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He Fashioned a Shroud
for a Deadly Divorcee

I, the Executioner

(False Bounty)

STEPHEN RANSOME



Complete and
Unabridged

. . . I had completed my arrangements for murdering Lydia.

. . . My plan was as lethal as I could make it. I had chosen the same ordinary but effective method used for exterminating lower forms of rodents. I had simply left a deadly trap for Lydia at a spot where she would be most likely to stick her lovely neck into it. Lydia's death would not be quick or merciful.

. . . I could guarantee her last few hours would be damned unpleasant ones.

The above lines won't give this exciting mystery's secret away, for they are only the very start of Stephen Ransome's tension-packed thriller. I, THE EXECUTIONER is an unusual mystery of a woman who knew how to get away with murder, of another who didn't, and of the man they involved in their schemes.

*Turn over this book for
second complete novel.*

The Saturday Review awarded this murder mystery "Full marks." You'll agree when you read about:

WEBSTER LINDLEY—who appointed himself a secret executioner because he couldn't condone murder.

LYDIA LINDLEY—whose lovely looks masked a most unlovely mind.

DR. DOREMUS—who couldn't diagnose doom until it hit him.

ERNIE REECE—who apparently became wealthy overnight.

VERNA DOREMUS—whose motives for murder no one had suspected.

SAM WREGG—who knew a deadly secret and tried hard to tell.

GRIFF WEST—who could positively prove the guilt of the innocent.

STEPHEN RANSOME

I, the Executioner

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I, THE EXECUTIONER

(FALSE BOUNTY)

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SO DEAD MY LOVE

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CHAPTER ONE

BY TWO O'CLOCK Thursday afternoon I had completed my arrangements for murdering Lydia.

My plan was as reliably lethal as I could make it. Avoiding unnecessary complexities, I had chosen the same ordinary but effective method used for exterminating lower forms of rodents. I had simply left a deadly trap for Lydia at a spot where she would be most likely to stick her lovely neck into it.

Rodent: a gnawing mammal.—Webster's.

Lydia had gone off somewhere this morning to shop—her favorite pastime. "I suppose it's true I buy things I don't really need, sometimes," she would admit under pressure, "but I've got to have something to *do*, don't I?" She was expected back at the house soon after lunch. That would be at any moment now.

I could picture her return. "Just simply exhausted," as always after any slight exertion, she would drag herself into her bedroom—her favorite lolling place—shed her mink, sink into a fluffy chair, pry off her thirty-dollar pumps and then, uttering a hard-used sigh, lift a silver vacuum jug off her vanity table and pour herself a cup of hot coffee.

This sequence of incidents was reasonably inevitable; I had seen it scores of times, the coffee included. Like cigarettes and men, coffee was one of Lydia's addictions. She said it picked her up, as no doubt they all did. This afternoon, however, she would drink an especially prepared cupful with a somewhat different effect. Sipping it would start her on her way to an earlier grave than anyone had any reason to expect.

Anyone except me.

Lydia's death would not be quick or merciful. Instead, I could guarantee her last few hours would be damned unpleasant ones. As to that I felt she properly had it coming; my conscience wasn't bothered. Not so far, at any rate. So far I was just potentially a murderer, my capabilities along

that line still unproved by any corpse. I'd still have to wait a little while to experience my reactions to myself as an actual killer.

I would become one of those very shortly. The pinch of poison was planted, waiting for Lydia now—if she hadn't already swallowed it.

Strangely enough, I didn't know the nature of the stuff I'd left there for Lydia to drink; but on several occasions I had seen it at work.

It was innocent-looking, white, and granular like fine sugar or salt, odorless, apparently tasteless—I'd respectfully taken its lack of taste on faith—and, for me at least, nameless. I had found it under peculiar circumstances and had tested it with results proving it to be deadlier than a bullet or a snake-bite, but slower-acting.

There would be no immediate symptoms. It would sneak into action so gently and subtly that for hours Lydia wouldn't suspect she was even then dying; and once the symptoms had begun it would be too late to save her.

Abruptly she would collapse.

Since Lydia habitually sent for her physician, Dr. Sylvester Doremus, on the slightest pretext, there would certainly be a hurry-up call for him now.

This time it would be a genuine emergency, but Dr. Doremus might reasonably assume it was merely another spasm of Lydia's imagination, and if so he would rush over as slowly as usual. There he would come up against a proposition too tough for any doctor. He would find himself unable to cope with his patient's rising delirium and as her convulsions grew more violent he would undoubtedly transfer her to the Garvey Memorial Hospital, where there were better facilities for being medically helpless.

There Lydia would slip into a deepening coma. Presently she would be carried out dead.

She would come out dead late this afternoon perhaps, or more probably during the evening, but not later than midnight. As I had quietly arranged it, this was definitely Lydia's last day on earth, and most of it was already used up.

The ambulance gong would be the signal. My awareness was already tuned to the coming beat of that bell. By now,

in fact, my ears had become keyed to all the ordinary noises around town which normally went unnoticed—mostly those of cars, motors burbling, horns blating, trucks growling up Main Street hill; but also the tinkle of passing bicycles, coal hissing down a chute into somebody's cellar, roller skates slashing across cement, birds chippering in trees that shivered their new leaves in a breeze too chilly for May. Although it was still hours too early I was anticipating that one sound above all others, the note I had privately orchestrated into the day's score—the hasty gong clanging out, proclaiming the mortal end of Lydia.

At two o'clock I was sitting in one of the dusty gothic windows of the courtroom. In Stagg County's legal arena the high walls of gloomy walnut remained unadorned except by the occasional addition of a murky oil portrait of another judge who had gone to suffer a higher judgment. Here, beneath a dome of mosaic glass dimmed by seventy annual films of soot, all manner of culprits and supplicants faced trial, including our local murderers—when caught, that is, which my own plans did not include.

We were not concerned with the criminal docket at present. This was a session in equity, so-called.

Especially glad today of the sun shining warm on my spine, I simply sat there pleasantly idle, as I had often done, and waited to ask Harvard Tasker, the current judge, for a postponement of *Reece v. Dodd*. Nobody gave me any special notice. I had set the fatal trap only a few minutes ago, during a brief recess called so that the court in all its majesty could go to the toilet, but outwardly I seemed to appear normal enough; nobody dreamed I was a murderer-soon-to-be.

Griffith West had buzzed in. The *Courier* liked to call Griff our "dynamic" district attorney. Being pint-sized, he had less beef to push around than most men, so he made better speed. Never strolling or meandering, he always hustled, usually humming to himself. He had cheerfully slapped the tipstaff's back at the swinging doors, signaled reassurances impartially to various litigants, whispered a few impromptu wisecracks along the clerk's table, found the court murmuring in con-

clave with counsel, wigwagged more greetings as he circled, and now he finally alighted on the window sill beside me.

"You're looking mighty sharp this afternoon, Web."

"I had Wheaties for breakfast. What's on your mind, Griff?"

"Me? Nothing."

"You came bursting in here as if you'd just picked up a bit of hot news."

Griff shook his hard little head. "Just looking in, killing time. I love court. Hate legal drudgery, such as digging for citations, but I do love trial work. Trouble with my job is, I conscientiously got to keep most complainants from getting this far. Otherwise poor old Harv would be swamped."

"Frustrates you, doesn't it?"

He lifted a glance. "You're different. I've noticed it before, the contented look you get on that handsome shining puss of yours when there's not a damn thing happening in here."

"When nothing's happening inside a courtroom it's the next best thing to keeping out of court altogether."

"That's no way to make dough, a lawyer having no patience with the law, like you."

"If I'm going to play word-games I'd rather people's lives or fortunes didn't depend on my luck."

"Luck? Sir, must I remind you this is a temple of justice?"

"Is there such a thing as justice? Clarence Darrow said it can't even be defined."

"Anyway weighty deliberations occur here. Issues of life and death importance get pondered. Don't they?"

"Judge Bridlegoose decided four thousand cases by flipping a coin. Only twenty-three hundred of them were appealed. All these were affirmed. Of course this august body wouldn't think of leaving its decrees to chance like that. Harv's method is to make his mind a blank and wait for something to happen."

"Contempt of court!" Griff was being jocular but my irreverence really disturbed him. "My God, seriously, somebody might hear you." He glanced around warily, then asked, swinging his short legs, "Making any money?"

"Money? What's that?"

"It's what the state pays the district attorney too little of per annum. You could keep as busy as the other distinguished counsellors in town if you wanted to."

"Know anybody who's looking for an honest lawyer?"

"Not a soul that I ever heard of. An honest D.A. can feel pretty friendless too." Griff fidgeted. "I'm bored, bored stiff. Need something stimulating, something to kick up a good court fight."

I asked an irresistible question: "Such as a murder?"

"A murder would fill the bill nicely. I would appreciate a really first-class murder."

"Today?"

"Today would be fine."

For the first time I felt it might get to be pretty rough on the nerves, this tricky proposition of acting normally casual and law-abiding while feeling guilty of the gravest crimes in the book.

"Of course you'd like it still better, Griff, if you could avoid trying some innocent guy and get the really guilty man, if possible."

Griff and I often joshed each other, none too brilliantly like this, but he'd never let himself go beyond a certain point where his earnest respect for his office sobered him.

"Is that so?" he said quietly now. "Damn it, Web, I don't bungle if I can help it and I don't demand victims. If I feel the defendant deserves a break I'll go out of my way to give it to him. On the other hand, if I know he's really guilty but trying to weasel his way out, then I hit him with my Sunday punch." Griff laughed softly at himself. "You happen to be talking to a remarkably high-principled character."

"That I know, Griff." Also sobered for a moment, I went on, "Well, unfortunately first-class murderers in Crossgate are few and far between." I couldn't resist adding, "I could use one myself. But we probably won't have another really good one for four or five years."

"At least," he agreed, momentarily dispirited. "Well, be seeing you, Web."

As he went humming off I responded, "Be seeing you, Griff."

But not professionally. Not as a defendant in a murder case. For all of me District Attorney West could go right on yearning. As I had arranged the matter his office would take no more than a passing interest in Lydia Lindley's sudden de-

parture from life. Griff might give it some official scrutiny, but this would get him nowhere; thanks to a total lack of evidence it wouldn't even be tagged as a homicide. Although Lydia's would be the second strange death to occur at Lindwood within a year the causes of both would remain obscure.

To everyone but me, of course.

So I hoped while listening for the bell.

After I'd waited a pleasant hour in the window with the sun on my back Harv Tasker got around to me, accepted my thoroughly valid reason for asking a postponement—one of my indispensable witnesses being persistently missing—and set *Reece v. Dodd* for June 17.

I walked down the hill from the brownstone courthouse feeling that with the chief exception of Lydia's impending death it was a routing afternoon in Crossgate.

Crossgate today was a living picture complete with sound track, sharper in my senses than ever before, but essentially the same as it had been yesterday and would be tomorrow. The two forty-eight had just pulled into the Reading depot, no later than usual, and this meant that Matt Cook, the station agent, was busily trundling its cargo of tractor parts and Sears orders into the freight shed. Bundles of the Philadelphia *Bulletin* were being dumped at Cluff's newsstand and Bert Garvey, driver for Saylor's dairy, whose father had endowed the hospital, was behind the lunch bar of the Colonial Inn packing cracked ice around the ice cream cans and the beer coils. Simultaneously it was safe to assume that Chick Weaver, ex-Marine, sole proprietor of Weaver's Shoe Clinic, was nailing down a new pair of rubber heels; Sam Wregg had brought in his daily basket of mushrooms to the Tip-Top Market; Ben Spencer, in his new shop on State Street, near the Strand, was replacing a blown condenser in somebody's radio; in the Super Photo Service Joe Shanks was splashing around in his darkroom trays while Ruthie, his shy little wife, handed customers their batches of bad snapshots; and here and there in town, much as in thousands of other towns, postmen were tucking letters into mailboxes.

A routine twenty-four hours in the complex little community called Crossgate must include profounder things than these, to be sure. The date would naturally be a milestone to

anyone who was getting married or being born, or, like Lydia, dying.

Two young women, both five years of age, had paused in earnest conversation on the corner of Main and Court streets. The one speaking now, a blonde cutie named Gloria Andersen, was growing up to be a heart-stopper. Pointing a tiny, dirty finger at the courthouse she said, "Know what the p'lice-men make everybody do up there? They make everybody say, 'Do you swear to tell the whole truth, every bit of it for the help of God?'"

The little brunette, with lovely long loose hair and a small gamin face, was Juliana. She contributed a bit of information of her own: "Know why that is? It's on account of he was the first one."

"Who?"

"God was."

"Was whut?"

"The first one."

Gloria took issue with this. "Was not. George Washnin was."

"No, sir," Juliana insisted. "God."

"Mommie said George Washnin," Gloria argued. "I heard her."

Juliana topped this easily. "Was so God. Miss Dodd said God and she knows everything, so that's who was the first one, see, dopey?"

Thinking how like the sophisms of that never-never land, the courtroom, this discussion was, I saw Gloria grow troubled. "But then what about our daddies?"

"Aw, they're just daddies," Juliana explained, dismissing the species with a woman's light touch. Then spinning about in my general direction, her skirt twirling and her hazel hair flying, she said, "Hi, Poppa."

"Hello, Julie. You do seem to do all right without a full-time daddy, don't you?"

She didn't burst into tears and clench her little arms around my neck, as a sugary little phony in the movies would be directed to do. Instead she gave me a sly smile and said blithely, "Oh, sure," knowing I would understand, and kept on whirling violently on one heel in a dogged attempt to

achieve a complete revolution. At the moment the success of this feat was of the highest importance to her.

"Are you waiting for Verna to pick you up in the car, Julie?"

"Yes."

"Is she going to take you home as usual?"

"Eeek! I almost fell that time, Poppa."

"Is she, Julie?"

"I guess so."

"I see her coming now, down the block. Wouldn't you like to stay with me the rest of the day for a change? I'd love to have you visit me again. . . . Julie?"

"Whups!"

"Well, how about it?"

"Did ya see, gee, I almost fell again. I'd like to, Poppa, but I better go home today."

"Why?"

"Lydia's going away."

I stiffened. "Going away? Where?"

"Phoo, I'm all outa breath! She said Cal'fornia."

"I hadn't heard about this, Julie. When is she leaving?"

"Oh, some time."

"Hasn't she told you when?"

"Some time nex' week."

"How long will she be gone?"

"Couple mumths."

"She's not taking you with her?"

"No, she said I shun't miss school." Juliana's funny little face lighted up. "She had me ask Bethany if I could stay with *her* and I drather."

I understood clearly Lydia's true reason for wanting to be free of Juliana on this trip. A child would be distinctly in the way on such an illicit outing. Lydia did have friends living in San Francisco, but I knew, too, that they would serve merely as a convenient means of covering up her real itinerary and purposes. All this, coming sooner than I'd expected it, might have hit me hard on any other day, but as it was Lydia's projected journey was already canceled without her knowledge and supplanted by plans of my own which had laid out an entirely different destination for her. That irresponsible expe-

dition westward would have been made at a crushing cost to Juliana. I had arranged it otherwise none too soon.

"I'm glad you like to stay with Miss Dodd. That's her name, sprout. I mean she's Bethany to me and other grown-ups, but Miss Dodd to you and the other children."

"I do call her Miss Dodd in school, Poppa, but Bethany said I can call her Bethany other places, so okay?"

"Okay. So you feel duty-bound to go on home this afternoon because Lydia won't be there much longer." The double meaning disturbed me and Juliana's decision seemed to take on overtones of unconscious portent. "Well, I may drop over this evening and pick you up anyway, if Lydia doesn't mind. Good-by, Julie."

"'By, Poppa."

A new Cadillac had glided to the curb, a superb car. Lydia didn't like its gray-green finish; she'd decided it made her look sallow. A paint job would have solved that problem but instead she had discarded the car in favor of a newer royal-blue Lincoln. Driving the Caddy only in muddy weather, she left it mostly for Verna's use when marketing and getting Juliana to school and back. "We really needed a new car for that, too, Web, the old Buick had begun squeaking so, and no wonder, we'd had it five whole years, and after all I do have to think of Julie."

The thoughtful door opened for Juliana and she scrambled to the side of the plain, timid girl sitting at the wheel. Verna, twenty-six and unmarried, was Dr. Doremus's stepdaughter. For the past few months she had worked as a general housekeeper. This astonished none of us who knew the eccentric doctor. A penurious martinet, he was known to have ordered her to "get yourself a man, get married as any normal woman should, or else earn your keep—do something useful." Verna's fear of her stepfather was a part of her nature which she'd probably never slough off; she seemed only too happy to have a room outside the Doremus house. Besides, the housekeeping job she had at Lindwood was the best of its kind in town, thanks to Lydia's extravagance.

I asked of her, as I might have asked on any other day when no poison awaited Lydia, "Has Mrs. Lindley come home, Verna?"

"Yes, sir."

My pulse rapped, skipped a beat, then resumed more evenly. "Good. I'll phone her. Julie tells me she'll be leaving on a trip West in several days."

"Will she? What for? I mean—I didn't know, she didn't mention it." Suddenly pink-faced, for reasons that escaped me, Verna squirmed a little behind the wheel and lifted her chin. "She better get to feeling good in a hurry, then. She's not feeling so hot this afternoon."

"No?" I looked closely at Verna and felt that the May breeze was unusually chilly. "In what way?"

"Just not so hot, that's all."

"Oh well, that's normal," I said. "Good-by, Julie, honey."

"By, Poppa."

The car cruised down Main Street bound for Lindwood. Picturing Lydia there in her bedroom, where a freshly emptied coffee cup sat on the vanity—Lydia lying down, not feeling her best and destined to feel much worse soon—I determined to get Juliana out of that house as early as possible. For my daughter's sake she must be gracefully and quickly removed from the scene of shock and kept safely away until the whole nasty business was finished.

