Maureen mad at me busting in. She dragged me into the bedroom and got the iron, but she

bawled me out real good and made me give up the key right there and then. She never said anything about the boy, of course, and when I went back through the living room on my way out, he was just sitting there on the couch, paying no attention to me, sipping his Rob Roy and folding a piece of paper into a paper dart."

Andrew knew that if he didn't get out of that bar immediately he would collapse. He called the waiter and paid the check. He got up.

Mary Cross exclaimed, "Gosh, Mr. Jordan, what is it? What's the matter?"

He started for the swinging door. He could hear the tap of her spike heels starting after him. He hurried out into the street and began to walk aimlessly.

If this had come earlier, before the exhausting ordeal of the day had undermined him, he might have been able to control himself. But now he was completely yielded up to the rage and humiliation which roared in him like flames in a burning building.

Maureen and Ned. Every detail of this most monstrous of betrayals was clear to him. Maureen marrying him for the money, Maureen finding out that the money was going to Ned, Maureen trying to get the will changed, Maureen failing and—and turning to Ned.

A sudden dizziness engulfed him. He stopped dead. There was a street light beside him. He leaned against it, the sweat pouring down his forehead. Maureen and Ned—lovers; Ned broke; Maureen and Ned working out how to get Mrs. Pryde's jewels in a hurry; Maureen pregnant with Ned's child; Maureen on the verge of triumph with the right son and the jewels; and then Ned meeting Rosemary, the homely little millionaire's daughter; Ned with his chance for the really

big financial time; Ned trying to discard Maureen, Maureen wild with fury and vindictiveness.

The gun—the struggle—the shots—

He felt a hand on his arm. He looked up dazedly. A man's face was hovering in front of him.

"Say, mister, you sick or something?"

"No, thanks. I'm all right."

The face hovering for a moment and then disappearing.

He let go of the street light and started walking again. He came to a bar. The raucous music from its juke box was blaring out into the street. A telephone. Call Ned. Go to Ned. Kill Ned.

He pushed his way through the crowd at the bar. They seemed to melt on either side of him, giving him free passage. There was a phone booth. He went into it and dialed Ned's number. His hair was soaking wet with sweat. He brushed his hand across his face. The phone went on ringing. There was no answer.

He went out into the street again. A taxi was passing. He hailed it, got in and slumped back against the upholstery.

"Okay, mister. Where to?"

Where? He gave his home address.

When he let himself into the apartment, the phone was ringing. He went to answer it.

"Mr. Jordan?"

"Yes."

"This is Mary Cross. Mr. Jordan, are you okay?"

"I'm okay."

"Walking out like that. You scared me. Honest, Mr. Jordan, you scared me. And you shouldn't have done it. I mean, the moment you'd gone, I remembered something. I remembered the whole setup. I mean, something that might help. You see, I said to her, 'Okay, take the apartment, what

can I do about it? But I don't want just any guy in there, some guy I don't know, slopping around, messing everything up. You've got to promise me this guy's a solid, respectable citizen.' And she said, 'Respectable citizen? Why, he's a millionaire.' That's what she said, Mr. Jordan, and maybe that's going to help you figure it out. 'A millionaire,' she said, 'one of the most prominent citizens of California.' "

NINETEEN

Andrew put down the phone. He went to a lamp and turned it on. *One of the most prominent citizens of California.* The phrase was repeating itself over and over in his mind. Maureen lying again? Maureen had lied to Bill Stanton about the identity of her lover. With "that sinister little giggle," she had said to Bill Stanton: *It's Lem Pryde.* Had that sinister little giggle come again when she'd said to Mary Cross: *One of the most prominent citizens of California?* A different masking identity each time, but always the same lover . . . Ned.

The rage blazed up in him. He dialed Ned's number again. The ringing at the other end of the wire throbbed on and on intimately, ominously, as if it were a noise inside his own ear. He glanced at his watch. Quarter to one. Where was Ned—and doing what? Had he learned or sensed that the truth had come out? Was he running away? He dropped the receiver and sat down.

One of the most prominent citizens of California . . . Maureen's first love, Mrs. Thatcher's "happily married man." A thought started to take shape. What if for once, just for once, Maureen had been telling the truth? Mightn't it be possible? Mightn't Maureen's first love have come back into her life? Couldn't he be in New York or, perhaps, still living in Pasadena and flying in to town whenever he got a chance, spending a few hours every now and then away from his wife in an obscure "lovenest" with the girl who at nineteen had so

beglamored him? Her "first love" being lured back by Maureen once she'd milked Lem of the jewels and got everything there had been to get out of the Jordans? One of the most prominent citizens of California—a really big-time victim with whom she had felt equipped to deal once she had sharpened her claws and her wits on the Jordans?

As the idea formed itself, he felt an improbable stirring of hope. Couldn't it be that? Wasn't it just conceivable that Ned had merely happened to be in the apartment with Maureen on the afternoon when Mary Cross had gone there for the iron? Maureen hadn't introduced him as the friend for whom she'd appropriated the apartment. She'd done nothing about him at all. He'd just been sitting there, his legs tucked under him, making a paper dart.

He knew the hope was ridiculous. Had he learned nothing from these terrible, interminable hours? Was he still as gullible as ever? Wasn't he now doing with Ned what he had done so disastrously with Maureen—flying against the evidence, clinging on to hope just because it was essential for him to have at least one person on whom to lavish his love and trust?

Ridiculous! But was it ridiculous? Dimly it came to him that perhaps this was the most crucial of all the moments of decision with which he had been confronted. If he abandoned faith in Ned, he gave up the one positive thing that remained in his life. Wasn't the only way to stave off complete personal chaos to believe in the existence of the millionaire for as long as he could?

As long as he could! That didn't have to be very long, because it would be simple to discover whether or not he could have been coming to New York. Mrs. Thatcher would know, or, if she didn't know, she could easily find out.

Andrew, isn't there something you know, anything, that

might point to someone else? . . . If we can help, call any time. It doesn't matter how late it is.

He went to the phone. He stood looking at it, dreading it, for he knew that once he'd picked it up he would be relinquishing forever any chance at further self-deception.

He dialed the Thatchers' number.

It was Mr. Thatcher who answered. The tiny unanticipated detail of its being Mr. Thatcher rather than Mrs. Thatcher confused him. He could hear himself stammering.

"Ned isn't there, is he?"

"No, I'm afraid he isn't. Rosemary came in about an hour ago. She's gone to bed. So has my wife. But my wife said you might call. Andrew, is there anything I can do?"

"I'd like to come over if I may."

"Why, naturally. Do you want me to wake up the others?"

Rosemary? He couldn't face Ned's fiancée. Not yet. He said, "Perhaps, if you'd be good enough to wake up your wife."

"Very well."

"Thank you. I'll be right over."

Mr. Thatcher opened the front door for him and took him into a little study-like room on the first floor. He was wearing a maroon velvet smoking jacket. Andrew hadn't known that people actually wore them outside of fashionable liquor ads.

"My wife should be down any minute, Andrew. Let me get you a drink."

"No, thanks," said Andrew.

This automatic offering and accepting of drinks had threaded his evening meaninglessly, neither dulling his grief nor sharpening his wits.

He said, "It was kind of you to warn me about the warrant."

"Good heavens, my boy, we're only too anxious to help."

The chairs were upholstered in maroon leather. To go with Mr. Thatcher's smoking jacket? Mr. Thatcher indicated one of them. Andrew sat down and Mr. Thatcher sat down opposite him.

Andrew said, "I feel bad about coming here so late, but your wife asked me to get in touch with you right away if I found out anything which could point to someone else."

"I know she did. And have you found something? I hope so."

Mr. Thatcher's quiet, authoritative persence was oddly comforting. With bitter self-mockery, Andrew wondered whether this new sense of confidence which had come to him was yet another banal Freudian legacy from his mother and her devastating success in emasculating Mr. Jordan. Mr. Thatcher—the father image?

Mrs. Thatcher came in then. She was immaculately dressed, giving no sign whatsoever of having been rudely awakened from sleep. Both men got up.

Mrs. Thatcher went to Andrew, holding out her hand. "Andrew, I'm so glad you've come. It means good news, doesn't it?"

Mr. Thatcher said, "He says he has found out something."

"Yes," said Andrew. "I've found out something and you are the only people who can help me."

Mrs. Thatcher moved to a couch and sat down. The men sat down too.

Andrew said, "Since I last talked to you I've found out a lot of things about Maureen. Some of them don't seem to have anything directly to do with her death. But there's one thing that almost certainly does. I've discovered that she had a lover. I think this lover killed her and I think I know who he is."

Both the Thatchers leaned very slightly forward. Mr. Thatcher had lit a small cigar. He took it out of his mouth, his forehead wrinkling with anxious concentration.

"Do you have any proof, Andrew?"

"I have a witness who rented them an apartment. I know they'd been meeting there. And, although it's possible Maureen wasn't telling the truth, she indicated who the man was." Andrew turned to Mrs. Thatcher. "Maureen described him as a millionaire, one of California's most prominent citizens. Mrs. Thatcher, I know this is going to be bad news for you. I know how eager you've both been to keep your friend out of it. But isn't it possible that Maureen picked up with him again, that, in spite of your efforts, she had lured him back into an affair, that he'd been flying here from California to see her and—and that, well, that once again he'd got into it far, far deeper than he'd intended, that Maureen had started to blackmail him and . . ."

Suddenly, as he talked, an image of Ned leaped up into the foreground of his mind. He fought to beat it down. What he was telling the Thatchers was the truth. It had to be the truth. Cling on to that and on to the Thatchers as the people who were going to save at least something for him from the wreck.

"So you see," he said. "I'm afraid I must ask you to tell me his name."

He turned to Mr. Thatcher then and, to his surprise, Mr. Thatcher's jaw had dropped and his mouth was gaping open, giving him an improbable look of stupidity.

"Some man from California?" he exclaimed. "You mean . . . you're implying that when Maureen was living with us, there was some man who . . ."

He broke off and swung around to his wife. Mrs. Thatcher

was sitting with her hands folded in her lap. She was smiling a small, rueful smile.

"I'm sorry, Andrew. I should have made myself more clear this morning. When I said I'd told nobody, I meant that to include my husband too." She got up then and, moving to Mr. Thatcher, put her hand on his shoulder. "I do see Andrew's point of view, James. This has got to come out now. Of course it has. Perhaps it would have been more sensible if I'd told you at the time. But . . . well, how can one be sure? When I sent Maureen off to New York, it wasn't, as you thought, because she was so eager to become a model. I sent her away because I'd discovered that she'd been having an affair with Rodney."

"Rodney?" echoed Mr. Thatcher, his face a battleground of astonishment and bewilderment.

"You can see how I felt," said Mrs. Thatcher. "Poor Lavinia—it would have destroyed her if it had ever come out. I hope you forgive me. I'm not by nature, I think, a secretive wife."

Mr. Thatcher had risen too. His wife held her hand out to him. He took it. For a moment they seemed quite oblivious of Andrew. Then they both turned.

Andrew said, "Rodney—who? You are going to tell me the name, aren't you?"

"Of course, Andrew," said Mrs. Thatcher. "His name is Rodney Miller."

The name, at last. Excitement came to Andrew, lessening a fraction of his tension.