Lydia was my ex-wife and my ex-sister-in-law, and also Juliana's mother.

Miss Dodd's kindergarten, or nursery school, or pre-school school for children from three to six, occupied a fine Dutch colonial house of pointed stone on North Main. Three stories high, it had a kitchen, a mess hall and a well equipped workshop in the basement, bright classrooms on the lawn level, cozy dormitories on the second floor and the mistress's own apartment topping it off.

It was a howling success with a waiting list. The local mothers who happily parked their kids there for six hours a day, five days a week, considered it a blessing, confessed they'd be driven nuts without it and wondered how it was possible that thirty brats could be handled so deftly by a staff consisting only of a cook, an assistant instructor and Miss Dodd herself.

I puzzled over this not at all. The answer seemed simple: the kids loved Miss Dodd—a very easy thing to do.

The young woman coming to meet me at the gate was twenty-eight years old and looked five years younger. She wore a red beanie, a smart gray suit, fuzzy stockings of black wool which she somehow made more appealing than nylons, and low-heeled oxfords that permitted her a natural grace of movement despite her slight limp. One rarely noticed the difficulty in her stiff left ankle; it was so pleasant to notice her face instead.

There were lines of laughter around her eyes and mouth. Her fine high forehead suggested a serenity transcending petty worries, and although her coloring wasn't unusual—her hair was dark hair-color, her eyes a not uncommon brown and her lips the customary red—still she had a certain fresh vivid quality that caused other women to moan in despair over their jars of skin food.

"June seventeenth, Bethany," I said.

"That's two more weeks. That helps." She smiled her relief. "Thank you, Webster."

"No credit to me our chief witness stays missing."

"We're both doing all we can, aren't we? This time we'll track her down, just you watch. My gosh, if I can find sixty mittens every day all winter long I should be able to find just one woman."

"The sooner the better," I said seriously. "Without Miss Shipp I don't dare go to trial."

Reece v. Dodd was a will case whereby Ernie Reece denied Bethany's right to the property now housing her school—the former home of Hosley Reece, Bethany's uncle and Ernie's father. If Ernie won he would tear down the lovely house and build an ornate gas station and lubritorium on the site, which unfortunately for Crossgate was just inside the business zone; and at the same time Miss Dodd's school would cease to exist, there being no other building suitable for it anywhere in town. If I could marshal our scant testimony to persuade the court that old Hosley's last testament should stand valid, then Miss Dodd and her little school would stay just where they were and everybody concerned would go

on being happy about it, except possibly Ernie Reece and counsel.

It was not a momentous issue. It involved not millions, but just a few thousand dollars' worth of stone and sod beautifully put together, and nobody would live or die by it. Nevertheless it was one of those small causes wherein greed may easily override common decency; it was for me a rare thing, a forensic fight worth the fighting; and Bethany was looking to me for a victory really crucial to her. Fundamentally it was a question of whether or not there should be such a thing in this world as Miss Dodd's Nursery School, and by God my heart was in it.

"I'm sure Miss Shipp didn't mean to disappear," Bethany said. "She probably hasn't any idea we're looking for her. She simply went to Philadelphia after Uncle Hosley died, got a new job and there she is. Just hasn't gotten around to dropping me a postcard, that's all. Let's start searching for her again first thing Saturday morning." Bethany smiled. "Web, when will you tell me what your fee will be?"

"Afterward. Meanwhile prepare yourself. It may come as a jolt."

I intended to ask her to marry me; but under the circumstances it seemed only fair to wait for developments.

Gazing at Bethany I was struck by a peculiar thought: how odd it was that she had no connection at all with my plan to murder Lydia. It was three years now since Lydia had divorced me. Not in any remote manner could Lydia have made herself an obstacle between Bethany and me. Odder still, perhaps, I would never gain a cent through Lydia's death. Dying, she would free me from nothing and give me nothing personally except a sense of rightful gratification. I hadn't fully realized before how altruistic an operation my murder was.

Struck by the thought, gazing at Bethany, I felt a force rushing over me and stood there wordless.

"Such a strange look came over your face just then, Web. Are you all right?"

"Nerves, no doubt," I said wryly. "Working too hard. It's only ten days since my last client and I haven't quite recovered from him yet."

I'd heard a sharp, quick, brassy banging; but from the

wrong direction. After a few seconds I'd recognized it wasn't the ambulance. But wondering how much longer the wait must be, I listened fascinated to a freight engine down at the depot huffing at its work and wagging its bell.

This time it *was* the ambulance.

It wasn't a locomotive this time, or any other bell; it was the ambulance.

Eight o'clock. To be exact, three minutes past eight.

Alone in my office, I'd been listening for the first ding of it, tenser with the passing hours in spite of myself. I sat at my desk in the fluorescent glow of the lamp that Bethany had given me last Christmas, staring at Borchard's *Convicting the Innocent*. The venetian blind wasn't entirely closed; anyone walking along North Main might glance in and see me here. They might notice that outwardly I appeared to take no interest in the bell.

I followed its every beat.

A faint vibrant pulsing at first, it came nearer along Court Street, growing into an urgent clangor. It whipped its way through the center of town and past my office in the direction of Lindwood. The sound diminished then, faded until it was almost inaudible, and stopped.

I sat still, staring at the book, breathing as quietly as possible in order to listen to every small distant sound.

Four minutes thereafter by the clock it began again. It came back, growing louder. Turning to the window now—that seemed a normal move—I saw the ambulance flash past and glimpsed something lying inside it, a form squirming beneath a white blanket.

I watched the red beacon blinking along Court Street until the ambulance veered out of sight toward the hospital's emergency entrance.

Then the gong stopped.

"So long, Lydia," I said aloud. "So long, my dear. And very, very good riddance."

CHAPTER TWO

I HAD PHONED Lindwood four times during the evening. Each time the line was busy. Since this seemed to indicate a disturbance there I'd decided to stay away, to avoid involving myself this early. Juliana in all probability was peacefully asleep by now. Verna would of course stay with her. Presently I could make sure of this and with the least possible stir bring Juliana in to my own place or to Bethany's in the morning.

Meanwhile it would no doubt fall to Dr. Doremus to tell me, with a few preliminary growls and h'rumphs preparing me for the shock, that Lydia was suddenly no more.

As a husband I was a bitter disappointment to Lydia.

"What's the *matter* with you, anyway, Web?"

It annoyed her that I could pursue this line of inquiry seriously. "I've tried my damndest to find out what's the matter with me, Lydia, but I still don't know exactly. I can't decide whether my natural attitude toward living is unusually intelligent or just unusual."

"Other lawyers make good money. Other lawyers' wives *have* things."

"I know they do, Lydia. It's easy to see just what kind of things you mean, too. Bigger cars, fur coats——"

"We drive around in a cheap old rattletrap and I haven't a decent stitch to my name."

"Aren't you wearing a stitch or two now?"

"This rag! It's two months old and only cost twenty-nine fifty and I'm sick of it. Other people go into town to the theater. They dine out once or twice a week. They give nice parties. I'd be ashamed to ask a crowd of people into this cubbyhole."

"They don't seem to mind coming singly, Lydia. I'd always thought this one of the most attractive and comfortable cottages——"

"It's so cramped we're always bumping into each other. I haven't even a dressing room of my own. You make less money than any other lawyer in town, Web, and I don't understand it, you don't seem the least bit ashamed. How can you expect to do as well as other husbands if you go on discouraging your clients?"

"I've learned that the less litigation they get into the better off they'll be. Look, Lydia, I agree heartily, making a lot of money would be fine, not for our sakes especially, but for Julie's. But Lydia, I'll never do it as a lawyer. Never."

"And why not? Other men do. Look at——"

"I'm not other men. God help us, I'm me, a guy who somehow can't work up much respect for his profession. I wish like the very devil I could have foreseen this, but I couldn't know just what I was letting myself in for until after I'd acquired some legal experience, and then it was too late."

"And just what would you like to be doing instead, may I ask?"

"That's something I may never get figured out. My law-schooling might be useful in writing fiction, but writing is such a lonely thing. I'd like to be a civil engineer, or maybe just a contractor, a small one of the kind who changes little pieces of wasteland into neat, useful plots of earth, new to walk on and clean to live on. Once I decided I should have been an inventor of new toys for children like Julie."

"Santa Claus, no less! Well, why don't you? There must be big profits in toys."

"Not for me. I can't seem to resist giving them away as fast as I turn them out. Silly, isn't it? Or I'd like to make a career of restoring damaged things which otherwise would be lost forever, like broken Ming vases or objects even more valuable, such as a kid's favorite doll or a wife's esteem for her husband. I'd like——"

"Considering the wonderful opportunity you have here, Web—inheriting your father's office and practice and everything—everybody thinks you're crazy to waste it."

"Really, everybody? I thought we were doing all right, Lydia, except that our bills seem to have piled up and our savings account is lower than——"

"Go on, tell me I'm a lousy manager!"

"—But I hope we'll catch up in time. I enjoy living in Crossgate and knowing our friends. Occasional week ends in the mountains and a vacation at the beach in the summer——"

"Camping out in a gritty shack is no fun for me."

"The trouble is, Lydia, your ambitions simply won't grow in my soil. I lack your brand of vitamin B or something. It's like trying to graft an orchid onto a sprig of mint; it won't work."

"So it's all *my* fault!"

"You're a very attractive woman when you forget yourself, Lydia, and I think I may be forgiven for marrying you when I found you receptive, if misguided. Of course I've had the better end of the bargain. It really was a serious mistake on your part. You should have married a man who already has everything you want. Someone like my go-getter brother Bruce."

"Don't for one instant think I couldn't have Bruce if I wanted him!" Lydia said sharply.

Four months thereafter, having just divorced me, she became Mrs. Bruce Lindley.

Bruce had put in three years as a Sea-Bee in the Pacific theater. By nature a big kindly bear of a guy, he was no longer as strong as he looked. A siege of tropical fever had left him in a shaky condition; but having no patience with its after-effects he'd begun driving himself hard to catch up on lost time.

As a real-estate operator Bruce was never satisfied merely to maneuver existing properties from one person's possession to another's; he also created new ones. The Candleberry Valley development, a trim little colony of houses just outside Crossgate, was one of Bruce's making from the first spadeful of earth to the last stroke of the paintbrush. He'd laid out new industrial sites and found businesses to fill the plants he constructed—the Maylon mill, manufacturing radio cabinets, for example, and the Ives drug-research laboratory. He had come home from the wars full of more new plans like these to turn into realities. Bruce was the sort who would always open opportunities to himself and thrive on the obstacles he met while building on them.

It was as strongly Bruce's nature to be all this as it was mine not to be it. I watched his every operation with envious admiration.

Only one of Bruce's projects ever got sidetracked. Prior to the war he'd bought as a speculation the big Tyler estate on Town Line Road. It could have turned into a white elephant, as comically predicted by his competing realtors; but they stopped kidding him about it when the housing shortage grew really acute. Bruce had recently had offers of three times the price he'd paid. However, he'd declined them all. He lived there himself now, with Lydia, at her insistence. She had renamed the place Lindwood. It was the grandest in all Crossgate and she had immediately begun improving it.

Just half a mile away, at the crossing of Town Line Road and North Main, sat the church where the Reverend John Beauveau had been the pastor and the parsonage where his small daughter Lydia had had so little.

On a cool autumn day I happened on Bruce in the bar of the Colonial Inn.

"A rare occasion, this, kid, finding you idle and alone." I perched on the stool beside him. "Feeling okay?"

"Feel sort of gone," he said in a dispirited tone. "Sort of drained. Sort of futile."

"You were pretty damn sick, Bruce, and you're not over it yet."

He wiped his handkerchief over his flushed face. His fever had a way of returning in short rages; spurts of restlessness caught him up and he complained of sleeping miserably. This morning he'd evidently been sitting here at the bar for some time, staring at himself in the mirror and drinking.

"Yeah, I know, I've got to slow down, but that isn't the real trouble. I still got plenty done. But I don't find any real pleasure in work, in accomplishment, any more. I mean I'd still have the old zest like I used to have—I'd feel satisfied if only Lydia would, but—"

He ordered drinks for us both, then went on: "I thought I drove myself pretty hard, but compared with the way Lydia can wield the whip I pampered myself."

"Don't let it get you, Bruce."

"I'm not killing myself trying to make all Lydia's dreams

come true, if that's what you mean. She's in an all-right spot already. I mean, no matter how big a job I may do I can't get a boot out of it any more because Lydia is expecting something at least that size but preferably five times bigger. No matter what I may deliver it'll always fail to fill the bill entirely because she'll always take that much for granted and feel disappointed because it's not more. So I've failed before I've even started. What the hell's the use beginning anything new? It takes the heart out of me."

He turned. "You know, Web, I don't believe it's really material possessions she's so hungry for, or money, or position either. I think they're a substitute for something else."

He stirred his drink. "As brother to brother—or perhaps I should say as one of Lydia's husbands to another—did you ever suspect her of playing around?"

Bruce had had a little too much whisky; but the question being on his mind there was certainly no one else to whom he could better put it. "Never seriously," I said.

"I'm not so sure," he murmured. "If my theory is true Lydia is doomed to die a frustrated woman. Just between you and me, Web, I think the thing she really wants above everything else is to be the sultana of a male harem."

Two days before Christmas Bruce came into my office. While we sat behind closed doors together snowflakes slanted across the windowpanes and we heard an amplifier playing carols at Sherr's Hardware up the street. Bruce seemed feverish again but under less strain. He grinned as he showed me the expensive electric train he'd bought for Juliana and I showed him the record albums to go with the phonograph I'd built especially for her blue-and-white playroom. Then we settled down to serious talk.

"Draw up a little legal paper for me, Web. Separation agreement."

It wasn't a surprise. "You're the one who's moving out, of course, Bruce?"

"She can have the damn castle. And fifty thousand in cash besides."

I straightened in my chair. "Surely she hasn't agreed to such a pittance!"

"She's screaming her head off," Bruce said. "Let her. It's that or nothing. She'll take it."

I looked hard at him. "A woman is the law's darling, Bruce. She gets the breaks in court, particularly if the man she's divorcing is rich."

"Lydia would never divorce me, Web—not as long as I'm the biggest fish near her hook."

"You intend to bring suit against *her*?"

Bruce's smile was tired and acrid. "Hell, I never claimed to be a gentleman."

I asked this one carefully: "What grounds?"

"Anything that'll serve. Cruelty, something like that."

It would be the usual stereotyped circumvention, with everyone concerned pretending not to recognize it as such. And like most clients Bruce was holding out on his lawyer, not telling the whole story.

"All right, something as innocuous as possible; but if Lydia puts up a fight you'll make it adultery and name names?"

"Just one, so far as I know."

"One's enough. Whose is that?"

"I don't want to talk about it, Web. You'd rather avoid that sort of case, too, for Julie's sake, wouldn't you? Lydia's also anxious for me to keep my mouth shut for her own sake strictly. That's why she'll end up taking what I've offered her. It's a long way from the handsome arrangement she's asking for—she wants half of everything I've got—but under the circumstances fifty thousand and the house are all she'll get."

Our state's divorce laws provided for temporary alimony during the legal proceedings but no alimony at all following the decree. Leaving aside the question of what reward an unfaithful wife deserved, almost any other woman might consider Bruce's settlement a fairly snug little fortune; but Lydia, of course, would go through it fast. And since Lydia herself must realize this at least as clearly as anyone else could, she had found herself facing a desperate crisis.

"I'll draw up the agreement right away, Bruce, and have it ready for signing tomorrow. At the same time you'd better sign a new will, one limiting Lydia to her dower right so long as she's your wife and cutting her off entirely as soon as the decree is granted."

"Yes. And since I'm not only Julie's stepfather but also the only rich uncle she'll ever have, I'd like to leave everything else to her."

Bruce never signed either document.

On the phone Verna Doremus sounded frightened.

"Your brother's turned awful' sick, Mr. Lindley."

Bruce had taken to his bed yesterday evening, soon after our talk at my office, with a flare-up of his fever—or this at least was as accurately as Dr. Doremus could diagnose the malady.

"Has your father been called back, Verna?"

"He's gone out to see another patient and I can't find out where. I'll keep on trying. Your brother needs him awful' bad."

"Where's Lydia—Mrs. Lindley?"

"Out somewhere too and I can't seem to find *her* either—but watching over Mr. Lindley the way he is now, I don't have much time to spare for making phone calls."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's threshing around and sort of acting like he's out of his head. I better go back to him now, I can hear him moaning like he's in worse pain all the time, but I can't handle him, I'm all alone here."

"Coming, Verna."

I was there within five minutes by the clock, whipping the car through Lindwood's high wrought-iron gate, stopping at the end of its long gravel driveway, hurrying in through the kitchen. When I ran up the stairs Verna was pleading, "Please, Mr. Lindley, be still, please be still now." She was trying to hold him down. I drew her away from the bed.

"How long has he been like this?"

"About an hour." She was breathless. "It came on him awful' sudden. I heard him fall. He'd tried to get up. Found him on the floor and I don't know how I ever got him back in bed."

"He has medicine, capsules to take whenever his fever goes up. Where are they?"

"Right there on the bedside table, but it's no use, you can't get him to swallow one."

"Phone the hospital for an ambulance. Then keep on trying to find your father."

Verna rushed to the phone downstairs. I spoke to Bruce and he didn't hear. His eyes were half open but glassy, unseeing. He writhed, keeping his jaw clenched, slowly arching his back and twisting his shoulders as if to pull himself away from an unshakable anguish. I sat beside him, helpless to alleviate his suffering, sensing that this could be more than the after-effects of a fever; and I reached to the little green bottle on the bedside table.

It was just an ordinary wide-mouthed bottle with a plastic screw-cap. Its label bore the imprint of Keller's Pharmacy, a typed date weeks old, directions for taking and the name of the prescribing physician, Dr. Doremus. Inside were four ordinary capsules containing a white powder.