"Then that's it," he said. "That solves it. She got Rodney Miller back, she got him to start flying here from California and . . ."

He stopped as he saw the expression on the Thatchers' faces. It was Mr. Thatcher who finally spoke.

He said gently, "I'm extremely sorry, Andrew. You've obviously been pinning your faith on this theory and hoping it would solve your problem with the lieutenant in the morning. I was astounded to hear about Maureen and Rodney in Pasadena, although, of course, I'm perfectly prepared to accept it was true. But if Maureen implied to that witness of yours that her current lover was Rodney Miller, she was definitely lying."

Andrew could feel the hope shriveling inside him.

"Yes, Andrew." Mrs. Thatcher had moved to him. Her hand was on his arm. "I'm afraid we can be completely sure of that. Rodney Miller couldn't possibly have been coming to New York to see Maureen regularly. Just over a year ago Rodney died."

Despair, a thick, clammy fog of it, started to slide through Andrew. So much for his hope. So much for Rodney Miller.

So much, then, for Ned.

He sat perfectly still in the chair, looking not at Mr. and Mrs. Thatcher but at the booklined shelves beyond them, waiting for the rage which would come, bringing the signal for ultimate defeat. Ned with the sun-bleached hair and the blue eyes solemn in their eagerness to express sympathy and love. *Gosh, Drew, you understand . . . Gee, Drew, if it'd help you in any way, I'll tell the cops everything, of course I will . . . You're the important one, you know that. The only thing that matters to me is you . . .*

Having to face this truth was more terrible to him than having to face the truth about Maureen.

Mrs. Thatcher's hand was still on his arm. He heard the phone on the desk ringing. Mr. Thatcher was moving to pick up the receiver.

"Yes? . . . Oh, yes, she's here, but she's been asleep for quite some time. She . . . Look, your brother's here. Perhaps

you'd like to speak to him." He cupped the receiver. "Do you want to talk to your brother, Andrew?"

Ned . . .

For one brief, mad moment, it seemed to Andrew that he couldn't get out of the chair, that his feet had sprung soft, sensitive roots, twisting, pushing down through the carpet, roots which, if he moved, would be agonizingly torn and split. Mr. Thatcher was holding the phone out toward him. The sweat broke out on his forehead. He left Mrs. Thatcher's side. He took the phone.

"Drew?" Ned's voice came through to him, hoarse, tumbling over itself with excitement. "Gosh, Drew, what a break. I've been trying to call. Look, it's okay. Everything's okay. I've got it. I know who killed her . . . Drew, are you listening?"

"I'm listening."

"Then, stay there at the Thatchers'. That's the quickest way. Stay there and call Mooney. Wherever he is, at home in bed with his wife, wherever, yank him out, tell him to get right over to the Thatchers'. You hear, don't you? It's all right. You're going to be all right. Just call Mooney and hang on. In about five minutes, I'll be there."

He hung up. Andrew stood for a moment with the receiver in his hand. Then he put it down. His eyes moved from Mr. to Mrs. Thatcher.

"Ned says he's got the solution."

"The solution?" echoed Mrs. Thatcher. "What is it, Andrew? What's he found out?"

"He didn't say. He just told me to call Lieutenant Mooney and have him come here at once because it'll be quicker that way. Is that all right?"

"Of course," said Mr. Thatcher. "Of course it's all right."

Andrew called the station house. The lieutenant wasn't

there, but the sergeant at the desk provided his home number.

Lieutenant Mooney answered almost immediately. Phlegmatically calm as ever, he listened, and said, "Okay, Mr. Jordan, I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

Mrs. Thatcher said, "It's all right? He's coming?"

"In about fifteen minutes, he said."

"Good," said Mr. Thatcher. His smile was encouraging and paternal. "Let's hope this is what you've been waiting for." He moved to his wife and slipped his arm around her waist. "Well, dear, I think we'd better wake Rosemary up, don't you? She's hardly going to want to sleep through this."

The Thatchers moved together toward the door. Then Mrs. Thatcher turned back.

"Andrew, you haven't got a drink. Do make yourself one."

"Thanks, but I don't think I want one."

"You'll let your brother in, won't you?" said Mr. Thatcher. "You'll probably want a few minutes alone together anyway."

When the Thatchers left, Andrew started walking aimlessly up and down. If ever there was a time for hope it was now, but he no longer possessed any ability to hope. Ned with a solution? Ned out all evening—tracking down the murderer? He tried to believe it, but it didn't work. He was too far gone into despair. The only image that remained was the earlier image of Ned, the monster, Ned, who even now was merely embarking upon yet another devious campaign of trickery and deceit.

Almost immediately, it seemed, the low, mooing sound of the front-door bell came. Andrew went out into the hall and opened the door. Hatless, beaming, his brother hurried in.

"Has Mooney arrived?"

"Not yet."

Ned saw the light in the study and went toward it. Andrew followed him. In the study Ned said, "But where's everyone?"

"They're waking Rosemary."

"Oh, well, they don't matter anyway." Ned spun around to him and grabbed his arms. "Boy," he said. "Wait till you hear. Just wait. Want a little action? Okay, call on Ned Jordan, private eye, crook catcher, second-story man . . ."

TWENTY

"Gosh, Drew, don't you want a drink?"

"No."

"Well, I do."

Although he'd never been in the Thatcher house before, Ned was completely at home. Without taking off his raincoat, he went to a table in a corner and made himself a drink. He came back to Andrew with it. He was smiling a smile of unabashed self-congratulation.