I emptied the capsules onto my palm, then dropped them into my coat pocket and put the bottle back.

A car had come rolling along the driveway. Verna had gone fluttering out to meet it. Now Lydia's voice turned shrill on Verna as they both hastened in. Lydia appeared at the stair landing, a tall dark woman, her color unusually vivid in a thin face unusually pale. She stopped short at sight of me, then hurried into the secondary bedroom where Bruce lay writhing in insupportable pain.

"Where have you been, Lydia?"

"At a hairdresser's, a new one I'm trying out. And why not? He was all right when I left. Bruce, dearest, is it very bad?"

"He can't hear you, but I can answer for him. Yes, it is very bad, the worst yet."

She stood still under tension, one fine hand lifted, her long fingers toying with the pearls at her lovely neck. Her black-brown eyes were unreadable and dry. I turned from her to the window to see if the ambulance had come in sight, then to the bath to make the pointless gesture of wetting a towel for Bruce's face; and stepping back into the bedroom I stopped short.

Lydia, having lifted the green bottle off the bedside table, was now replacing it. It was no longer empty. Again it contained a few white capsules.

CHAPTER THREE

IN MY CAR we followed the ambulance, neither of us speaking. Lydia sat stiff-backed, still dry-eyed, her face cool and white. No doubt she believed that Bruce, seeking relief from his mounting distress, had gulped down one capsule after another until all of them were gone. She rode beside me to the hospital with no inkling that I had four of those capsules in my pocket.

Dr. Doremus's muddy car sat in the parking lot behind the hospital. We hurried down the hallway with a nurse rustling alongside us and whispering that Dr. Doremus had just finished an emergency operation and was right there to take care of Mr. Lindley. Then Lydia and I went into the room where a bare-armed man in a white stained jacket was already bending over Bruce. There we stayed while Sylvester Doremus worked over him unremittingly until, to the doctor's intense exasperation, he died.

Alone that evening in my basement workshop I put the four capsules inside an envelope, tucked the envelope inside a tool cabinet, turned the lock and pocketed the key.

Next afternoon that familiar mud-splashed sedan of Dr. Doremus's sat in front of the office of District Attorney West.

I took care to be quiet as I stepped into the drab, deserted waiting-room. Dr. Doremus was talking behind the closed door of the inner office. Griff spoke in murmurs but the doctor asserted his loud, bold voice and cleared his throat sharply to drown out interruptions.

"Autopsyl!" he snorted. "Fine, fine! By all means let's cut the poor devil open. At least it'll prove our ignorance. Hrrr! Can you tell me just what you expect his insides to show us? The Army medicos couldn't even make up their minds which name to stick on this patient's fever. And can you tell me, what's more, when a man dies of a tropical disease contracted

in the service of his country in time of war, what possible concern it is of this office? What? Hrrr!"

This gruff eccentric approved of the profession of medicine on the whole, but he had a short temper with complaining patients, the ill-informed laity and most other doctors, particularly big-city specialists.

"If it wasn't the fever that finally killed the poor soul," Dr. Doremus demanded bluntly, "may I ask just what the devil you think it was?"

Griff had barely begun to murmur an answer.

"Poppycock! Preposterous! Young man, as a practicing physician for the past thirty-two years and the coroner of Staggs County for the past nine, I've seen scores of men and women dead of causes as indefinite as this. However, as you can see, I have duly complied with the law requiring a specific label to be applied to the corpse. I stand by the statement I have written on this death certificate, and so far as I am officially concerned it's my final word. Hrrr! Good day, young man."

I left as quietly, unseen.

The certificate of death read in Sylvester Doremus's unruly script, under the line *Cause of Death, Hematohepatogenous jaundice*.

The medical dictionary in our public library (open Tuesday and Friday afternoons from two to five) defined hepatogenous jaundice as the sort ordinarily occurring in diseases of the liver, hematogenous as that kind caused by the disintegration of the red blood cells, and hematohepatogenous as a combination of the two; which merely translated the obscure into higher terms of ambiguity.

Bruce's funeral was the most crowded Crossgate had seen in years despite our efforts to keep it small. Standing tall and cool beside the grave Lydia was a figure darkly high-lighted in Persian lamb. Not having a black fur among her collection of coats she had bought a new one for the occasion. "And why not?" the superior lift of her chin seemed to say; "I have the money for it." She had indeed—not a paltry fifty thousand, or even a mere half of Bruce's holdings, but his whole estate.

Juliana during this final rite stayed with Bethany, a bewildered little girl. She would have been also quite a rich

little girl, just as her only moneyed relative had wished her to be, except that he had died a little too soon.

After dark that evening I climbed into the loft above my garage to rummage for an old-fashioned rattrap. I remembered leaving one up there, the wire cage type. Having brought it down, I installed a ball of fresh hamburger as bait and left it in a dark corner behind a worn tire.

The cage remained empty for two days. On the third I acquired a suitable subject for experiment.

The fat gray-brown rat seemed not unhappy as a prisoner. I fed him moist raw meat for two more days to make certain he hadn't picked up any tainted food in the neighborhood before arriving here. This control period ended with the specimen still in good health.

Early next day I prepared another snack for him, this time a special one. Taking one of those four capsules, I emptied it onto a bit of ground meat and kneaded in the white powder. I dropped this morsel into the cage and watched him devour all of it. I observed him closely for two hours, vetoing breakfast, and when I gave it up and set off for the office he seemed unchanged.

Hurrying back home during my lunch hour I found the rat still as contented as a pet rabbit.

When I returned at five he seemed, if anything, more chipper than before.

I had dinner, giving him meanwhile nothing more to eat, and afterward he appeared delighted to have been trapped and eager for more medicated meatballs.

An hour thereafter he lay in the cage, stiff-legged, trembling, squirming in slow powerful tortures.

He was dead before dark.

The wind of the January evening bit through my overcoat as I walked down to Keller's Pharmacy.

"What'll it be, Web?" George Keller asked.

"Haven't been sleeping well the past few nights, George. What about those capsules Dr. Doremus gave Bruce? Just sedatives, aren't they? Would it be all right if I took the rest of them?"

George gave me a hard, direct look. "I 'member that prescription—pretty simple one," he said evenly, "but let's check."

From those mysterious realms of alchemy behind the pebbled glass partition he brought a fat leather-backed book having hundreds of prescriptions pasted inside it.

"You're right about part of it, Web. Phenobarbital in it, half a grain—light dose, not enough to make Bruce drowsy, just enough to calm his nerves. Plus quinana sulphas ten grain—medium normal dose there. That's all.

"I figured at the time, Web," the druggist went on, letting me take a closer look at the prescription, "—this is just between you and me, of course—the quinine meant Syl Doremus couldn't tell just what to do about that fever of Bruce's but hoped it might respond something like malaria. When you come right down to it, I guess Syl did as well for Bruce as anybody could. Lots of unfamiliar ailments doctors hereabouts never met before stirred up and scattered by the war. No, better not take any of those capsules of Bruce's, although they wouldn't hurt you a bit." He looked straight at me. "Might make your ears ring a little but otherwise wouldn't hurt you a bit."

He added, teetering on his heels, "Fella come in the other day, he brought up the question about how a pharmacist might make a mistake filling a prescription. Happens sometimes, sure, but very rarely. Here, in this pharmacy, never. Got my own system here, check every move, just couldn't get the wrong stuff in. No, sir, couldn't possibly." He looked absolutely infallible, convincingly so. "Having a little trouble sleeping, Web? Sure, I'll fix you up."

"Thanks, George."

She could have worked it so easily, so simply, by removing a few capsules from the little green bottle and refilling them with that poisonous white powder. This capsulated poison left at Bruce's bedside—meanwhile the other medicinal capsules hidden. Perhaps she had actually watched him swallow one or more of hers, then had hurried from the house so that the seizures would begin during her innocent absence. Afterward she'd merely have to get rid of any of the poison that might remain, then replace the properly compounded capsules for possible examination in case anyone should raise a question—which no one had done except me, and that only within my own mind.

I kept thinking back to the troubling fundamental puzzle of where and how Lydia might have obtained the poison in the first place. It was no ordinary substance but one possessing a special inexorable toxicity which seemed—in Bruce's case it had, at least—to resist all known antidotes and treatments. Lydia wouldn't have dared ask for and pay for it across the counter of any drugstore in Crossgate where she was so well known and where Bruce was soon to die of its effects. Still less likely that she could have bought such deadly stuff elsewhere as a stranger. True, there was another man behind the scene—that unnamed lover of Lydia's—who might have obtained it for her; but in seeking her security through murder surely she had avoided the obvious danger of possible exposure through an accomplice. No; she must have procured the poison herself, if possibly entirely on her own. Her complete success as a self-made widow required that no one else at all should even know she possessed it.

A tough problem. How had Lydia managed it? I couldn't guess. Nevertheless I meant to leave no room to doubt she had somehow actually done it.

Immediately I repeated the test. I trapped another rat in the garage. This one I held a pampered prisoner for an entire week, nourishing it with care. Then I fed it the contents of another of those capsules sprinkled on snowy fresh bread.

Beginning eight hours thereafter the second rat began to writhe in agony and die.

Driving into Lindwood last Sunday afternoon I left my coupé in the driveway as usual, said hello to Verna as I went in through the kitchen and climbed the back stairs to the third floor, bringing an album of the Nutcracker Suite for Juliana. Usually, if she hadn't already come bouncing down to meet me, I found her busy in her dormer room. Today she wasn't there.

"Julie? . . ."

"I left the records in her dolls' bed. Going down the main stairway I paused at the open door of Bruce's old bedroom. A thorough job of redecoration had made it almost unrecognizable as a room once lived in by a man of earthy hands; it seemed much more suitable as a set-up for an amorous in-

trigue in technicolor. Turning then to the main bedroom adjoining I found Lydia, wearing something long and lacy, seated on the bench before her vanity mirror.

"Web?" She gave me one quick glance, her slender fingers never pausing as she arranged her hair. "Oh. You've come to see Julie."

"Of course. Where is she?"

"Down the road, playing with the Callum children."

"How come?"

"I sent her. Julie can be terribly trying at times. How do you like this new hair-do?"

"Lovely. It happens to be Sunday afternoon, Lydia. I have a standing date with Julie every Sunday afternoon in the year, remember?"

She paused then, giving me another fleeting glance in the mirror. "I'm really dreadfully sorry I forgot, Web; but you *could* go down there and get her, you know."

I demurred on the grounds that Juliana no doubt was enjoying herself there and I stood gazing at Lydia. It was four months since Bruce's death. Since then I had watched my friends with sharpened awareness, but as far as I had discerned no one had dropped even a hint of suspicion. Lydia was getting away with it with an artful ease which many less successful murderers might envy.

For me, a nice problem in ethics: what to do after your daughter's mother has neatly killed your brother. After thinking long and hard about it I had found only one workable answer: *Do nothing. Sit tight. Watch her. Think always of Juliana first.*

Lydia had emerged by imperceptible degrees from her period of mourning and her friends were remarking how admirably she had adjusted herself to the shock of widowhood. But she was not quite the same Lydia. She had grown subtly bolder and more restless. Her extravagances were increasing—new clothes at breath-taking prices, the new cars, the sweeping redecoration of Lindwood, in an elaborately landscaped setting at the Jersey beach a new house which in no way resembled a gritty camp, a cabin cruiser, flying lessons in her own plane, a world cruise as soon as Juliana was old enough to be put into a boarding school which, of course, would be

the costliest if not the best-suited to Juliana. In all this nothing resourceful but everything prodigal; and behind it I saw the compulsion of a guilty conscience.

On a grander than average scale Lydia was a thief squandering her swag. Superficially it might be taken as an example of "easy come, easy go," but much deeper forces were prodding Lydia. Having gained these riches through murder, the minister's daughter must punish herself by robbing herself of her own evil rewards.

Couldn't she see she was punishing and robbing Juliana as well?

"Web—" Lydia's manner was studiously casual as she took up the silver vacuum jug and poured coffee into a cup. As long as I'd known her she'd kept hot coffee within reach at all hours. "Web— Perhaps you should be the first to hear I'm going to be married again."

"Naturally. It seems a little early, but natural. Who's the man I should congratulate this time, Lydia?"

"Ernest Reece."

"*Ernie Reece!*"

Lydia turned a brief indignant frown on me, then sprinkled a single spoonful of sugar into her cup. "You needn't sound quite so scandalized. Why shouldn't I marry Ernest if I choose?"

"How much younger than you is he, Lydia?"

"Only six years, and I can't see that it makes any real difference."

"Is he pretty well set in his job?"

Lydia stirred her coffee and narrowed her eyes at me. "Don't get nasty, Web. Ernest has had a few bad breaks but he'll soon have a really good position—managing Bruce's old properties."

I stared at her. "Good God, you can't be serious! The biggest deal Ernie Reece ever handles is making change for a ten dollar bill."

"After all, Web, everyone has to make a start sometime. Ernest will soon learn."

"It'll be the first useful thing he's learned since getting kicked out of high school in his junior year for a job of dirty work in a water-polo match—and to manage that you have to

get really dirty. Lydia, as I recall it, Ernie Reece is already married."

"As a lawyer of sorts, Web," Lydia said bitingly, "you should know how easily that detail can be taken care of."

"Reno is not cheap. Where's he getting the money?"

Lydia sipped her coffee. Her silence told me she intended to foot all Ernie's bills herself.

After a moment she said aloofly, "I'm *not* asking your advice, Web. I know there'll be talk, but I'm not afraid of it; my mind's made up. I simply wanted to be thoughtful enough to let you be the first to hear what my plans are."

"Am I really the first, Lydia—even before Juliana?" and I turned away without waiting for an answer.

I swung the car into the Sunoco station on North Main and as a blond young man came out of the greasing shed, wiping his hands on a wad of waste, I said with no friendliness in my voice, "Hello, Ernie. Fill her up."

Ernie Reece did not smile. His poker-face seemed to answer, "Okay, pal, but watch yourself; my day's coming," and he turned to the rear of my car.

The gas station was the standard block-shaped hut. The shed standing behind it included a small room, just big enough for a cot, where it could be said Ernie Reece was living these days. He owned a small house and lot on Dark Hollow Road, a mile outside of town, but he hadn't been back there since walking out on his wife and two children several months ago. The present Mrs. Reece was doing fairly well without him, her services being in considerable demand as a laundress.

At the age of twenty-one Ernie had come into a bequest of some eight thousand dollars from his late uncle, Butler Reece, former United States Senator. At the age of twenty-two he was broke. Shortly thereafter his father, Hosley Reece, had ordered him out of his home for good. Old Hosley, one of the founders of the Crossgate Trust Company, had never had much patience with his irresponsible son and finally he had reached his limit. He never told anyone the true cause of the final break, but rumor consistently mentioned a forged check.

I thought of Ernie Reece managing Bruce's properties and winced.

Ernie's qualities as an easy-going heel were made all the

more captivating to women generally by the fact that by all odds he was the handsomest chap in Crossgate. Watching him as he held the hose, I wondered that Hollywood hadn't kidnaped him. His hair was all natural golden waves, his face Grecian, his body perfectly proportioned. Except for the sullenness in his eyes this young god of the gas pumps was swoon-bait for the bobby-soxers and a dream walking for their mothers. Watching him, I could appreciate that Lydia was moving closer, husband by husband, to her desire of desires as defined by Bruce.

Ernie Reece shut off the pump and said, "That'll be two sixty-four."

I handed Juliana's newest stepfather-to-be a ten dollar bill.

I had the two remaining capsules tucked snugly in a vest pocket when I went into court early this afternoon to ask for a postponement of *Reece v. Dodd*.

Shortly before two o'clock Harv Tasker called a short recess. That was my opening. I crossed the street to my car. Not hurrying, but being careful of every move as I made it, I drove to Lindwood.

Having phoned late this morning I'd learned from Verna that Lydia had gone off somewhere to shop and wouldn't return until after a late lunch. This being Thursday afternoon, Verna was permitted a few hours off while Juliana was at school, until three. Temporarily Lindwood had no gardener or any other hired help. It would be deserted.

I drove in quietly. The garage was empty, as I'd expected—both cars were out. I stepped in through the pantry door and listened, surrounded by the various kitchen gadgets which Lydia must buy although Verna rarely used them—pressure cookers of all types, an elaborate electric mixer, a dehydrator and the like. The whole place was soundless. Then feeling doubly reassured I went by way of the main stairs directly up to Lydia's room.

It was untidy, the bed still unmade. Lydia always "did" her own room—"I'd rather have my privacy than a maid snooping into my things"—but evidently she'd let it go today in favor of an early start on her shopping.

I knew just what she would do, with minor variations, the

moment she returned home. She would come in here dragging her heels, "simply exhausted," dropping on the floor whichever fur coat she had worn today, then falling into this soft chair beside her vanity. Next prying off her costly shoes she would sit here wriggling her freed nylon toes and automatically she would pour herself a cup of coffee.

I twisted the stopper off the vacuum jug. Only a little coffee was left, not much more than one cupful, but it was still hot. I replaced the jug.

Next I took up the small silver sugar bowl. Lydia never used cream, just sugar, one rounded teaspoonful to the cup. The bowl held an ample supply—too much for my purposes. I carried it into the bath connecting with the room that had been Bruce's. After spooning sugar into the toilet and flushing it away I returned with only enough for one cup of coffee left in the bottom of the bowl.

In this way I made sure Lydia would use the bowl's entire contents at once.

I opened both the remaining capsules, emptied them over the sugar and used the spoon to mix the poison in thoroughly but invisibly.

It was done. The last step was simply to go back the way I had come.

When I reentered the courtroom the recess had just ended. There was no reason for anyone to have noticed my completely commonplace absence. No one would dream that I had just now quietly arranged for Lydia to die today.