"Okay, Drew, just sit there, stand there, do whatever the hell you want to do—and listen. The whole idea only came to me two hours ago. You'd gone home. Rosemary left soon after. I was just sitting there in the apartment, beating my brains out trying to think of some way to help you. Then for no particular reason I remembered this thing that happened a couple of months ago. You've got to believe me. Until that moment I'd forgotten everything about it. It had seemed so unimportant, nothing to do with any of us. Then, suddenly, while I was sitting there, I saw exactly what it could have meant."

Andrew sat down again. Ned was walking back and forth.

"It was before I went to Florida, about three months ago, I guess. It was in the afternoon. I'd been walking down Fifth Avenue and I'd turned east on 38th Street. As I was passing one of the houses, I just happened to look up and there was Maureen letting herself in the front door with a key. I called up to her, 'Hi, Maureen.' She turned, and when she saw me

she smiled and said, 'Hello, Ned. Come and help me. I'm on an errand of mercy.' I hadn't seen either of you for quite a while and, well, I was kind of curious too. So I went up the steps and joined her. She said, 'It's nothing very exciting, I'm afraid. A girl friend's gone off on a cruise and she asked me to water her plants.' We went up three flights and she let us into the apartment at the rear. It was a perfectly ordinary apartment and there were a few philodendrons standing around. She said, 'Let's have a drink. At least she owes us that.' She made us Rob Roys and we just sat talking, about you mostly. There was nothing in it. That's why I never gave it a thought at the time."

Ned came back to Andrew and stood in front of him. "We'd only been there a few minutes when the door opened and a girl came in—a big, tall, thin girl with black hair. Maureen didn't introduce her. She just yanked her off into the bedroom. They were there a couple of minutes, and when they came out again, the girl was carrying an iron. She left right away. I asked Maureen about her and she just laughed and said her girl friend was lavish at handing out keys. Apparently she'd given another key to this other girl friend and had told her she could borrow her electric iron if ever she needed it. I was late for a date, anyway, but before I left I went in the bathroom. Hanging on the door was a man's robe, a real fancy gold brocade robe. There were male hairbrushes on the shelf and after-shave lotion and a lot of other male junk too. I did think it was a bit odd, but I just figured this girl friend of Maureen's must have a steady boy friend and that was that. When I left, Maureen stayed behind because she still hadn't gotten around to watering the philodendrons."

Ned took a swig of his drink. "Well, you see now, don't you, Drew? You see what a jerk I was not to have been suspicious at the time. Two girls with keys—just to water a

couple of philodendrons? A man's robe in the bathroom when no man was supposed to be in the setup. Just a couple of hours ago, when it was so desperately important to think of something, it came to me. Of course, I'd caught Maureen sneaking into her lovenest, and she'd been quick enough to cover by inviting me in and playing it smooth. This was it. It not only proved she did have a lover. I knew exactly where they'd been meeting."

Andrew sat looking at his brother, feeling the hope which only a few moments before he thought had abandoned him forever.

"East 38th Street," he said. "Apartment 3b—Mary Cross."

The blue eyes widened. "You know about it?"

"I was there this evening."

"Not *in* the apartment?"

"No."

"Well, I was." Ned's face was glowing with triumph. "When I'd doped it out, boy, was I excited. I called you but you weren't there. In a way I was glad. It put it all up to me. Okay, I said, enter Nick Jordan the second-story man. You'll think I'm crazy but I've still got a couple of skeleton keys and a lot of gadgets left over from when we were kids. Me and never throwing things away—you know how I am. Well, it was a cinch. When I got there, I rang the buzzer although I was sure no one would be there. Nobody answered, of course, so I just wangled the front-door lock, went upstairs and wangled the apartment lock. I was inside in under five minutes and—boy, everything was there. I mean, the robe, men's pajamas, all kinds of junk. I guess he either hadn't had a chance to clear the place out or he was so confident no one would find out about it that he'd figured it would be safe to leave it for a while. But, Drew, when the cops get there, God knows what they'll turn up. Almost the first thing I hit when

I started searching the drawers of the dressing table was a red-leather jewel box, a dead ringer for Maureen's other one. I opened it and . . ."

Ned felt in the pocket of his raincoat and came out with a thick bundle of letters tied together with string. He tossed the bundle to Andrew.

"Just take a look at them, Drew. A bunch of letters the guy wrote to her, love letters, letters giving a blow-by-blow description of the affair. I guess he didn't have the faintest idea she was keeping them, but she was, of course. There she was, providing herself with a brand-new victim for a brand-new blackmail setup. Don't you see? By that time she was through or practically through with the Jordan family. We had been Operation Number One. This was Operation Number Two, and she died of it."

Andrew had untied the string from the letters. He glanced through them, reading at random sentences written in a bold, heavy scrawl: "*If you knew the agony of having you so close and yet so inaccessible . . . Maureen, my love, when I think of yesterday . . . One day we'll decide or perhaps it will decide itself for us. You'll leave your husband and . . .*"

"You see?" Ned's voice came through to him. "She had him so hot for her he was all set to leave his family—and yet not quite. Read 'em and you'll see how he was torn two ways. He wanted her; he didn't want to break up his home. Boy, she had him on the rack. And that's not all. There's a photograph too."

"A photograph?" Andrew looked up sharply.

"It was in the jewel box with the letters. Maureen and this guy—whoever he is. I don't know, but the cops will be able to trace him. Here—take a look at May and December."

Ned brought a postcard-size, unframed photograph out of his pocket.

"Not only the letters—a photograph too. She was really piling up evidence in that jewel box. Just let that lieutenant try to arrest you now."

As he spoke, the front-door bell rang. Andrew jumped up. Ned was holding the photograph out to him. He heard footsteps on the stairs and voices. The Thatchers were coming down. The Thatchers would let the lieutenant in.