Then I had begun waiting and listening for the signal bell.

Now the ambulance had clanged across town and back to the hospital. Standing at my office window I had seen it rush up Court Street and out of sight.

There, I told myself, went Lydia.

Probably it would fall to Dr. Doremus, soon now, to tell me the news of Lydia's sudden death.

Waiting for his call, I reflected that as Lydia's only surviving ex-husband I would no doubt be asked to function as one of her pallbearers. This needn't bother me. I'd recently done it for Bruce and it seemed no more than proper that I should do it for Lydia in return. At any rate it would be

expected of me and no one was likely anyway to suspect Lydia's murderer of publicly helping to bury her.

Once the ceremony was concluded I could dust my hands with the feeling of having polished off a job worth doing.

An inevitability was forestalled. Together wasting Bruce's substance, Lydia and Ernie would certainly have left nothing of it in time; but as matters stood now—as I had rearranged them—Juliana had become the rich little girl Bruce had meant her to be.

The news from the hospital was intolerably slow in coming. I could cut short this strain of waiting simply by calling Lindwood. Verna, staying there with Juliana, would answer and tell me how Lydia had been so unexpectedly stricken.

The distant bell rang and immediately a voice answered, "Yes?"

Abruptly my own voice was lost.

The phone said again, "Yes? Who is it?"

I blurted, "Lydia!"

"Yes. Who's calling?"

"Lydia!"

"Web? Is that you?"

I could only make it a staggering question: "L-lydia?"

She said coolly, "Yes, this is Lydia. You sound rather strange, Web. Are you upset or something?"

"A little."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Lydia—"

"Well? For heaven's sake, what is it you want?"

"Just—to ask if you're—you're all right. Verna mentioned this afternoon—you were feeling a little under the weather."

"Why, Web, dear, do you really care? Oh, I'm quite all right now. Thank you so much for asking."

"That's fine, fine.—Good night, Lydia."

I pushed the phone away and sat there sick at heart, stunned with incomprehensible defeat, staring in the direction of Lindwood where Lydia still lived.

CHAPTER FOUR

AFTER A BAD ten minutes of stamping about, of chair-kicking and hair-raking, I forced myself to sit down and try to consider it clearly.

I'd been overly eager. Lydia simply wasn't quite as far along the road to the graveyard as I would like her to be.

Her voice on the phone just now had sounded mockingly vital, but this needn't mean she would stay that way for long. So far I had no good reason to believe the trap I'd set for her had failed to catch her. After all, I'd seen the poison's deceptive delayed action—and the evening was still young.

"Feeling all right now, are you, Lydia?" I said half aloud. "Well, even so, don't be in too big a hurry to enjoy the diversions of California and Reno. Keep your shroud on."

I should have known better than to let my anticipations go off half-cocked. I could realize now that if Lydia had been taken seriously ill I would have heard from Lindwood immediately.

Lydia had long assumed that as her very first husband I retained some sort of undivorcible primary responsibility in any difficulty that might arise. If one of Lindwood's sinks became clogged and no plumber was immediately available I was expected to find one for her; if she had a flat tire on the road and couldn't get instantaneous service from a garage, she called me, whatever the hour. In the case of a middling bad headache the move was slightly less unreasonable although essentially of the same pattern of unyielding possession: as soon as Dr. Doremus had been summoned, I was called in to take over Juliana so that Verna might devote herself entirely to the sufferer.

Tonight, surely, I would have received the usual urgent SOS shortly following Lydia's first serious twinges. Not having received it, I shouldn't have let myself misinterpret that long-awaited bell.

"Watch your step, Bud," I warned myself.

Besides, there were, of course, other homes in the general direction of Lindwood. I explained to myself that the ambulance had simply rushed off to some other place near by at the very time when I had expected it momentarily to pick up the expiring Lydia.

Who was the patient I'd seen squirming in pain inside the ambulance as it sped past? Simply someone who had been stricken at the wrong moment for my jumpy nerves.

Now I faced a repetition of the past few hours' ordeal of waiting. Staying here in my office and staring at a book, I must listen for the bell again—either the ambulance bell, this time really beating out a dirge for Lydia, or the telephone bell calling me into the emergency at Lindwood.

I'd no more than resigned myself to another long wait when the phone rang—so unexpectedly soon it caught me off guard. I waited a moment, steadying myself, before answering.

It was not Lindwood calling, however. The voice was a man's, brisk and impersonal. "Webster Lindley?"

"Speaking."

"Victor Bray calling."

I said, "Oh, hello, Vic," sounding as casual as if he hadn't given my sore nerves a twist. Victor Bray, a Crossgate boy, was the youngest of our local doctors and the most stiffly dignified. I didn't know him well. No one did; he was too self-absorbed, too aloof from casual relationships. Although we'd both lived in the same town all our lives this was actually the first time he'd ever phoned me. A remarkably fine time he'd picked for it! While silently cursing him I asked affably, "What's cooking, Vic?"

He countered with a formal question of his own: "Can you come over to the hospital?"

"Now?"

"Right away, please."

"Why do you want me there?"

"It's very important." He sounded really anxious. "Please get here as soon as you can."

Before I could put another question he'd hung up, leaving me no choice but to go. I turned out the lights and locked the

office behind me, not hurrying but conducting myself as normally as possible while attempting to prepare myself for contingencies still unseen.

I hadn't been inside the hospital since Bruce's death. A nurse—her name was Alden, as I recalled it from that long night—hurried with a fresh starchy rattle to meet me. "In here, Mr. Lindley—" and she led me to the closed door of the same room in which Bruce had died.

She knocked and we waited.

"Is Dr. Bray in there?" I asked.

"Yes, with Dr. Doremus."

"Who's their patient?"

The door snapped open before she could answer and Dr. Bray briskly stepped out. As he pulled the door shut I glimpsed the bed behind him, its coverlet a white mound, two other nurses posted beside it.

"Thank you for coming," Victor Bray said. "Let's go in here," and he gestured me into the unoccupied room adjoining.

Following me in with an alert stride, seeming eager to corner me, he closed the door at his back again. A guardedly private person in all senses, I thought, and one trying too hard to be older than his age.

Lacking long experience, he made himself as impressive as possible in manner and appearance. No West Point cadet could be more sharply pressed. He was brushed speckless and seemed so aseptically clean that none but a foolish germ would venture near him. I had heard one of his first patients, an expectant mother, express the hope that her baby's skin would be as peach-petal smooth and its cheeks as softly touched with pink as her doctor's. But despite the professional disadvantage of his youthfulness, Vic Bray was not to be under-rated if he could help it. In his brief career to date he had meticulously laid the foundation of a reputation for careful competence.

"As professional men, Mr. Lindley," he began, "we know how disconcerting it is to find ourselves at the end of our resources, all our training suddenly useless."

Indeed, yes; but better let him build it up his own way, I thought—whatever was coming.

"A really distressing sensation. Frankly, I'm experiencing it now. I asked you here in the hope you might be able to help me."

"How?"

"By giving me whatever information Dr. Doremus may have given you concerning the case of your brother, Bruce Lindley. Did he find any treatment that was at all promising?"

"No. But why don't you ask Dr. Doremus himself."

"He can't answer."

"Why not?"

"Dr. Doremus, there in the next room, is my patient."

"Your patient?" I groped for a new footing. "What's wrong with him?"

"That's the question, Mr. Lindley. Possibly the same sickness that proved fatal to your brother."

Carefully watching Vic Bray's pink-cheeked face, I said, "That seems highly unlikely. Bruce's death was caused by complications following some sort of tropical fever."

"So I understand. As you say, it does seem improbable that Dr. Doremus could have contracted it from him in some way; but unfortunately we doctors still have a great deal to learn. In this case I'm sure of nothing—not even that Dr. Doremus's symptoms in general are really very much the same as your brother's were."

I asked evenly, "Just what led you to believe they might be?"

"The nurses here. Also, Sylvester Doremus himself told me a little when I asked him about it at the time, being naturally interested in such a rare case; but he put me off, growling and scowling. I regret now he didn't tell me more."

Pained as he was by his need to be helped, and apprehensive of failure, Vic Bray unbent a little. "As you may know, I feel indebted to Sylvester Doremus. This isn't the time to discuss that aspect of it, but I must say, now that he's been taken ill so suddenly and so desperately, I'm very earnest in my desire to do everything I possibly can for him."

"If it's the same thing—the same malady that killed Bruce—I know of no way under God's sun to pull him out of it."

Vic Bray lifted his head and said in a sadly resolute tone,

"Well, then, let's hope it's not the same. The hepatic symptoms—well, in Dr. Doremus's case, as we both know, they could be of alcoholic origin. At any rate I'll keep on trying my level best. Thank you for coming down."

He stepped into the corridor, turning back to the next room, and I followed him quickly as far as its door. As he went in I saw again, more clearly this time, the body on the bed. It lay there inert. Dr. Doremus's face was swollen and greenish as if with asphyxiation—not blue but actually green, an almost inhuman mask of anguish.

The door closed, leaving me blindly fearful that somehow my plan might have miscarried. But my misgivings lasted only a moment. The trap I'd set so especially for Lydia missing its intended victim, catching Dr. Doremus instead? No, of course not; I couldn't imagine it. This, I reassured myself, was still Lydia's night to die.

When I let myself into my home the phone was ringing in the hallway. All afternoon and all evening I'd been waiting for a signal bell; and so far every bell had signaled nothing. Perhaps this was the message at last—the expected distress at Lindwood. Not taking time in my impatience to snap a light-switch, I groped for the phone in the dark, thereby wasting seconds.

Of course I could recognize now—I repeated this to myself as I kept grabbing in the air for the phone—that I'd heard the ambulance beating its way to Dr. Doremus's home. The nondescript Doremus house sat not far from Lydia's mansion, on the next road, a stretch of woods separating them. The difference was only a moment or two by car, a small fraction of a mile. My error was as understandable now as it had been hopeful then. But as for the rest—Simply coincidence, of course, that Dr. Doremus's abused liver had begun kicking up, because of his too-heavy drinking, just when I'd expected my carefully planted dose of poison to finish off Lydia.

Having found and lifted the phone—and feeling it was high time now for Lydia to get busy with the process of dying—I asked with grim but well-controlled eagerness: "Yes?"

"Good evening, Webster."

Again it was not one of Lindwood's voices.

"God damn it!" I blurted.

"Why, Webster!" the startled phone protested.

"I'm sorry, Bethany," I said in hasty repentance. "Didn't mean those naughty words for Teacher, of course. This seems to be one of those times when everything seems bent on going wrong and annoying hell out of me—excepting you, Bethany, always excepting you. Where are you, darling?"

"At home. I thought you'd like to know I have Julie here."

"Julie there?"

"Lydia left her with me just a little while ago. She seemed pretty upset, Web—Lydia, I mean. She said she simply had to see you but hadn't been able to reach you by phone. Don't worry about Julie, though—she's tucked into a bunk and already asleep, snug as a bunny."

"What's bothering Lydia this time?" I asked it not quite in banter: "A bellyache?"

"No, she seemed well enough." Bethany couldn't know, of course, how exasperating this otherwise good news was. "It's something special this time and apparently serious, although Lydia didn't explain—except to say as she went rushing right back out again that she'd be 'simply *hours*' at the district attorney's office."

I echoed it, my voice sounding a little hollow: "District attorney's office?"

"That's what she said, Web. Apparently Griff had called her in. But what on earth for, I wonder?"

"Damned if I have the faintest idea," I answered. "All right, I'll rush to her rescue, as usual. Anyway I'm glad Julie's with you, Bethany, and I'll see you both bright and early in the morning."

"Doubly a pleasure," Bethany said, her voice smiling. "Good night, Webster."

Walking rapidly toward Court Street, inwardly in a ferment, I thought it would be just like Lydia, damn her, to start having her fatal cramps right there in the district attorney's office.

Lydia's new royal-blue Lincoln sat sparkling in the shine of Griff's windows. Griff's grimy pre-war Chevy was almost lost in the gloom behind a white coupé of the State Police pa-

trol. Two uniformed troopers sat inside the "ghost car," their hat-straps tucked under their handsome chins, waiting for something—and watching me with what seemed a quietly alert official interest as I opened the D.A.'s door.

In his quick-trigger way Griff turned to face me. A woman was sitting there in the waiting room and he was standing over her, having evidently been questioning her—which suggested that his rear offices were fully occupied. The woman sat in a straight chair, hatless, her back turned toward me. At the click of the latch Griff had checked himself in mid-sentence and had straightened, instantly ready to block my unwelcome advance.

"I'm busy here, Web." Importantly so, too, his tenseness warned me. "Have you an interest in this case?"

"Could be." I tried a fraternal smile. "At least Lydia seems to have sent out another of her SOSs. Have I found her? What case do you mean?"

"Lydia's in no trouble here," Griff informed me. "All I want from her is information, if she has any. Would you mind, Web?"

"Mind what?"

"Letting me get on with my official business."

"In other words, I'm to clear out? Without seeing Lydia? Is that a quasi-judicial order?"

"Please, Web."

"I'll have to explain to her, of course, that the state's attorney refused her her right of counsel. Good night, Griff—and many thanks."

"No." This was the woman in the chair speaking. Turning to gaze at me, she protested quietly to Griff, "No, please, I want him to stay."

"As a lawyer?" Griff asked. "You haven't any need for one, Mrs. Doremus; you're not under arrest. I want to find out from you what happened, that's all."

Speaking with a faint accent—she was Polish, I recalled—she insisted, "No matter, I want him to stay, please."

Griffith West frowned down at her and she remained placidly immovable. In her quiet way she was a woman of strength—as indeed she must be in order to endure more than twenty

years of marriage to the irascible Sylvester Doremus. She had a peasant-bred simplicity and she was tidy, with every hair brushed in place, her cheap black dress expertly mended, her black oxfords cracked but shining. Mrs. Doremus, although small, could hold her own against odds, including privations, husbandly afflictions, or, if the occasion should require it, the district attorney.

Griff sensed this and astutely yielded in order to avoid antagonizing a source of information. "All right, Mrs. Doremus. All right with you, Web?"

"Why not? Since you say Mrs. Doremus doesn't really need a lawyer it should be an easy assignment, just my kind."

I took a chair, figuring that this move would also keep me abreast of the night's developments involving Lydia.

Griff said, "I'm not sure so far just what's cooking here, except that there was some trouble in the Doremus home tonight and it looks serious. You'll get the drift easily enough as I go over it."

"Fine. Just answer the district attorney's questions with the truth, Mrs. Doremus, when it seems useful—and otherwise don't answer him at all."

Griff flicked me with one of his swift frowns. "I'm sure Mrs. Doremus has no desire whatever to conceal the facts," he asserted earnestly, then turned back to her. "Now we'll get this part all cleared up in a minute or two, then I'll ask the troopers to take you home. You say it was the middle of the afternoon, about three o'clock, when the doctor came back from seeing patients. Then what did he do?"

"Drank."

Evidently Mrs. Doremus intended to answer with as few words as possible. Griff referred to notes he had scribbled while questioning her before my arrival.

"After making his rounds Dr. Doremus likes to relax with a bottle, is that it?"

"He gets himself drunk every night," Mrs. Doremus said. "Every day as soon as he thinks he's finished with the patients he starts with the bottle."

"And this afternoon he drank a little more heavily than usual, apparently because he was in a bad mood."

Mrs. Doremus nodded. "He brought with him home a new bottle and pretty soon most of it is gone."

"What had put him in his bad mood, Mrs. Doremus?"

"Anything at all will do this."

"Had he quarreled with you over something?"

"With him I do not quarrel. Most times I do not even listen."

"Had he had a disagreement with your daughter Verna?"

"If so, I did not hear."

"Anyway he'd brought home a bottle and began hitting it pretty hard."

In Crossgate it was generally known that Sylvester Doremus's practice was small and that a substantial part of his meager income went for liquor, so Griff didn't bear on this point. He'd taken an interest in this particular bottle.

"Where did he get it, Mrs. Doremus?"

After glancing at me she answered hesitantly, "From Verna."

"That is, since liquor is rationed in this state, and one person's allotment isn't enough for the doctor, he uses your ration and Verna's as well, and today's bottle was Verna's. You say he brought it home this afternoon when finishing his rounds?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Doremus—this is important—had that bottle been opened before it came into your husband's possession?"

"Why should it?" she said. "Verna does not touch this stuff."

Griff didn't try to pin her down on that. "So the doctor had come home and had had some drinks. He'd begun behaving a little strangely, you said, and he went on drinking faster. Pretty soon he began to get sort of violent. He mumbled, saying things you couldn't understand, and acted wilder—began throwing himself around and resisting your efforts to control him." Griff paused. "Mrs. Doremus, you're sure you can't remember anything definite he said?"

She seemed to stiffen her spine. "No. It was all crazy talk."

"In fact you began to think your husband had actually gone insane. He seemed dangerous. You grew so afraid of him that you phoned Verna at the Lindley place—she'd gone back there meanwhile. Verna rushed over to help you and found her stepfather raving. She phoned the State Police barracks. By

the time the troopers arrived your husband had quieted down. He seemed to have fallen into a semi-conscious state."

"Drunk," said Cora Doremus.

"He seemed to be overcome by the liquor, yes. The troopers, however, decided he might be sick rather than merely intoxicated, so they called in Dr. Bray; and the doctor, not able to bring your husband out of it, had him transferred to the hospital, where he's remaining under treatment at this moment."

Griff peered at Cora Doremus and to all this she said simply, "Yes."

"Mrs. Doremus," the district attorney inquired earnestly, "what do you think is the *real* cause of your husband's sickness?"

Her answer was unequivocal: "Too much drink."

"But have you any reason," Griff insisted, "to suspect something might be *wrong* with the liquor he drank?"

"Drinking so much for so many years," Mrs. Doremus said, inflexibly convinced, "that's what was wrong with it."

Griff straightened. "I appreciate your co-operation, Mrs. Doremus. This is being a tough night for you and I won't keep you any longer."

She made a point of thanking me sincerely for nothing. In courteously attempting to escort her out Griff was left out-distanced. She headed straight for the door with her quick short steps and in opening it needed no assistance, particularly not from Griff, who was hardly bigger than she was. It was Mrs. Doremus herself, not the district attorney in her rear, who instructed the troopers to taxi her home. Griff had to let her go and turned back soberly frowning.

"That's all for you, too, Web." Since I made no move to leave he added pointedly, "Good night, counsellor."

"Explain to Lydia that you left me no choice, will you, Griff?"

At that moment the inner door connecting with Griff's private office opened quickly and Lydia herself appeared. She looked annoyed and Voguishly smart, her custom-tailored suit topped off tonight with a jacket of platinum fox. I searched her thin patrician face for signs of distress but her expression was purely the sort of haughty indignation which she usually

directed at unimpressionable salesgirls or overworked waitresses.

"Really, I think I've been hellish patient. Oh, Webb, you're here at last. I'm so glad. Find out why he's holding me here like this, Web. He can't make me wait indefinitely, not all night, can he?"

I fixed Griff with a stern eye. "The lady may stay up practically all night in a supper club, but that's by choice. What are you trying to do, bore her silly? Are you or are you not being unconstitutional?"

Griff, in no humor for persiflage, gave Lydia an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, very sorry. After all, Mrs. Doremus's husband is in a serious condition at the hospital and I felt I should finish with her first. You'll be all through here and free to go inside ten more minutes if you'll just tell us what you can about Syl Doremus's actions this afternoon. Let's go into my office, Lydia. There, take my chair, Lydia. Now if you don't mind, Lydia, make it brief but as clear as you can—"

Lydia sat behind the district attorney's desk while the district attorney sat in a visitors' stiff-backed chair and I tried vainly to find a comfortable angle in another.

"I simply don't know *what* you're getting at. Yes, I did call Dr. Doremus to Lindwood this afternoon because I wasn't feeling too well, but what that could have to do—"

"Please, Lydia," Griff said, a bit less deferentially. "Let me decide what it may or may not have to do with something else. As a patient of Dr. Doremus's at your home where also his daughter works, you can help me to fill in a picture of his movements this afternoon. In fact, you see, you're the only disinterested person who can do this for me, and it may turn out to be very important. Now if you'll just give me your co-operation—"

"But of *course!*" Lydia said. "I still can't guess what in the world you're driving at, but— All right, then. I went shopping this morning. At Strawbridge's I found the most stunning—but you wouldn't be interested in that. I found myself feeling headachey and thought I might be coming down with the flu, so I cut it short and came back here, just simply exhausted."

I listened closely, more closely than either Griff or Lydia

could suspect, and watched her thin face. She spoke in her habitually breathless manner while Griff made notes rapidly, trying to keep up with her.

"Then when I got home I fell into bed simply *dead*—"

I winced at her emphasis.

"—and decided I'd better have Dr. Doremus look at me, so I phoned for him. I really don't know why I haven't changed to a more modern doctor—a younger man like that Victor Bray who I hear is so careful and gentle. I suppose it's because I've always had Dr. Doremus since I was a little girl. He does know me, after all that's important, and he's never so busy as other doctors these days who have scarcely time to glance at you before rushing on to the next patient; and then too Dr. Doremus lives so close, it takes him only a minute or two in an emergency and I do seem to need him in such a hurry sometimes—"

"So you phoned for him after you'd returned home this afternoon," Griff put in firmly, "and he came. Verna was in the house at the time?"

"Yes, she was. I give her Thursday afternoons off but she rarely does anything with them—just hangs around, apparently having nothing else to do. Today I was glad of it; I'd most probably need her. So finally Dr. Doremus came. I was sitting up by then, although I still felt just terribly exhausted. It's strange my metabolism tests don't show a low thyroid when I'm sure that's exactly what the trouble is. Anyway Dr. Doremus's call was the usual thing. He gave me some pills and we talked a while. He makes his calls a sort of social occasion, you know—we enjoy exchanging gossip."

"Where was Verna?"

"In the kitchen. I rang for her and she came right up."

"What did you want her for?"

"More hot coffee."

I watched Lydia's face with almost painful intensity and wondered vaguely why Griff didn't boost the thermostat a little. It was chilly in these bleak offices. Unaware of this, however, Griff hitched forward in his seat like a fisherman feeling a nibble.

"Coffee? Tell me about that in detail."

"Why," Lydia said, "there was nothing unusual about it. I

love hot coffee—can't stand it cold, though—and always have a jug of it in my room. Dr. Doremus loves it too, next best to bourbon, so I always offer him a cup when he comes—that is, when I'm well enough to remember it. Today there was just one cupful left in the jug, so of course I poured it for him and then rang for Verna to bring up more. She keeps a pot hot on the kitchen stove."

Both my hands were pressed hard on my knees as I leaned toward her. *The sugar! The sugar, Lydia? What about that one teaspoonful of sugar I'd left in the bottom of the bowl especially for you, so thoroughly mixed with a double dose of poison?*

"So I simply told Verna to put more coffee in the jug from the pot in the kitchen."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, and to refill the sugar bowl."

I had questions to yell at Lydia but I didn't dare ask them, couldn't risk any attempt to voice them even in a normal tone. Griff, keenly alert, didn't miss the point here. I blessed him grimly for wanting to get it clear.

"You gave Dr. Doremus the last of the coffee in the jug? Did he use sugar in it?"

"Yes," Lydia said. "He takes his coffee just as I do, no cream but a little sugar. There was just one teaspoonful of sugar left in the bowl, so I put it in his cup." Then Lydia asked, in a tone of passing puzzlement, "Is this really important?"

Really important, she'd asked!

I stared at her, full of a wild consternation, keeping a grimace off my face, keeping my manner pleasantly casual just as if this were of no importance at all.

"It could be important, yes," Griff said gravely but indecisively.

Now I could quit looking for signs of expected distress in Lydia's fine face. I would hear no bell of deadly significance tonight. No ambulance would rush to Lydia's aid in vain just yet. A tombstone engraved with Lydia's name would not be required quite so soon as I'd anticipated. At the moment she was feeling normally well.

"Lydia," I heard myself asking, "you're feeling quite well again now, are you?"

"Oh, yes, thank you so *much*, Web," she answered, smiling brightly. "It's so charming of you to ask."

Just like Lydia, damn her, to mistake my secret fury for solicitous affection! Damn her from here to hell! She was feeling, oh, quite well now and it was so charming of me to have asked. Oh, quite well indeed. And why not? It wasn't inside Lydia that the poison had gone to work. Instead, it was at this very moment destroying the red blood of a man for whom I had never intended it. A ghastly trick of circumstances had turned its tortures on an innocent man—while the insufferable Lydia remained oh, quite well.

I sat there with a fixed smile that felt hideous, nodding like a penny-in-the-slot oracle, cursing myself for an unforgivable bungler, and heard Griff asking, "How much coffee did you and Dr. Doremus drink?"

"We each had two cups."

"Then both you and Dr. Doremus drank the same coffee and used the same sugar."

"Yes."

"Well, then, that eliminates that."

So the true cause of Dr. Doremus's collapse was dismissed as too unlikely!

Lydia was becoming annoyed again. "Just what *is* behind all these questions, may I ask?"

"I'm trying to pin down a certain idea, Lydia, but I can't explain just yet what it is. Please go on."

"Go on? What else could there be? Dr. Doremus left, that's all."

"Didn't he stop a moment in the kitchen with Verna?"

"I think he did. He drops in at Lindwood rather often, you know. On his way home usually. He's always growling at Verna, when he isn't outright quarreling with her, but he likes her cooking anyway. He likes to spend half an hour in my kitchen every day or so, eating a snack, perhaps getting in a drink or two; I don't know. Anyway I never minded it and if he did linger there with Verna this afternoon, on his way out after seeing me, I didn't particularly notice." Lydia settled her shoulders inside her platinum fox, a woman of true fortitude doing her duty in the cause of justice. "Now, what else?"

"I think that's all, Lydia." Griff rose with a disarming smile.

"I'm very grateful. You won't mind repeating this to a stenographer tomorrow or next day—will you—at a more convenient hour, of course?"

"Now see here." Not to be imposed on, Lydia quickly put the district attorney back in his place. "Just what use do you intend making of this information I've given you? Just where does it leave me?"

"Whatever use I make of it, Lydia," Griff answered firmly, "I'll be acting upon my official responsibilities without personal bias. I may or may not call you as a witness in a trial involving criminal charges against another person. If I do you'll have to testify; but that's the most you have to worry about."

"Oh," Lydia said. "I don't like it but I suppose if I must I must."

"Yes," Griff said. "Thank you again, Lydia, and good night."

Lydia did not answer in words; one of her automatic smiles sufficed. She plucked up her gloves, tucked her handbag under an arm and waited for me to open first the office door for her, then the street door.

"You won't need an escort home, will you, Lydia?"

"You're being so sweet to me all of a sudden, Web, dear!" she said gaily. "But fact is, I've a date."

My brother's murderer went humming off in her yacht-on-wheels—to join Ernie Reece, no doubt. I gazed after her with a sourness I could taste, reflecting that my plans had miscarried disastrously not in merely one way, but in two ways at once. Not only was a blameless man suffering the agonies I'd reserved to Lydia, but also the last of the poison was gone now—I had no more left for another try at her.

Griff's phone had rung and I turned back to find him listening earnestly to a voice on the wire. He responded with brief cryptic questions. "Just now? . . . Anything definite? . . . No statement? . . ." and added a succinct "Thanks." Then, disconnecting, he gazed at me without speaking for so long that I felt myself shrinking inside my suit.

"What now, Griff?"

"Doc Doremus is dead."

"Dead?"

"Died just now."

I couldn't trust myself to comment.

"Odd thing," Griff said. "Only this afternoon I was wishing for a good murder case. Now I've got one."

"Murder?" I kept staring at him. "What do you mean, murder?"

"What do I mean?" Griff came decisively to his feet. "If Sylvester Doremus died of drinking it wasn't the alcohol that got him. It was something else, something deadly put into that last bottle of liquor for the specific purpose of killing him."

Griff turned energetically to another door and stepped into the adjoining office. A young woman sat in a corner there—Verna Doremus. All this time she'd been sitting in here alone, waiting. She lifted her colorless face to Griff as he went to her and she heard him with no change of expression except a mild shadow of bewilderment darkening her naïve blue eyes.

"I'm sorry, Verna," Griff said, "but I'm going to have to hold you without bail on suspicion of first degree homicide."

After a dazed moment Verna asked, "What does that mean, Mr. West?"

"It means you're going to be put into jail and kept there, at least for a few weeks but probably for the rest of your life."

"But—why, Mr. West?"

Griff frowned at her. "Why? You know the answer to that one, Verna. Because you murdered your stepfather with poison."

Verna Doremus sat utterly still, too dazed, too frightened and too timid to blurt out a protest.

CHAPTER FIVE

LYDIA WAS on my phone next morning before I'd finished shaving.

"Web, this is just a perfectly horrible thing."

"You mean about Verna?"

"What else? What's Griff West thinking of, I'd like to know. Now I'm stuck here in this big house with no help at all."

"I'm sure Verna's sorry she has to leave you in such a fix. Her own troubles are comparatively trifling. Just a first-degree homicide charge."

"Don't be sarcastic, Web. I know how serious this is even better than you do."

"Do you really, Lydia?"

"Yes. After all, I'm the one who must take care of this huge house and I do have a hell of a time getting domestic help. What on earth will I do, Web?"

"Go to employment agencies, put ads in the papers—the obvious things. Meanwhile I'll try to get Verna back to Lindwood as soon as it can be managed—not simply to solve your employment problem, however, Lydia, but for Verna's sake entirely."

"Oh, Web, I'll really appreciate that. Will it take long?"

"My God, Lydia! Good-by!"

Having fumed and cursed the whole restless night over a misdirected cup of coffee I now brewed myself an exceptionally strong batch of the stuff. The cup in my hand enabled me to visualize all too vividly a cup in Sylvester Doremus's—his last, God rest his cantankerous soul. I felt this morning as if I'd been on a week-end bender, although I'd had nothing at all to drink, and the blistering coffee didn't help; in fact it put a queasy sensation behind my belt. I abandoned the kitchen.

On any other morning I'd have thought it the start of a fine day. Crossgate had that pristine aspect which gives a small town a wholesome cheerfulness like the opening of an operetta at the blooming of each new day. The weather was sweetly warm, the sky was pure sky-blue, the exhilaration of spring was everywhere, Verna Doremus was wrongfully jailed for a murder and my mood was black.

Griff West's hard-used sedan sat in front of his office just as if it hadn't stirred. Crossing his cheerless waiting room I opened the door of his sanctorum in the rear and put my head through.

Peering at me, Griff said, "I hope someday to have a private office that's private."

I went in regardless and faced him across the notes scattered over his desk.

"You don't seriously believe Verna murdered Doc Doremus, do you, Griff?"

He sat back. "Counsellor, who are you representing?"

"Nobody. Except possibly me."

"If you've been retained by anyone in this case, Web, I'm not going to talk to you about it."

"The fact that Mrs. Doremus asked me to stick around for a few minutes last night doesn't mean I'm retained as Verna's lawyer. At least I don't see it that way. My interest is personal—but strong, strong enough to override a few rebuffs."

"It doesn't entitle you to use up the district attorney's time whenever you happen to feel like shooting the breeze."

"I'm serious, Griff. I can't believe Verna would actually kill the doctor."

Griff gazed straight at me. "Why can't you believe it?"

I swallowed and answered. "I'm convinced she'd never do such a thing."

"What convinces you?"

My face grew warm. I was completely convinced of Verna's innocence by reason of my own guilt, of course; but this was hardly a point I could argue.

"If it wasn't Verna who murdered the doc," Griff persisted, "then who did?"

This question was more effectively evaded. "That's just the point, Griff. Who, including Verna, would have a good reason for killing the old guy? I can't think of a single soul. It's not a case of murder at all." I added, "Who decides that question at this stage of the game anyhow? Doremus himself was our coroner, but he can't very well give us an official pronouncement on his own demise. So who coronates over the coroner?"

"That angle of it's up in the air," Griff said. "The question never came up before. I'm looking into the law on it. Meanwhile I don't think anyone will object if I authorize Victor Bray to take over the coroner's duties temporarily."

"Certainly a capable chap," I agreed. "He'll probably do a better job than his predecessor could have done—certainly a better one than the coroner we had before Doremus—a veteri-

nary. Think you'll get the family's permission for an autopsy?"

"Permission in a case as dubious as this one? Don't need it." Griff spoke flatly. "Dr. Bray has already performed the autopsy."

Usually the law moved with ponderous slowness, but in this case, of all cases, the D.A. wasn't wasting a minute.

"Vic found abundant evidence of advanced chronic alcoholism, of course?" I said. "Cirrhosis of the liver? Degeneration of the——"

"He found Dr. Doremus's blood in a condition which means poison to me, Web." Griff aimed his pencil between my eyes. "I wasn't eager, either, to believe that girl killed her stepfather. Always before, I felt sorry for her. But I don't any longer, not now, not as a murderer. Stop and think, Web."

"I'm thinking," I said wryly.

"That coffee Doremus drank with Lydia in her bedroom—it's logically eliminated as the source of the poison. Ask yourself, how else could it have gotten inside Doremus's stomach, then? There are two possible ways, Web, and only two. First, in food given him by Verna in the kitchen at Lindwood. Or, second, in the bottle of liquor also handed him by Verna. That's all. Absolutely there are no other possibilities."

None except the true one which he was logically ignoring.

"So who poisoned Syl Doremus?" Griff asked with a cynically twisted smile. "Think it over impartially, as I've done, Web—not overlooking the fact that Verna had various poisons within easy reach."

"Had she? Where?"

"In her father's office, of course. All she needed to do was sneak a bottle of something while he was out——"

"Just a minute, Griff. You're off the beam there." I seized on this as a sound point to drive home. "What on earth would a doctor use poison for? Of course, almost anything will kill you if you swallow enough of it—including alcohol and even common table salt—but as for really powerful poisons, like cyanide—— Why would a doctor keep such stuff on hand? A physician is devoted not to the practice of killing his patients, but to curing them; remember? So there wasn't really any poison easily available to Verna, at least not on her father's shelves."

No poison was any more available to her than it would be to you—or me.”

Griff squirmed, mentally noting that he must find an answer to this objection; and I went on to hit the subject another blow.

“Just what did Vic Bray’s autopsy show as to the nature of your imaginary poison, Griff?”

He gazed at me in disturbed thought, not answering.

“Have you identified it?” I insisted.

He rippled his finger tips on his blotter.

“Did Doremus really tarry a few minutes in the kitchen at Lindwood before leaving for home? Did Verna really give him something to eat there? Are there scraps of that food left? If so, have you had it analyzed?”

Griff’s drumming quickened.

“How about the liquor left in that last bottle of Doremus’s? Any traces of poison in it?”

Griff asked without a smile, “Are you trying to milk me? Sure you aren’t spying for the defense, whoever that may turn out to be?”

“You know me, Griff—easy-going until aroused. I simply can’t see Verna getting put through the wringer for this. She didn’t act like a murderess yesterday afternoon when her father began going to pieces. Remember, he was still able to talk at the time she phoned for help—able to accuse her, if he had any reason to do it.”

“He was too drunk and too sick to know what had hit him.”

“All the more reason, then, to believe the whole thing would have been written off as the long-expected end of a case of chronic alcoholism if the troopers hadn’t reported it to you. Nevertheless Verna called in the law even before calling in another doctor. And why not? She thought her stepfather was raving drunk. She had nothing to hide from the law, no reason to fear it. That was the act of an innocent young woman.”