He took the photograph and looked at it. It had been taken in some night club. Maureen and a man were dancing. Maureen was wearing the gold evening dress which he knew so well and which had been sprawled over the living-room carpet when he'd come home from the office—had it been only last night? She was smiling her dazzling smile, looking up into the eyes of the man who was looking down at her with an expression of obsessed devotion.

He heard the front door open. He heard Lieutenant Mooney's gruff voice. He heard the sound of multiple footsteps coming toward them. He looked at the picture dazedly, thinking: "Of course, Ned doesn't realize because he's never met Rosemary's parents."

The man with his arms around Maureen, gazing at her with such worshipful intensity, was Mr. Thatcher.

Mr. Thatcher! Andrew was staggered when he thought of Mr. Thatcher's show of majestic imperturbability only a few minutes ago. But now that he knew, it seemed inevitable. For her second victim, with Rodney Miller no longer available, Maureen hadn't picked just any millionaire. With fiendish malice, she had chosen to allure the husband of the woman she had hated so bitterly for ruining her attempt to become Mrs. Rodney Miller. No wonder she'd been so eager to effect a reconciliation with Mrs. Thatcher. Operation Number Two hadn't merely involved blackmail. It had involved revenge.

The study door opened. Mr. and Mrs. Thatcher and Rosemary came in, with Lieutenant Mooney moving ponderously behind them.

"Neddy!"

Rosemary was running toward Ned. He paid her no attention. He was gazing at Mr. Thatcher with a look of astonished horror.

"But–but . . ."

"Good evening, Mr. Jordan." Lieutenant Mooney had come to rest in front of Andrew and was watching him from small, bright eyes. "I hope what you've got to tell me is something worth dragging me out of bed for."

Mr. Thatcher infatuated with Maureen–Mr. Thatcher "torn two ways" whether to leave his wife or not! In the confusion of his thoughts, Andrew remembered something Rosemary had told him the very first time he had met her. She was only a stepdaughter. The one thing in the world Mr. Thatcher had wanted was an heir. Of course, here was the truth behind the pregnancy. It had been Maureen's final, most potent weapon in her bid for Mr. Thatcher. *You've got to leave them now. I'm carrying your baby. I'm providing you with an heir.* That was why Maureen had refused to come to Scandinavia. She had wanted to be certain she could prove to Mr. Thatcher that the child must be his. That was the explanation, too, for her desperate need to have no one suspect what was going on. Mr. Thatcher "torn two ways" had been terribly difficult to hook as a husband. If the trap had been sprung too early, she would have lost him. Her only hope had been to wait until she was absolutely sure of the pregnancy.

Lieutenant Mooney's quick, professional glance had flicked to the letters strewn on Andrew's chair. Now he moved it back to the photograph in Andrew's hand. Without saying anything, he took it, turned it around and studied it.

"Lieutenant!" Ned ran to him and clutched his arm. "It wasn't Drew, it was me. I was the one who made him call you, because I'd found out the truth and I wanted you to know so—so you wouldn't arrest Drew. Maureen had a lover, a lover who killed her. I found out the place where they met. I broke in and there was a lot of love letters, all those letters, and the photograph too."

He turned back to gaze despairingly at Rosemary. "My God, this is awful. I'm terribly sorry, Rosemary. I never knew, I never had the faintest idea it was your father who . . ."

"My father!"

Rosemary ran to the lieutenant too. She stood beside him, peering at the photograph.

"My God," she cried. "My God."

Andrew was looking at Mr. Thatcher. So Maureen had told him about the pregnancy? And the final coup intended to bind him to her forever had boomeranged? Was that how it had happened? Mr. Thatcher had learned Maureen was bearing his child—and had killed her? Because an illegitimate heir was more horrible to him than no heir? Yes, that must have been how he felt, or otherwise, why would he have been so eager for Ned to change his name and become a substitute heir?

Mr. Thatcher, quite inscrutable now, was standing beside his wife. He had never glanced at the letters on the chair. He hadn't even glanced at the photograph. His face was as handsome and controlled as ever, although it was very pale. For a moment he returned Andrew's gaze. Then he took his wife's hand. Together they moved to a red-leather couch and sat down.

For a moment Lieutenant Mooney stood gazing at the photograph. Then he looked up.

"Okay, Mr. Thatcher, this is kind of embarrassing for all

parties concerned, but I guess you admit that you and Mrs. Jordan . . ."

"I can hardly deny it, can I?" Mr. Thatcher's voice was very quiet and it was his wife he was addressing rather than the lieutenant. "I've been a fool, Margaret. The classic old fool of bedroom farce. And my most magnificent piece of folly, it seems, was not to go to that apartment and remove the evidence. But so far as I knew, all that was there were a few clothes which could have belonged to anyone. I had no idea she had any photograph, certainly I had no idea she was keeping my letters. To make my position even more ridiculous, I must confess that, until the moment she was murdered, I was completely convinced she was sincerely in love with me. So, Margaret, all I can say is that I deserve this public humiliation. I could only have wished that for your sake . . ."

He turned to Andrew, his lips drooping at the corners. "And as for you, Andrew. When I think of myself a few minutes ago sitting here, pretending to be your friend and adviser, I realize I merit not only your hatred but your contempt."

The silence, when he stopped speaking, was painful to Andrew. He went back to his chair, gathered up the letters and sat down with them in his lap. Automatically, to screen his embarrassment, he picked one up. It was dated four days before. That would be the day before Bill Stanton's party. It was short, only a couple of paragraphs.

> Darling, something rather alarming has happened. You know I'm always scrupulous about destroying your letters the moment I've read them, but your letter of yesterday was so sweet, so moving, I took it with me to the office . . .

"Mr. Jordan."

He heard the lieutenant's voice and glanced up. The lieu-

tenant had put the photograph down on a table and was looking straight at it, ignoring Ned, who stood at his side with his arm around Rosemary.

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"I think I should tell you that I have a warrant for your arrest in my pocket."

"I know."

"You do? Then maybe you've figured out my reasons for swearing out the warrant. Your wife was shot by your gun in your apartment at a time when you could have been there. She'd lied to you about not being able to have babies and yet she was pregnant."

"Pregnant!" Mr. Thatcher had jumped to his feet. His face had suddenly collapsed; it was gray, creased, an old man's face. "Maureen was pregnant!"

No one could look like that and be lying, thought Andrew. So Mr. Thatcher hadn't known Maureen was bearing his child. That was why he'd been so eager to adopt Ned. Then . . . then . . . He felt a sharp stab of excited understanding. Yes, of course . . .

The lieutenant was paying no attention to Mr. Thatcher. His gaze was still fixed on Andrew.

"So that's the setup, isn't it, Mr. Jordan? And I think you'll agree that once you'd found out your wife was a tramp who'd married you for your money, cheated you with another man and was pregnant by him . . ."

"But that's ridiculous," said Ned. "Drew didn't kill her."

Slowly Lieutenant Mooney rotated so that he was facing Ned.

"So you think it was Mr. Thatcher, do you? Well, sure, that's one way of doping it out, yes. It's logical enough to suppose that a married man who found out he was having a baby by another man's wife might have killed her. But it so

happens there's something that kind of busts that theory wide apart. Mr. Thatcher didn't kill her. He knows it and I know it. All yesterday afternoon, from noon until six-thirty, he was in a board meeting. He never left that board room. I've gone into that. There's a dozen, in fact, fourteen, witnesses prepared to give Mr. Thatcher an alibi."

He swung around to Andrew again, the lids half closing over the blue, bright eyes.

"Looks like we're back where we started from, don't it, Mr. Jordan? I'm sorry for you and all that. You had a raw deal, sure. I'm the first to admit that. But I've got the warrant right here in my pocket and, so far as I can see, that warrant holds just as good now as it did before you dragged me out of bed."

TWENTY-ONE

Andrew sat looking back into the lieutenant's small, obstinate eyes. He was perfectly conscious of his danger, but only part of his mind was concerned with it because he knew now, he was absolutely sure. He knew who had killed Maureen.

"Well, Mr. Jordan, have you got anything to say to me?"

As the lieutenant's voice sounded, Andrew could feel the veins in his temples pulsing. He knew. But what good was knowing without proof? Unless he could prove . . .

He glanced down at the letter in his lap, the letter which was dated the day before Bill Stanton's party.

> . . . I took it with me to the office. When I got home I had to change in a hurry and I forgot about the letter in my pocket. Later I remembered and ran to the closet. The suit I'd been wearing to the office wasn't there. It had been sent to the cleaner's and all the contents of the pockets were on my dressing table—except the letter. I don't want to be an alarmist. It's possible that I left it at the office or even that I automatically hid it somewhere safe when I got home, but if I didn't . . .

The tension in him was growing tauter and tauter. All right. Try it, improvise, take the gamble. There was nothing else to do.

He got up. He handed the letter to the lieutenant. "Read this, Lieutenant. Mr. Thatcher wrote it to Maureen the day before Bill Stanton's party."

As the lieutenant read, it seemed to Andrew that his legs had no substance whatsoever. It was a paranoiac sensation, as if he were floating on air.

"Okay, Mr. Jordan, I've read it."

"It proves Mr. Thatcher was scared one of Maureen's letters had been intercepted, doesn't it?"

"That's what it says."

"Then don't you see? That explains the telephone call my wife made from Bill Stanton's, that call which wasn't to Gloria Leyden. I told you what I heard her say. *You've found it? Thank God, I was going out of my mind that she . . . She,* Lieutenant. Maureen was calling Mr. Thatcher because she was scared someone might have found that letter. I realize that the other part—*Thank God you've found it*—implies that Mr. Thatcher had found the letter, but that doesn't prove it hadn't been read, does it? And of course it was read."

The insane, disembodied feeling was still there.

"Okay, Lieutenant, there's a lot of things you don't know about this case. It's largely my fault and Ned's. We've been keeping most of it back from you. But there's one thing that's common knowledge. Mr. Thatcher had always been desperately eager to have an heir. That makes it unlikely that he'd have killed Maureen because she was pregnant by him. But what about his wife? What about a woman who was happy with her husband and her respectable, luxurious way of life, a woman who suddenly discovered not only that her husband was having an affair with a much younger woman, her own niece, her own protégée, but that the protégée was bearing him an heir? Wouldn't she realize that her whole life was falling apart around her? Wouldn't she see that the only possible way of removing Maureen as a threat was to kill her?"

He swung around to Mrs. Thatcher. She was sitting be-

side her husband, her face quite expressionless, her lips pulled into a thin, tight line.

He said, "Just now you merely invented Rodney Miller, didn't you? You picked the one person you could think of who was safely out of the picture, who was dead. Maureen never had an affair with Rodney Miller. Her lover in Pasadena was your husband. The wife who was your best friend was you. You sent her away, but it didn't work. The moment you were here in New York, there was Maureen. The fuse was lit. It was just a question of time before the explosion came."

He'd done it now. He'd really gone out on a limb. But proof . . . where was the proof? The intercepted letter, the telephone call? They weren't proof, of course they weren't. But go on. To turn back now would be disastrous.