“Or an overly optimistic one. People who murder other people often have mistaken notions about how smart they are.” Griff aimed his sharp-pointed pencil at me again. “It’s possible I’m acquainted with a few more factors in this case than you are, Web.”

"So you're going to press the case against Verna regardless."

"I'd be remiss in my duty if I didn't," Griff frowned. "Look, counsellor. My assistant is sick in bed with the grippe, I've got to run this whole damn office alone and with a first degree homicide on my hands I'm busy as all get out."

"Take it a bit easier, then. Recognize the fact that you actually haven't a murder on your hands at all."

"Cut it out, Web." Griff wasn't smiling. "So long."

"One trouble with me," I said, opening the door, "I can be hard as hell to get rid of."

Like Lydia, I reflected as I left.

The Doremus murder case was not only the biggest event to come Griff West's way; it would undoubtedly stand out on his record as the most important of his whole tenure. I had sensed the awakened zest in him, his eagerness to build it up into a spectacular court contest—one he fully intended to win. For Griff it was what the doctor ordered.

Not Dr. Doremus, of course.

A character whom I was willing to avoid this morning—Crossgate's own bogey-man, Sam Wregg—stood just outside my office door.

Sam's long frothy beard and collar-length hair stirred in the morning breeze as he waited beside my doorstep. Three or four times a year he appeared with something roughly approximating a haircut but otherwise his hair grew rank chiefly because the town's barbers had unanimously banned him from their shops and he didn't often remember to hack it off himself. His chocolate-brown hound's-tooth jacket and his tuxedo trousers were not quite a stylish mismatch, although, considering each garment separately, Sam was a bit fussy about his clothes; in pawing over people's trash piles he chose only the best.

His home also possessed in generous measure the one quality he insisted upon: solitude. He lived in a shaky dirt-floored hut which he'd built of scrap lumber, saplings and dump-heap tin deep in the woods stretching between Lindwood and the Doremus house. It was located just this side of the Lindley property line. Bruce had acquired Sam Wregg with the Tyler

deed and had allowed him to stay on unmolested, feeling a hermit on the place to be a picturesque asset and useful as a self-sustaining guardian of the wood lots. Lydia, after seriously threatening for a time to have Sam put off, had lately let the issue ride, finding other matters of possession more engaging. Syl Doremus on his part had counted Sam a desirable neighbor and a kindred soul and had often visited his shack. I could also concede the Waldenian virtues of Sam's simple way of life, although I felt that plumbing might be acquired without a sacrifice of philosophical integrity.

With his waggishly crafty eyes Sam Wregg watched me approaching. He had his basket slung under one arm, as always, and this morning it overflowed with early wildflowers, each a beauty. As long ago as I could remember Sam had acquired the little money he needed by selling the manna of the wilderness—wild berries, too, mushrooms, nuts, fruits, a few Christmas trees and wreaths. Every day his trip to the market paid him with a bag of groceries, a few coins besides and an hour of curbstone gossip. "Man's gotta keep posted on the world's foolishness," he'd observe. The scent of gossip had brought him into town unusually early this morning and his bright black eyes glittered as he button-holed me.

"Is it so, what I hear, Mr. Lindley—Syl Doremus is gone?"

"Yes, he is, Sam."

To my astonishment Sam Wregg cackled merrily over the news of his closest friend's death. "Goes to show," he opined, wagging his furry head. "Goes to show, you gotta watch out."

Not amused, I asked shortly, "Watch out for what?"

"For y'rself, o' course. Yessir. Syl should've watched out a little sharper. No use feelin' worry about him dyin', though. I'm gonna die too someday. So're you. If there's one thing everybody does the whole world over without exception, it's die."

"Quite universal," I agreed. "Perfectly natural."

"Mrs. Doremus, I guess she's glad Syl's done vexin' her. But Verna, though, Verna'll miss him in her way. She's a nice girl. I like Verna. Funny thing about her, y' know."

I gazed hard into his ancient imp's face. "What's funny about Verna?"

"Never once saw her walkin' in the woods."

"What do you mean, Sam?"

Elusive, cryptic gleams darted about in Sam's eyes. "Lots o' woods on her father's property, reachin' from practically her back door, but never once saw her out there. Not even when the strawberries was ripe—best-eatin' strawberries on earth, right there for the pickin', but she just left 'em for the birds and rabbits. Verna never got interested in nature, I guess. Not that kinda nature, anyway. Liked the village better—or better still the city, where she hardly ever got to go. Never once saw her walkin' in the woods and it wasn't because of bein' scareda me none, 'cause she wasn't ever taught to be, like mosta the kids around. You neither."

"Me? Scared of you, Sam? Why should I be?"

"Didn't mean it that way," Sam Wregg said impatiently. "Meant I never saw you in the woods nowhere neither, not once since you grewed up."

"I suppose that's true, but I don't know what you're drivin' at."

"Ain't drivin' at nothin' except what I already said. I see what goes on in other places as well's the woods—see plenty that people don't think I see."

He leered at me and I frowned back into those mischievously glittering eyes of Sam Wregg's and said, "I don't get this. What's on your mind? Something about Sylvester Doremus? About Verna?"

"I already *told* you what's on my mind," Sam answered with a flash of pettishness. "You don't have to pay me no attention if you don't want to."

Knowing he'd prattle on for hours unless cut short, I said, "Well, Sam, I am pretty busy this morning," and moved on to my office door.

"Sure, sure." Sam raised his irate voice behind me. "I ain't a man worth listenin' to. Go on, Mr. Lindley, go right along your way. Your time's too valuable to waste on an idle old chatterbox like me." He added as a general observation, equally loud, "By dang, this world's fulla people all as busy as the very devil bein' fools!"

He went shuffling off with his basket of flowers, chortling derisively in his resentment. Watching him go, I warned myself not to hear dangerous insinuations in innocent, random

remarks. I'd expected to have one tender spot to guard—my guilty knowledge; and now I had an unexpected second—the injustice of Verna's position—making it twice as ticklish a proposition to appear irreproachably normal, doubly essential to keep my growing skittishness under control.

I stepped into my office and Ruth Carey said, "Hiya."

A vital twenty-two, Ruth was my secretary, stenographer, office boy, desk-duster-offer, general factotum and a pleasure to have around. She had definite ideas in her pretty head about men, women and what they should do about each other. Six mornings a week I was astonished to find her still here instead of suddenly married; but as I reminded myself, she had ideas.

She sat at her desk at the front window, from which I'd watched the speeding ambulance last night, and informed me, thumb indicating the closed inner door. "You've got a visitor in there."

This three-room suite, still a Lawyer Lindley's office since the day my father had hung out his shingle, was a wing of a house that had remained otherwise a private dwelling until last year, when the main section had been converted into more offices for the AAA and the Internal Revenueurs.

"Isn't that something about Verna Doremus?" Ruth went on with the enviable dawn-freshness of youth. "Nobody's very surprised, though. Fact is, everybody's wondering how she ever managed to wait this long before bumping the old hellion off."

I stopped short. "You mean everybody's simply assuming she really did it?"

"Well, didn't she? I mean everybody I talked to on my way to work seemed to think so, anyway—if you can call this work. They all say, 'Good morning, did you hear Verna finally let the old doc have it last night?' Nobody ever got warmed up to Verna, she's so shy, so there's not much sympathy for her, even so. They seem to think the doctor was a tough guy to get along with, but not so tough as to deserve getting knocked off for it."

"Put me down as an exception, Ruthie. I don't believe Verna's guilty. In fact, I don't even think it was a murder."

Ruth smiled. "That's fine with me. Gee, does it mean we're

going to be busy for a change? You going to defend Verna?"

"No."

The smiled trickled away. "No?"

"No."

"You *aren't*?"

"No."

"Not as badly as we *need* a good big case?"

"No."

"My gosh!" She was round-eyed. "Why not?"

"To begin with, nobody's asked me. If I'm asked I'll refuse."

"But why?"

"Verna needs a better lawyer than I am."

"Well, my gosh sakes," Ruth murmured, deflating. "No other lawyer in town would say a thing like that. One of 'em's going to jump at the chance. I guess you know, Mr. Webster Lindley, I'm making more money in this office this week than you are. Last week too. And the week before that. I always did think you were sort of odd, but you seem to keep getting odder all the time."

"With me it's an occupational affliction."

I stepped into my office and found my visitor was Bethany.

"Morning, Webster!"

She looked even younger this morning with a red ribbon in her hair. I envied her her refreshing appearance of pleasant tranquillity; behind that high forehead it was always a beautifully clear day. A fine girl, Bethany, in harmony with herself—rather too fine to associate with a murderer, especially one too inept to call his shots.

"Aren't you late for school?"

"It'll get along nicely without me for a little while. This is much more important. What do you think? How good are her chances?"

"Verna's? Nobody can say. Whatever's going to happen to Verna, it rests on a thousand unpredictable elements, including sheer luck. Also, a lot depends on how obstinate Griff West can get."

"So far as Griff goes, you've put him back on his heels in the courtroom before now, Webster, and you can do it

again this time. He rushes around a lot, but in your quiet way——”

“Just a minute, Bethany.” Her mistake was one I must clear up fast. “I’m not Verna’s lawyer.”

Her smile began fading and she blinked once. “But of course you are, Webster.”

“No, Bethany; to the best of my knowledge I’m not.”

“But Cora Doremus told me you are. Only this morning, just a little while ago. She told me she’s wondering, among all her other worries, how to scrape up enough money——”

“She’s made a wrong assumption, Bethany. Last night she merely asked me to stick around while Griff questioned her, but that’s no basis——”

“I drove over to see her,” Bethany broke in. “With her husband dead and her daughter in jail I knew she must have had a pretty rough night of it. She really had, with state cops in the place until three this morning and Griff poking around inside for evidence. The one thing that’s holding her up is her confidence in you as Verna’s lawyer.”

“I’m sorry, but——”

“Her instinct was to turn to you rather than any other attorney in town because you’re closer to the whole terrible thing. You know Verna better, chiefly because she’s taken so much care of Julie——”

“Verna’s almost as much a stranger to me as she is to everyone else, Bethany. I’ll go right out to see Cora Doremus and explain she really hasn’t a lawyer so far.”

Bethany gazed at me in hurt confusion. “But why must you do that, Webster, when she’s counting on you?”

“One reason is that in talking with the D.A. about the case I’ve already assured him I’m not associated with the defense. If I should pop up now as Verna’s lawyer he’d be thoroughly justified in accusing me of unethical conduct.”

Bethany shook her head a little. “I don’t understand this. It’s not like you. Always before you’ve been above such high-sounding evasions as ‘unethical conduct.’ We both know there’s something else far more important than that: Verna herself.”

“Admitted, Bethany. Verna’s in a damn serious spot. She

needs the best legal talent she can hire. In all honesty I must insist I'm not that."

"But Mrs. Doremus doesn't want anyone else, Webster. She said Verna asked her to get you. They both believe you've already taken the case, and to them it's the one thing they feel reassured about. It would seem you're backing out, letting them down for no reason at all."

"Damn it all, Bethany, Cora Doremus should not have assumed she'd arranged the whole matter simply by asking me to stick around Griff's outer office last night. I can't hold myself bound to the conclusions other people mistakenly jump to."

"Webster," Bethany said, gazing straight at me. "When are you going to tell me your *real* reason for wanting to refuse the case?"

I dropped into my chair and sat there wordless. Already I'd revealed as much of my real reason as I dared. As a lawyer who mistrusted all legal artifices I felt I lacked the forensic dexterity necessary to saving Verna Doremus from this most serious of all criminal charges. I had unwittingly made a predicament for her which called for more skill than I possessed to unmake it.

"Bethany, every venireman in a case involving the death penalty is asked whether he favors capital punishment. Many sincerely answer no. They wouldn't mind serving as a juror on any other sort of case, but they don't want to be nagged by life-and-death doubts; they'd rather not waken in the middle of the night wondering in a cold sweat whether it was a ghastly mistake to send that man to the electric chair. But it's still harder on the man whose handling of the defense is answered by the death sentence for his client. It's never happened to me, thank God. I've always avoided it."

"A surgeon facing an emergency operation can't let himself feel like that. He's got to go ahead and do his best."

"It isn't a fair comparison, Bethany. Medicine is science; the law is hog-latin gibberish, whereby the patient entrusts his life to conjury. If its pronouncement doesn't spring from blind emotion it's based on tricky technicalities. I'm not an actor and I don't profess to be any kind of wizard—not when a human life depends on a one-time show."

"But somebody's got to do it," Bethany said softly.

"Somebody will, and gladly. Every other attorney in town is drooling at the mouth right now, waiting to welcome this case into his door. But not me."

She was silent, at a loss.

"I'm afraid, Bethany. In all candor I must confess I'm afraid of failure. The charge if proved calls for a mandatory death sentence. My failure would be a little too rough on the defendant."

Bethany said quietly, "I never expected this of you, Webster."

"Don't be disappointed in me. I don't care a hell of a lot what others may think of me; but I'd rather not disillusion you."

I'd heard the street door opening and somebody coming into the waiting room. The voices of two men rumbled as they spoke to Ruth. The connecting door opened and Ruth smiled in.

"Should I let Mr. Dredger and Mr. Bascom barge in on you now or should I make 'em wait?"

A voice behind her boomed, "You in there, Beth? Get out of our way, there, Ruthie, child; I've got a pocket full of money for that shiftless boss of yours."

The big man who pushed his way in first was Dave Dredger, editor of the Crossgate Courier. Dave wore his invariable blue-denim shirt under his open vest, and no tie. With his bush of uncombed silvery hair he appeared as formidable as a venerable bear. A man of violently righteous opinions, he possessed a snaggle-toothed typewriter that could, if the victim merited it, bite like a bulldog and leave a lifelong scar. Also the busiest man in Crossgate—being not only the Courier's editor but also its star reporter, advertising manager, circulation chief, photographer and press repairer—he seemed always turning from one unfinished job to a more urgent one. He tramped toward my desk as if having only a minute to spare.

Close behind him came another of our leading citizens, Timothy Bascom, the unbankerish president and chairman of the board of the Crossgate Trust Company.

In no way a cold-eyed, austere man of finance, Tim Bas-

com had a pink puckish face and such innate kindliness that he couldn't say no to any borrower; those who must be turned down heard the bad news from the cashier or a teller.

These two immediately began fishing money out of their coat pockets and piling the wadded, crumpled banknotes on the blotter in front of me.

"Wait a minute, Dave," I protested. "Keep this stuff, Tim."

Bethany had risen. "He says he won't help Verna, gentlemen."

Unhearing, they plucked more currency from the bottom corners of their pockets.

"Don't know how much is here, son, but she's all yours," Dave informed me. "Tim and I started out bright and early to do a little collectin'. People seem to want her to have a proper trial no matter how guilty they think she is. Look at this, will you?"

"Anything there from Lydia?" I inquired wryly.

"Said she'd help pay for any other lawyer but couldn't see why she should give money to you. Hah? Say something else, Web?"

"I said to ask Lydia again, then, and take this stuff to some other law office."

"What for?" This was Bascom explaining in his high-pitched voice, "That's your fee, Web. Can't expect you to work for free. Mrs. Doremus, she's got no way of paying you herself. Syl didn't even leave her his funeral expenses. 'T isn't much for handling a big case, I know, but as a starter—"

"Hah?" Dave Dredger broke in, cupping his bum ear, having suspected a sound from Bethany's direction. "Say something, Bethany?"

"Webster refuses to defend Verna," she repeated, her voice heavy.

"Refuses?" Dave boomed, scowling at me.

"Refuses!" Tim piped, scratching his head. "What's she talking about, Web? Can't refuse. For Verna's sake—"

"It's for Verna's sake I'm keeping out of it. Please understand that. I'm sincerely concerned for her. This is a case wherein I certainly don't want to hear a verdict of guilty. That's why I'm declining the case in favor of some other lawyer who's better qualified to do the job for her."

Dave and Tim stared at each other uncomprehendingly; then they both stared at me and Dave said, "How's it gonna look?"

"Why, she's a personal friend of yours—more so 'n any other lawyer in town," Tim squeaked. "Verna and your daughter Julie are real pals and everybody knows it. 'T won't look good, you turning your back on Verna like this. What's a matter with you, Web?"

There was that question again—Lydia's old favorite.

"One of the many things which are the matter with me," I answered with an edge on my voice as I leaned across the desk at them, "is that I can't fight a man tooth and claw in the courtroom and then slap him on the back and laugh with him during the recesses. My friendship with Griff West would get in my way—although it won't cramp Griff's style at all. I'd be at a serious disadvantage—"

"Cocky little pipsqueak," grumbled Dave Dredger, who had found the district attorney too unresponsive to the Courier's editorial persuasion. "Chance of a lifetime to get in there and teach him a lesson."

"Chance of a lifetime for Verna to die for a crime she never committed, too, Web," Tim pointed out. "Or maybe you think she's guilty."

I frowned at them both with my jaw clenched for a moment before answering. "No. No, I do not think Verna is guilty."

"But you got your doubts," Tim Bascom said sadly. "Is that it?"

I made it grimly clear. "No. I have not the slightest doubt that Verna is completely innocent."

"Then I don't get you, Web, son," Dave said in a troubled rumble. "You're sure she's not guilty and yet you won't help her to prove it. Why's that?"

"I've already tried to make it plain to Bethany—"

"What'll everybody think, you deserting Verna like this?" Tim said indignantly. "It'll go against her, make the whole thing look worse."

"Damn it all, I'm not deserting her!" I exploded. Wasn't it bad enough that I'd plunged Verna into her predicament?