"Sure," he said, and his voice sounded quite unfamiliar to him, remote and distorted. "Mrs. Thatcher killed Maureen, and I can tell you exactly what happened. Everything came to a head through Rosemary and Ned. There was Maureen determined to get Mrs. Thatcher's husband but wildly eager to keep her from suspecting a thing until she could be absolutely sure about the pregnancy which was bound to land him. Then, quite incidentally, Rosemary fell in love with Ned. You can imagine how Maureen felt about that. In the first place, stopping the wedding was a magnificent revenge on Rosemary. But, far more important, it gave Maureen a wonderful opportunity to convince Mrs. Thatcher once and for all of how loyal she was, the sweet, dutiful niece appalled for their sake at the idea of Rosemary making such an unfortunate match.

"So she knew exactly what she had to do. After her lunch with Rosemary yesterday she called Mrs. Thatcher and invited her over to the apartment. What she didn't know, of course, was that Mrs. Thatcher had intercepted the letter after

all and had decided that this was the moment for a showdown. Mrs. Thatcher came to the apartment. Maureen, all sweetness and light, started to prove her loyalty by warning her against Ned as a son-in-law. Then, to her astonishment, Mrs. Thatcher counterattacked. 'I've discovered you're having my husband's baby and I'll . . . I'll . . .' "

His sentence dribbled off into silence and he felt panic invading him. How could Mrs. Thatcher at that time have learned Maureen was pregnant? Certainly not from the intercepted letter and certainly not from Mr. Thatcher himself, who hadn't known anyway. Then . . . then she couldn't have known? She'd gone to Maureen knowing nothing more than that she was having an affair with her husband? She had gone there to kill her just for that? No, he couldn't conceive of Mrs. Thatcher actually driven to murder unless she'd known about the baby. Then . . . she had merely gone there to force Maureen into giving up her husband? But how had she hoped to do it, knowing Mr. Thatcher was besottedly in love with Maureen, unless she had something against Maureen, some terribly powerful counterweapon?

Suddenly, when all seemed lost, it came to him. Of course Mrs. Thatcher had had a counterweapon. And he realized what it was. Maureen hadn't been sure of the address of Rosemary's school in Lausanne. To make certain Rosemary would receive her letter, she'd mailed it to her at the Thatchers' Pasadena address. Mrs. Thatcher, naturally suspicious of anything concerning Maureen, had opened it. Once she'd read it, she'd decided not to send it on, she'd scribbled Maureen's New York address on the back and kept it—just in case she would ever need it. And she'd needed it all right. When she went to Maureen, she'd taken the letter with her. *You give up my husband or I'll show this to your husband.*

That was it. That was when Maureen had seen everything tumbling around her. That was when she realized the time had come when she would have to use her trump card. That was when she said, "There's nothing you can do because I'm pregnant. I'm bearing his child." And then . . . the gun . . . a struggle . . . the shots . . .

It had to be that way. It was the only possible solution. And, my God, yes, there might be proof after all. There might—there just might, for he had remembered the memorandum sheet on which Mrs. Thatcher had scribbled the Thatchers' unlisted telephone number for him that morning. He had in his possession a copy of Mrs. Thatcher's handwriting. If it matched up with the address penciled on the letter to Rosemary . . .

His hand quivering, he brought out of his pocket the letter Maureen had written to Rosemary. He also brought out the scribbled telephone number which Mrs. Thatcher had given him.

Immensely conscious of the silence, of the oppressive barrage of eyes on him, he looked at the telephone number Mrs. Thatcher had scribbled. It was Templeton 7-8077. Three sevens! And all of them had on their uprights the identical little European ticks which figured in the address on the letter to Rosemary.

Proof!

He was feeling a sort of crazy triumph now. He turned back to the lieutenant.

"I know what you're going to say. There's no proof, no proof at all. Well, there is. One of the things we've been keeping from you is that it was Ned who faked the burglary. He went to the apartment and found Maureen dead and he faked the burglary for my sake because lying beside the body he found this letter."

He handed the letter to the lieutenant. "You don't have to read it now. You just have to know it was lying beside the body. And it's not just me who's saying that. Ned found it. Ned will testify. It was left beside the body, it was left there by the murderer, and I can prove that the only person who could have left it there was Mrs. Thatcher. Look." He handed the lieutenant the scrap of memorandum paper. "Here's Mrs. Thatcher's handwriting. Compare it with the address penciled on the back of the letter. Look at the sevens. There's no doubt. That's Mrs. Thatcher's writing."

Mrs. Thatcher's writing! Even then when, the almost drunken excitement was seething in him, he saw how pitifully thin that was. Mrs. Thatcher's writing? Yes, he could prove Mrs. Thatcher had written on the letter. But . . . what had he just said? *I can prove that the only person who could have left it by the body was Mrs. Thatcher.* Could he? Of course he couldn't. It was evidence of a kind, but as for holding up in a court of law . . .

He glanced at Mrs. Thatcher. She had removed her hand from her husband's. She was gazing straight at Andrew, her eyes icily steady. Mrs. Thatcher, who had been so "sweet" to him that morning, who had urged him so warmly to believe in Maureen's love. *Maureen was a good girl with a lot of love to give when she found the right man . . .* He felt a huge, frustrated rage swelling up in him. She'd said that, of course, because it had been desperately important for her to allay any doubts he might have about his marriage. Once he started to suspect that Maureen had a lover, he might have taken the next step of suspecting Mr. Thatcher. That was why she had been so "kind" as to warn him about his arrest too. Was he suspecting her? Beyond anything, that's what she'd had to find out.

The rage was there—and the panic. He glanced back at

Lieutenant Mooney, who was comparing the two pieces of paper, his face stonily impassive. No, this wasn't going to do. There had to be more proof, real proof. Somehow he must unearth . . .

Once again, when everything seemed to be collapsing around him, he was rescued. One thing was absolutely certain. The initiative for the meeting between the two women must have come from Maureen. Yesterday, after her lunch with Rosemary, she wouldn't have been able to wait to get in touch with Mrs. Thatcher and play her little devious comedy about Ned. So, at some time during the afternoon, she must have called Mrs. Thatcher.