Must they also force on me the responsibility for the much tougher job of getting her out of it? "I'll help all I possibly can—help her lawyer, I mean. Can't you see, I'll be freer to work for her, I'll have more time to dig into it if I'm not swamped by the details of preparing the case for trial?"

They couldn't see it. Tim Bascom pursed his lips, finding hitherto unsuspected flaws in my moral fiber. Dave Dredger mumbled, "By golly, Web, I got half a mind to write a piece about you"—meaning one of his haymaker editorials, the direst threat he could utter. Worst was the reproach in Bethany's unnaturally clouded face.

"Please don't look at me as if I'd just finished strapping Verna in the chair, Bethany."

"Perhaps you actually have," she said. "She can be found guilty with some other lawyer defending her. Then you may get to wondering if you couldn't have done better than he did after all."

I sat heavily in my chair.

"That does it. All right. I've been under a misapprehension all along. In spite of everything I've said it seems I really am Verna's lawyer anyhow."

They brightened instantly in inverse proportion to my own darkening misgivings. Dave Dredger drummed out his expressions of gratification and hope, Tim Bascom piped a gleeful "That'sa stuff!" and Bethany smiled, her bright self again, proud and trustful. When they'd hurried off I turned back to my desk to try dizzily to find a perspective on a worsened predicament.

Besides having a dead doctor on my conscience, I now faced the possibility of becoming twice responsible for the death of Verna Doremus as well—once by creating a murder charge for her to answer in my stead, again by failing to save her from its penalty.

Twenty seconds thereafter Ruth, in the front office, heard a resounding crash. Running to the connecting door, she saw my wastebasket in an astonishing place. It seemed to have soared from its accustomed spot beside my desk, to have flown across the room and knocked a hole in a rear window, where it was lodged on ragged points of glass.

"Good grief," she said, wide-eyed. "What happened to it?"

"I kicked it a little in passing—accidentally, of course," I explained shortly, not smiling. "Nothing to get upset about."

CHAPTER SIX

AS VERNA DOREMUS's lawyer I'd better lose no time getting busy.

It was a thoroughly uncertain assignment except in one way: I needn't feel the slightest skepticism as to the accused's rectitude. In the past I'd had more than one manifestly black-handed client who had never stopped insisting on his angelic innocence from arrest to final well-deserved incarceration; but this was ironically different. I would never, in fact, take on any case wherein I could presume with greater confidence that my client deserved acquittal.

"If you should need to get in touch with me, Ruthie," I said, reaching for my hat, "I'll be at the Doremus home. Gather that money off my desk, seal it in an unprinted envelope and leave it in the Doremus mailbox when nobody's noticing."

Ruth gave me her wide-eyed-kid look again. "This time it's the client, not the lawyer, who's getting the fee?"

"That's right."

"I give up," Ruth muttered. "A few more big important cases like this and you'll go bankrupt."

I left without attempting to explain. In my dual role of amateur poisoner and professional deliverer it was a little difficult to keep my moral values straight even to myself.

Ernie Reece had just parked his car near mine—a sporty cabriolet with its top booted down. He kept it in trim, its motor juiced up, its dents ironed out, its rust spots painted over. Ernie himself was abloom this morning, his hands scrubbed free of grease, his hair glistening in golden ripples. What with his box-shouldered sport jacket, pleated slacks

and suede bluchers, he seemed to have just emerged from a four-color illustration in a women's magazine. From her window Ruth had spotted him, instinctively, as in all nature the female sights the bright-plumed male. His course about town would be marked by filliped pulses and quickly refurbished faces. I could imagine Ruth's envious sigh and the wistful sound echoing softly throughout Crossgate at the news of Lydia's triumph—a mutual conquest distinguished by its component of matrimony.

"Things pretty slow at the pumps this morning, Ernie?" I asked.

"I've quit." Ernie spoke with challenging overtones. "I was just helping out a pal, anyway, filling in there. That job's strictly for dopes."

"Found something better suited to your talents, have you, Ernie?"

"Yeah. I have. I'm opening a new office any day now. Going into real estate. Good opportunity here since your brother's not around any more." Ernie eyed me. "Drop in some time when I'm not too busy."

"Why, thank you, Ernie, thank you very much. I will indeed. That's certainly something I'll have to see—you trying to fill Bruce's place."

"Yeah? Far's that goes—filling a certain place where he's been—and you too—"

Something in my face must have warned him. He quickly abandoned the crack, substituted a sneer of pure beauty, then went his breath-taking way toward the center of town.

I drove in the opposite direction, following the road taken by the ambulance last night.

Cora Doremus was doggedly pushing a lawn mower across her front yard, tidying the place for her husband's funeral and her few friends' condolence calls. She and Verna had for years resisted, unaided by the doctor, the chronic deterioration of this place. Except for its neatly patched look it was a fit place for bats and haunts—a high, many-gabled dwelling overloaded with dormers and the gingerbread of the General Grant period. It sat alone against a background of rolling woodland. The mansion of Lindwood could not be seen from this point and Sam Wregg's shack was hidden deep in the pathless stretches

between. These were the quite commonplace woods which Sam had cryptically insisted had never attracted Verna.

Mrs. Doremus stopped her grass-cutting, seeing me with a hopeful lighting-up of her plain face. She came straight to me, her small hard hand outstretched to clasp mine.

"We go in the house to talk," she said.

She led me directly inside, marching, and offered me her best chair. Its ragged upholstery was concealed under a beautiful hand-woven shawl from "the old country." She sat opposite me, straight-spined, her usually busy hands resting in her lap. The living room, tidy but shabby, showed the complete lack of taste of a mail-order catalogue of the early 1900s—from which indeed its furnishings might have been ordered in toto as a "fine six-piece suite, only \$99.50." Dr. Doremus's office, no more modern in its equipment, occupied the opposite front corner of the house. Closed today, it would never again hear a patient growled over.

"Mr. Lindley, I will get money by going to work soon," Cora Doremus began. "Please, how much it cost for you to get Verna out?"

"The matter of my fee has already been taken care of by several of your husband's friends, Mrs. Doremus. Think no more about that. The rest may come harder. Please don't let your hopes run away with you. Nobody can tell how a jury will react. Also, we're up against a smart district attorney who will try very earnestly to chalk up a conviction. If we can foresee his arguments, all the better for us. I understand he was here last night turning the place upside down for evidence. He showed you a legal paper first, of course—a search warrant?"

"Something like that he showed me, yes."

"Did he take anything away with him?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"The bottle."

"That's important to him—to us, too, of course. He wants to analyze the liquor left in the bottle."

Cora Doremus shrugged slightly. "He find nothing."

"I'm sure he won't." Then I paused, disturbed by a suggestion of defiance in her manner. "Just what do you mean?"

"He find nothing left in this bottle except maybe a few drops."

"What?" I hitched forward in my chair. "Just a few drops left in the bottle? How come?"

"The whisky I pour in the sink."

I stared at her. "When?"

"When Dr. Doremus was sick," she said, looking straight at me, her face shining and fixedly placid.

I cautioned myself to wait a minute before speaking, to take it easy, to make sure of this before letting my blood pressure bump the ceiling; and I suggested, still sounding calm enough, "Let's take it from the beginning, Mrs. Doremus—say, from the moment the doctor came home yesterday afternoon. He brought a bottle with him, one he'd picked up from Verna on his way here."

"Yes."

"I won't ask you to repeat the whole story you told the district attorney last night. As I understand it the doctor drank too much out of that bottle and became so hard to handle that you phoned Verna for help. When Verna arrived she called the state police, and after a few minutes the doctor sank into a semi-conscious condition. But he hadn't drunk all the liquor in the bottle. There was some left."

"Yes."

"You got rid of it by emptying the bottle into the sink?"

"Yes."

"When, Mrs. Doremus?" I asked it in all earnestness. "At just what point did you pour that whisky down the sink?"

She was so apparently calm, so strongly braced against the significance of these questions as she sat there looking at me—just looking, not answering. I pressed her with a question that could bring out the worst of it quickly.

"Was it *after* Verna had called the police?"

"Yes."

"Was it *before* the police arrived?"

"Yes. Then I wash it out too."

"You *what*?"

"I make it clean inside, nothing but water."

Half out of my chair now I asked in a raised voice, "Why? Why did you do that, Mrs. Doremus?"

She sat still and silent again, and her silence was answer enough. I sank back into the sagging chair, my own wordlessness far less hopeful than hers. Bawling the hell out of this woman now wouldn't help the case. If she had only left that liquor in the bottle, the district attorney's chemists would have found no trace of poison in it; but it was gone; Cora Doremus had destroyed it. Wishing only to help Verna, she had by that act robbed Verna of a powerful point; she had unwittingly encouraged the darkest sort of suspicions; and even worse, she had provided Griff West with a devastating argument.

Certainly the D.A. had already seen it, as I saw it now, caught in slack-jawed dismay—the fact that Cora Doremus felt morally certain her daughter had actually committed the poisoning.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LUNCH WAS EATEN and the noon play period near its end at Miss Dodd's nursery school. Kids all over the lawn were energetically preoccupied with the peculiar ego-maniacal business of being kids—outyelling one another, chasing one another into exile, asserting their superiority over one another in all conceivable ways, including a grim contest to see who could climb the highest on a Goldbergian latticework of plumbing called a "jungle gym."

Near the picket gate Juliana and her favorite foil, the blonde Gloria, had noticed a bird perched on a near-by bush.

"Swalla," Gloria said.

"Is not a swalla," Juliana stiffened. "Cardinal."

"Mommy said swalla," Gloria insisted. "Just like drink your milk, only it's got wings."

"Swallas aren't red and they don't wear peaked hats," Juliana pointed out. "*Richmondena cardinalis*."

"Huh?" Gloria said blankly.

This display of erudition on my daughter's part left me dazed too. I listened in proud incredulity as she repeated, more loudly, "*Rich-mond-ena card-in-a-lis*."

"Just a minute ago you said a card'nal," Gloria reminded her.

"It's the same thing, goosey. Lydia told me. Lydia knows all about birds and flowers and stuff like that. She learned it when she was a little girl. She says it was the most fun she had when she was little like me on account of she couldn't ever go to movies or parties or anything. My poppa's smart, too, he knows all about law stuff. My poppa's the smartest lawyer in this whole town. Hi, Poppa."

"You flatter me, Julie, but I like it."

"Where's Verna, Poppa?"

"I'm afraid Verna won't be around for a while."

"Because she's locked up in jail?"

"Well, yes."

"Because she killed her father?"

Juliana asked it with such matter-of-course acknowledgment of the practice of patricide that I was jarred again. "No, Julie, she *didn't* do that."

"But if she didn't do it, then what's she in jail for, Poppa?"

"They're keeping her locked up until they decide whether or not she really belongs there."

"But we already know she doesn't b'long there, don't we?"

"Yes."

"Then what's there left to decide about?"

Penetrating as close to the basic legal difficulty as I could, I answered, "We know it, but the district attorney doesn't."

"Then you oughta tell him so he'll let Verna go."

"I've already told him, and so has Verna, but he doesn't believe us."

"But why doesn't he?" Julie persisted. "Verna knows more about that than *he* does."

"Of course, Julie, but you see, he thinks Verna isn't telling the truth."

"Why! Verna doesn't fib, Poppa. Verna's nice. *Everybody* knows that."

"The district attorney is not so sure of it as we are."

"He must be a big dopey if he doesn't know what every-

body else knows," Juliana opined soberly. "That's the whole trouble. If he wasn't such a big dopey he'd let Verna come back home and then nobody's have to worry about it any more."

How true. A slight amelioration in the D.A.'s attitude would cause the whole problem to vanish in a flash—a flash of common sense.

"If the big dopey just *has* to believe Verna did it," Juliana continued sagely, "then all he has to do is spank her and tell her she better not let him catch her doing it again."

"Killing your father is more serious than—well, than just bad manners, Julie."

"Oh," Juliana thought a moment. "Well, then, that dopey districk burney, he at least ought to hurry up and make up his mind about Verna and not keep her in jail like that."

"I'm afraid it will be weeks or months until the trial comes up. There are other cases on the docket ahead of—"

Juliana screeched, "You mean they're gonna keep Verna locked up for weeks or mumths when they don't even know yet if she did anything bad?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But why can't she come back home and wait *there*, where she b'longs?"

"In a serious case like this, Julie, they keep the defendant locked up so she can't run away."

"Poppa!" Juliana was breathlessly indignant. "Everybody *knows* Verna wouldn't *ever* run away."

"I'm quite sure you're right about that, Julie."

As a clincher Juliana reverted to her original question: "Then what're they keeping her locked up for?"

"To prevent her from doing what she wouldn't do anyway."

"That's dumb!"

"It's the law. It's written down in a book, so that's the way it's got to be."

"Phooey!" Juliana said, unconsciously displaying her paternal heredity.

A child's questions had poked at the roots of our judicial system. Any attempt to make it clearer would set off another chain reaction of explanations and sub-explanations, the whole thing being unacceptable to anyone not yet educated to our

standard set of cultural confusions. Julie could resign herself to the principle of prompt punishment, such as a swift whack on the bottom, but she was still too natively clear-minded to grasp the devious processes through which her innocent friend must suffer.

"Anyway, Poppa," she said practically, "how soon you gonna bring Verna back out of all that stuff?"

"It may take a little while. I'm on my way to the office now to work on it. I'll do my very best, Julie."

"Okay."

Juliana banished her doubts, instantly confident of a satisfactory outcome. She had taken my cautious answer as the most supremely inviolate of all covenants, a father's promise. A misunderstanding as serious as this called for immediate correction. Unfortunately the approach of Dr. Victor Bray at that moment interfered.

Dr. Bray, shoes spotlessly shined, black medicine case in immaculate hand, was bound for his new office a few doors farther north. Pausing, he nodded a greeting. He had something difficult to say and he began in a more than normally wary manner.

"I hear you're representing Verna Doremus."

"Yes. I hear you're our acting coroner."

Vic Bray's sudden ascent into officialdom seemed to have added to the stature of his dignity. "However, when I talked with you last night at the hospital I had no expectation of the appointment. You understand I'll have to testify against your client."

"It wouldn't have come as a surprise," I said. "Griff tells me you found certain signs which may be construed as indicating poison."

Vic Bray stiffened a little. "The district attorney disclosed that?"

"There could hardly be any other reason for holding Verna. Having a bit of trouble identifying the stuff, though, aren't you?"

Vic Bray frowned upon me as a trespasser into his official precincts. "My report to the district attorney is confidential, of course."

"Confidential," I agreed, "but not specific. The fact is, Vic,

you found the general symptoms of something, but no traces of any ordinary toxic substance to account for them, such as arsenic or cyanide."

A slight change of expression flickered over Bray's clean, pink-cheeked face. I may or may not have hit the bull's-eye in the dark. If so, he might wonder how I could be so strangely sure of that point. On the other hand, it seemed more probable he actually hadn't identified the poison. At any rate, he was impressed enough with the responsibilities of his position to keep quiet. Also, he put on a faint but smug you-can't-catch-me-napping smile. This tempted me to try again.

"I'll never forget Syl Doremus's face. I caught a glimpse of it, you know. Green—a ghastly green. I'll get an expert opinion on that symptom, of course—from one of our old established physicians. Your first case of this kind, isn't it, Vic?"

He could take this as fair warning of my intention to discredit his testimony by making him look like a medical babe-in-arms. Nothing could rankle worse on the proud young Dr. Victor Bray than the expectation of such an assault made in public; or so I hoped. A small war of nerves, begun now, would not make my client more innocent, but it might help to undermine the acting coroner's opinion to the contrary. Its only immediate effect, however, was to cause a brief bristling on Vic's part and a more lasting sensation of nausea on mine.

"The green color of Sylvester Doremus's face," Vic answered with an air of conceding nothing, "was simply the blue of asphyxiation mixed with the yellow of jaundice."

Juliana, having listened entranced, now piped up. "That's right, Poppa. Blue and yellow make green."

We stared for a moment into her sweet little face. I thought I felt the unmarried Victor Bray shudder a little. But we found her beyond rebuke.

"I'll adhere to the facts in this case," Vic said with unexpected forcefulness. "I've no intention of betraying a dead friend."

It was a moment for listening.

"As I mentioned at the hospital last night, I feel indebted to Sylvester Doremus. My father was a close friend of his, perhaps the closest friend he ever had, and in a way he

made me his protégé. Following my father's death I'd never have been able to complete medical school without his backing."

I remembered law school as a pedagogical assembly line, but already Victor Bray recalled his classrooms with an old grad's nostalgic reverence.

"Dr. Doremus couldn't give me any assistance financially, of course, but he did exert his influence—obtained scholarships for me. They were essential. I felt the strongest sort of gratitude toward him, but we never became intimate personally. I mean he saw me through, and in that way discharged a friendly duty toward my father, but otherwise he ignored me or dismissed me—being embarrassed by any show of sentimentality. I regret not knowing him better. Sylvester Doremus had the makings of a great man."

"What? As a doctor?"

"He could have been one of the greatest."

It astonished me to hear the fastidious Dr. Bray sincerely expressing such high esteem for the impatient, shabby Sylvester Doremus.

"He was too cynical to capitalize on his discoveries. My father told me how he was once horrified to see one of Dr. Doremus's patients with a wound full of crawling maggots, and still more horrified to see him leaving them there. He was one of only a few who had learned that maggots, harmless in themselves, devoured the infected tissue and cleaned the raw wound as nothing else would in those days. That was twenty years before the medical journals reported on maggots as a cure for osteomyelitis. Meanwhile they'd saved a lot of local legs and arms for Dr. Doremus, without fanfare."