He turned to Rosemary. "When you came to my office yesterday, you said Maureen would have to wait a few hours before talking to your mother because Mrs. Thatcher was at her bridge club, didn't you?"

Rosemary gave a bleak little nod. "That's right."

"As it happens, her bridge club is in the same block as my apartment. It never occurred to you that Maureen would know where it was, did it, but she did and so do I. Your mother mentioned it that day she came to our place to pick you up. So Maureen knew exactly where your mother would be—at the Royale Club. That's its name, isn't it? That's the only bridge club in our neighborhood."

He glanced back at the lieutenant. This was the wildest gamble of them all. But there was one thing about bridge clubs. They stayed open late. One-thirty would be quite early for the Royale Club.

"Lieutenant," he said, "if I could prove that Maureen called Mrs. Thatcher yesterday afternoon . . . !"

Mrs. Thatcher gave a quick, muted gasp. The lieutenant glanced up from his study of the two handwriting samples, but said nothing.

All the others were watching in stunned silence. Andrew went to the phone. There was a telephone book on a shelf beneath it. He found the number of the Royale Club and dialed.

A woman's voice said, "Royale Bridge Club."

Andrew said, "This is Homicide. I want some information. Did a Mrs. Thatcher play bridge at your club yesterday afternoon?"

"Homicide!" The voice repeated the word with the faintest tinge of skepticism. Then the woman seemed to be satisfied. "I'll check."

In a few moments she was back. "Yes, that's right. Mrs. Thatcher was down to play in the weekly duplicate match at two-thirty yesterday afternoon."

"Is there any way of telling whether she received a phone call while she was there?"

"Why, certainly. We keep a record of all incoming calls. We write the name and number of the calling party on two slips and send one of them in to the players in the bridge room so they can decide whether they want to take them then or have the party call back. The copies are kept several days. It's our protection in case a member complains that a call was never received. One moment, please."

Transfixed with suspense, Andrew stood holding the receiver.

Finally the woman's voice came again. "Yes, sir, there was a call. I have the slip here. It came in at three forty-five P.M. It was from a Mrs. Andrew Jordan."

"From Mrs. Andrew Jordan?" repeated Andrew. "A call from Mrs. Andrew Jordan at three forty-five yesterday afternoon?"

He heard a little gasp behind him.

Then Rosemary's voice cried in angry attack, "But what

does that prove? Of course Maureen called her. Of course she was going to tell her about Neddy and me. That's nothing. That doesn't prove that she . . ."

The woman's voice on the phone was saying, "And there's another thing, sir. One of the ladies who's playing here tonight happened to be Mrs. Thatcher's partner in yesterday's duplicate. She tells me that when Mrs. Thatcher came back from answering her call, she stayed just long enough to finish the hand and then left. Luckily her partner was able to get a fill-in."

"Thank you," said Andrew. "Thank you very much. Would you mind repeating that information to Lieutenant Mooney?"

He held the receiver out to the lieutenant. "Mrs. Thatcher was in the middle of a duplicate match, but the moment she received the call from Maureen, she abandoned her partner and left the club. The woman will tell you everything for yourself, but I think this is going to be all you need."

"But—but she brought out the gun . . ."

The words, high, hysterical, split the air as the lieutenant took the receiver from him.

Hating it, Andrew turned to look at Mrs. Thatcher. She was standing between her husband and her daughter. Her eyes were wild, her face horribly contorted.

"She . . . she said . . . give me that letter or I'll shoot you. She said . . . She started it. There was the gun. I didn't know . . . I didn't mean . . ."

The words choked off into a sob. She made a little incoherent gesture toward her husband, then she ran blindly out of the room.

"Mummy, Mummy."

Rosemary ran after her. For a moment Mr. Thatcher stood

quite still, his shoulders sagged. Then he sat down in a chair and put his hands over his eyes.

Andrew could hear the lieutenant's authoritative voice on the phone. Dimly he knew that Ned had moved to join him and had put his hand on his arm. The truth, he thought. All through this day of bewilderment and pain, he had stumbled on in his pursuit of the truth, forcing himself to believe that once the truth was known, the nightmare would be over. Well, the truth was known now, not only the truth about Maureen and her death, but the truth about himself and Ned and the Thatchers and, yes, his mother too. Everything had been exposed. All of them had been revealed for what they were. And he, Andrew Jordan, had been tested as he had never been tested before.

To what purpose? Had the insecurity which had made him so easy a dupe for Maureen been burned out of him? Perhaps there was that. Perhaps in time he would find that something of value had taken place. But at the moment he felt nothing but exhaustion and corroding pity for Mrs. Thatcher. This wasn't the villain unmasked, the classic end of the drama of murder. This was Maureen reaching up from the grave to destroy the last of her victims. Yes, the roles were reversed. The victim had been the killer, the killer just another victim.

On the phone, Lieutenant Mooney was saying, "Okay. Thank you. I'll be around in the morning to check."

He put down the phone and turned implacably to Mr. Thatcher. "Perhaps you'd go to your wife, Mr. Thatcher, and ask her to come back here."

Very slowly, Mr. Thatcher started to rise.

It was then that Andrew faced one thing which had happened, one realization which would indeed change his life forever. If he had known what Mrs. Thatcher had known about Maureen, he would have killed her himself. He was

quite sure of it. Mrs. Thatcher had committed his murder for him. Whatever ordeal lay ahead for her could, but for the grace of God, have been his ordeal.

He said, "Stay there, Mr. Thatcher. I'll go to her. I think I should be the one . . ."

"To me Patrick Quentin is the Number One of American crime-novelists."

FRANCIS ILES