Vic Bray went on earnestly, "Another discovery of his was even more important. Dr. Doremus didn't like children very much, but he liked still less to see them pasty-faced, wasting away and dying. He dreamed up something he thought might help them—a thick, black mixture—and it worked. He'd force it down the throats of certain ailing kids and before long they'd be full of bounce again. Sylvester Doremus knew he had something there, but he wasn't interested in exploiting it, and when he passed it along to other doctors as a friendly suggestion they usually laughed it off. Some fifteen years after-

ward an able researcher who had come up with exactly the same discovery—the cure of pernicious anemia by means of liver—was awarded the Nobel Prize in medicine.”

“I’d no idea,” I said.

Vic Bray lifted his chin and gazed directly at me—and as I recalled too vividly the poison I’d left to find its way deviously into Sylvester Doremus’s throat, he went on with disarming candor.

“I’ve more than a passing interest in Dr. Doremus’s death, you see. I can’t help feeling I let him down. He made possible my medical education, yet the most I was able to do for him wasn’t enough to save his life. It’s too late now, of course; but at least I can still insist his murderer should not go unpunished.”

Young Dr. Bray, shoulders squared, shoes gleaming, black medicine case held hard in clean hand, strode on toward his shiny new office.

I paused to gaze at the legend which never should have appeared on any law-office door: *Webster Lindley, Attorney.*

It proved the folly of shaping a future for a child still too young to consult. Too often he won’t hold still and the fit is bad. In forcing on me a vocation suitable to an admired name, my parents might have done better to dub me Greeley Lindley and steer me into newspaper work instead. For that matter, almost any other choice would have been a happier one for the victim—Barnum Lindley, for example, or Edison Lindley, or even Burbank Lindley. Possibly, too, there was a slight natural leaning toward Chippendale Lindley. As it was I must go on reflecting no credit on an oratorical legend cast in statuesque mold.

I stepped into the office just as Ruth said into the phone, “Hold it, Mrs. Lindley, here he is now.”

From Lindwood Lydia complained, “Web, I’m *simply* exhausted. I’ve been trying all morning to find someone to take Verna’s place here and it’s just hopeless.”

“Funny thing about castles in Spain—nobody seems to anticipate they’ll need the floors mopped occasionally, but they do.”

“You might at least *try* to be helpful, Web. What am I

supposed to do meanwhile about a housekeeper who's in jail for murder—go right on paying her salary?"

"I'm sure you'd appreciate such thoughtfulness on the outside if you were jailed for murder, Lydia."

"What? Oh, do be serious, Web. Why, she'll be there for *months*, not doing me the slightest bit of good. I've no money to waste."

"Since when?"

Lydia spent a moment being speechless with exasperation; but only a moment. "Web, something's come over you. You've changed somehow. You're developing a sly streak."

"I am? Maybe that's not altogether bad. It could turn out to be pretty useful in my job."

"Don't be facetious, Web. I'm quite serious about this. In case you've any more tricks up your sleeve you'd be wiser to keep them there and avoid making unnecessary trouble."

"I don't get it, Lydia."

"You want to fix things up for your precious Bethany, of course. She's one reason you had the will case postponed, and another reason is to force Ernest to stay around town. With the trial coming up on the seventeenth he can't go off to Reno as we planned. Your tactics are very transparent and I don't like them a bit."

Delighted to hear they were being so unintentionally effective, I said, "Listen to me, Lydia. Your plans had nothing to do with the postponement. I asked for it before I'd even heard about them. The reason for the delay lies in my case, not your romance."

"You've no reason to look down your nose at Ernest to begin with," Lydia said resentfully. "He comes of one of Crossgate's very finest families. And neither Ernest nor I are quite so oblivious of what's going on as you seem to think we are, Web."

I began to ask carefully, "What in particular—"

She ignored the half-formed question and rushed on in indignant tones, "I simply won't stand for any more of your interference. You're to keep your hands strictly off my affairs. Force me to it and I'll make things very unpleasant for you."

"If you're trying to intimidate me, Lydia—"

"Call it what you choose, I mean exactly what I say and I'm sure you know exactly what I mean. Good-by, Web."

The connection clicked off, leaving me disturbed by an ominous hint of power behind Lydia's threat. Something had given her reason to feel she had acquired some new sort of command over me. I was still standing there frowning over the phone when I became aware of Ruth saying, "Mrs. Doremus is waiting in your office."

"Yes; I asked her to come."

"And there's Verna outside, just arriving."

A sedan had just stopped at the curb. The driver was Leroy Bommer, a deputy sheriff. Circling to Verna's door, he politely opened it for her. She smiled her shy thanks and alighted, looking frightened, confused and too submissive to fate. She wore the same topcoat over the same dress, both the black of mourning. For a second she hesitated, glancing toward the sporty car still parked several doors away—Ernie Reece's. Then Bommer took her arm and escorted her to my door as if they were making a pleasant little social call together.

I greeted her in a professional manner of unfelt optimism, thanked Bommer for his courtesy in bringing her here, then ushered her into my inner office where her mother had stolidly waited. As I closed the connecting door Verna and Cora Doremus were clenched silently in each other's arms and Bommer was settling down for an amiable chat with Ruth. I was sure the deputy sheriff would gladly bring his prisoner to this office as often as I might like. My secretary was so remarkably pretty that in these days of hard-to-get service she had even achieved a quick repair for my rear window. I felt grateful for that, too, since I needed no external reminder of the fact that in this case my client was far less culpable than her attorney.

After their moment of wordless reunion and reassurance, I placed Verna and Cora Doremus in chairs facing across my desk—the mother small and immovably strong, the daughter unassertive, thanks to years of browbeating by her stepfather, and largely an unknown quantity to me.

"Now," Mrs. Doremus said abruptly, "you get her out."

A private, secret ballot had already been taken in the hard mind of Cora Doremus. She would never divulge it in words,

but the stoicism fixed on her plain face told me she remained convinced of her daughter's guilt. At her home this morning, realizing this, I had tried to dissuade her—in necessarily subtle ways, taken under peculiar difficulties known only to myself—and I had left feeling frustrated, sensing that all my persuasions, and all Verna's protestations, would never weaken this woman's misguided conviction. She would keep her reasons for it locked up within her, but I could guess they were the simplest and solidest: since no one but she and Verna could have had a motive for destroying the doctor, and since she was certain of her own guiltlessness, she must inevitably conclude Verna had done it.

"Now get her out."

Cora Doremus urged it obdurately and sat with her small rugged hands momentarily idle and the thought of Verna's guilt fixed in her starkly simple mind. The question of guilt, however, was now beside the point. She meant to stick with her daughter regardless, and the rest was up to me. Verna's destiny now depended upon my talent for legalistic witchcraft—an ability which I had never claimed to possess.

"Verna——"

I paused, seeing now for myself, with another twinge of consternation, that this young woman actually looked none too innocent.

Well, small wonder. She's felt the shock of sudden death in the family; she had dropped unawares into a circumstantial pitfall; she'd been a captive ever since, in the custody of officers every moment; she'd spent her first night in the county jail with the prospect of many more to come; and none of this would contribute to anyone's poise. Let suspicion fall anywhere and no matter how undeserved it may be people will feel there must be good reason for it. Point an accusing finger long enough at your saintly pastor and presently you'll have him cringing like a conscience-stricken malefactor if not actually fleeing for the border. No, it wasn't surprising an innocent girl under duress had acquired a guarded air, which might seem to verify one's darkest doubts.

What astonished me more was that Verna Doremus looked, and seemed also to feel, more guilty than I did.

"Verna, I understand Doremus is not your real name. You

took the doctor's name when your mother married him. It that right?"

"My real father was killed in a mill accident when I was a baby," Verna answered.

"Yes. And your name was then—?"

"Verna Benarski."

"Not that it's important, Verna, but you'll be asked that same question on the witness stand. Mrs. Doremus, I understand also that before becoming Dr. Doremus's wife you were his housekeeper?"

She shrugged. "I must have a home for my little girl and myself." Her attitude added, as clearly as words, "Never mind such unimportant details. Get busy. Get Verna out."

"Now, Verna, we've a lot of ground to cover together. I'm not going to begin by asking you whether you caused Dr. Doremus's death in any way. I don't believe you did."

"Honestly, I never even thought of such a thing, Mr. Lindley," she said.

"I'm quite certain of it, Verna."

Of course I actually was quite certain; but not Cora Doremus. The expression on Mrs. Doremus's face remained unchanged except for a faint cynical shadow flickering at the corners of her mouth. She had taken this as the keynote of the performance to be staged in the courtroom. As Mrs. Doremus saw it, Verna's denial was pretense, my sober acceptance of it was part of the routine and this was my usual method of contriving a verdict of not guilty—by a professionally skilful fraud upon the court.

Cora Doremus's attitude was well-founded in general but in this case a distinct liability. Her poker face wasn't the canny mask she imagined it to be. In her artlessness she overestimated her ability to put over a fast one and, worse, telegraphed her intentions. I decided that before attempting to sway twelve jurors I might do well to impress this one woman with a fact which she should have been only too eager to embrace unurged.

"Regardless of what anyone else may think, Verna," I said, putting a sharper point on it, "you may be absolutely assured of my belief in your innocence"—but immediately I saw it was no use trying. The cynical flickers played across Cora

Doremus's mouth again. I might swear with my last dying breath a true faith in her daughter's innocence, but to her it would still seem to be dramatic lip-service, part of the play's rehearsal.

Memo: park Cora Doremus in a dark corner of the courtroom where she would be as unnoticeable as possible, and hope to God I'd find the jury more receptive to the truth than the defendant's mother.

"So far, Verna, you may feel you've been getting a raw deal."

Knowing damned well she was fully justified in that, I reminded myself I'd better stop fretting over the hidden ironies in my lines. After all, no one else could hear them; I couldn't possibly sound as two-faced to others as I did to myself. Besides, I could hardly avoid going through the motions of inquiring into my client's predicament even though, having precipitated it, I knew more about it than she did.

"Since you've done nothing wrong, you may very well feel the law's ganging up on you, Verna. It actually is a one-sided process. Once it has begun, with doubts of your innocence in some official mind, it devotes itself exclusively to the business of building up a case to prove its theory of your guilt. You traditionally go into court with a presumption of innocence, yet nobody employed by the state is acting on such an assumption so far. On the contrary, they're all working against you, not vindictively, but because that's their office."

Verna stirred in her chair, her soft sensitive eyes appealing to me for help.

"This isn't the best arrangement possible—certainly it has led to grievous injustices—but it's quite the accepted, long-established thing. However, we're not interested just now in reforming the judiciary. Our one big specific purpose right now is to show that Verna Doremus is not guilty of murder."

That subtle smirk on Cora Doremus's face was getting no easier to take.

"So far, Verna, you've had nobody on your side. The district attorney has listened to your denials and has discounted them, and that's that—you've no recourse there. He'll present his bill of particulars against you to the grand jury, which has the final word as to whether you must face trial, but you can't

appear before it unless called, and neither can I. My first opportunity to defend you won't come until after the trial has begun. That will be our big chance.

"Now, Verna, something is causing the district attorney to act as if he has a good case against you. I don't know what's making him feel that way, and naturally he's not going to tip his hand to me, his opponent. We must wait until the trial is actually under way before we'll know for sure what points he intends to make against you. So we've got to do our best to anticipate him. You understand, Verna?"

"Yes"—sounding none too sure of it.

"All right, then, let's try to figure out in advance the way the district attorney will try to prove you poisoned Dr. Doremus."

Like most clients she hesitated to state the case against herself; although, unlike others, she did recognize that a case against her could exist. "Well—I—"

"This is where I'm left in the dark, Verna," I went on earnestly. "I simply don't know as much about you as the district attorney seems to know. I need your help here. And yours, too, Mrs. Doremus. I must rely on both of you to tell me what possible shapes the district attorney's case may take."

They both sat silent, Verna gravely thoughtful, her mother continuing to look on this conference as a conspiracy.

"Above all, Verna, don't hold out on me," I cautioned her. "By keeping something back you would deprive me of the chance to prepare against it. Very bad business, being reticent with your attorney, letting him get caught by surprise on a damaging point. In fact, that mistake could be fatal—so tell me every single possibility. You understand this clearly, Verna?"

"Y-yes. . . ."

"Well, Verna?"

She began, "There always was trouble, sort of, between the doctor and me—but I can't think of anything *that* serious."

"Well, then, keep turning it over in the back of your mind while we look at several other points. That bottle of whisky, for example. I expect there'll be a lot of testimony about it."

Here Cora Doremus's smile turned smug. She considered that she'd already taken care of that detail. Indeed she had!—

to the extent that she would be unpleasantly amazed and considerably less complacent about that damned bottle when she found it looming large and black at the trial.

"I understand, Verna, the doctor had asked you to get it at the liquor store yesterday."

"Yes, and then I took it back with me to Lindwood, that's all. When the doctor came to Lindwood early in the afternoon to see Mrs. Lindley—she'd phoned for him because she wasn't feeling well again—he asked me for it and I just gave it to him. That's the last—"

"Just a minute. Was that bottle still unopened then, the seal intact?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Lindley."

"Is there anyone to verify your statement to that effect?"

"Nobody else was there when I gave it to him—just the doctor and me, alone in the kitchen."

Not good, this business of the bottle. Not good at all, any part of it—particularly the part unwittingly contributed by Verna's mother.

"Mrs. Doremus—" She stiffened a little as I turned to her, an actress about to walk onstage, eager to play her role. "When the doctor came home with that bottle did you see whether or not it was still sealed?"

"It was, yes, still sealed."

A lie. The sly shift of her eyes, the too much emphasis in her assertion—these signs betrayed the falsity of her answer. I wished to God this irreversibly misguided woman could be eliminated from the case. Her loyalty made her too eager to protect her daughter with deception. She had fallen too heartily into what she considered to be the spirit of duplicity in this legalistic cabal.

"Are you certain of this detail, Mrs. Doremus?" I insisted.

"The bottle was still sealed," she repeated. "I see him tear the seal to open it. I am sure."

A lie still; but having committed herself to it Cora Doremus would never yield; and anyhow I might better let it stand. This point about the bottle was crucial. If proved it could clear Verna completely; but no unquestionable proof was possible. It was supported only by the defendant's own honest word and her mother's dishonest confirmation; but even that

doubtful support was better than the alternative, no support at all. It was a calculated risk worth taking.

"All right, then. Dr. Doremus himself broke the seal of the bottle after he'd reached home. This bears out our chief contention, that no poison could have been added to the liquor he drank. I believe that's absolutely true."

Damn Cora Doremus for her cynical smirk!

"Verna, had you given the doctor anything to eat in the kitchen at Lindwood?"

"Yesterday— You see, he stopped in almost every day, Mr. Lindley, usually for a sandwich or a piece of pie and coffee, but yesterday"—she shook her head—"he said he wasn't hungry."

I asked the next one with more care than they could suspect: "When you saw him there in the kitchen, just after he'd left his patient's room upstairs, Verna, did he seem—well, all right in every way?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Lindley!"

So quickly she reassured me on that point! The doctor had just swallowed a double dose of deadly poison, but nevertheless he had appeared, oh yes, Mr. Lindley, all right in every way. Goddammit! Couldn't he have seemed faintly pale, or slightly shaky, or perhaps a little uneasy behind the belt, thereby allowing me to assert to the jury my sincere conviction that his illness had begun even before Verna had delivered that infernal bottle to him? But no; she had noticed nothing to suggest her stepfather at that very moment was already a doomed man.

I had to double-check this. "He did seem perfectly all right, Verna? You're sure?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Lindley!"

"He'd drunk coffee upstairs, Verna. Did he by any chance mention it tasted a little odd? Did he have, say, a peculiar after-taste in his mouth? Did he perhaps complain——"

"Oh no, Mr. Lindley," Verna broke in. "After all, I'd made that coffee myself. There couldn't have been anything wrong with it."

I gave up. This defendant naïvely esteemed the truth above any temptation to twist it a little, even when the twisting

might prolong her life somewhat. I turned to her mother, whose scruples in that direction were fewer.

"Did Dr. Doremus eat anything at home before or while drinking the whisky, Mrs. Doremus?"

"Nothing but the drink," Mrs. Doremus answered, adhering irremovably to her own version of it, that the cause of her husband's death was not filial, as she wrongly believed it to be, but, instead, alcoholic, as actually it was not.

"You see," I pointed out, "if the doctor had eaten something we might possibly argue ptomaine poisoning or the like."

Cora Doremus's mind instantly resumed its scheming for her daughter's benefit.

"However," I added quickly, "the doctor's stomach was examined at autopsy, and the coroner knows whether or not he actually ate anything just prior to his death. This is a matter of recorded fact which we'd better not contradict."

Mrs. Doremus immediately abandoned her self-made doubts. "Nothing but the drink," she restated decisively.

"So the doctor took nothing into his stomach except the unadulterated contents of that bottle, which he opened himself at home. Now another important point. When Dr. Doremus began feeling seriously ill did he voice any suspicion that he'd been poisoned?"

Mrs. Doremus shrugged and looked away. "Too drunk."

Verna added, "When I first saw him, after rushing over in answer to Mother's call, he'd fallen into a sort of stupor. But he wasn't entirely out. Every few minutes he'd sort of come to and mumble and try to get up, then sink back."

"Did he say anything to either of you to account for his condition?"

They gazed at each other in mutual question, not speaking.

"Surely you'd remember it if he had. Did he ask for help," I insisted, "or mention what he thought was wrong with him?"

Cora Doremus decided this question by repeating bluntly, "Too drunk."

I was doubly happy to hear it—happy once that no dying statement would complicate an already bad situation, happy again that this time Cora Doremus's face suggested no mendacity. It seemed safe to assume, then, that the first deadly symptoms of the stuff, whatever its nature was, had been

masked by the liquor, and that the combined effect of both had left the man of medicine no opportunity for self-diagnosis. At least I couldn't dispute the point, not even as the dispenser of the poison.

"All right. Let's get back to the question of the district attorney's attack on the case. It's one of the odd quirks of the law that a motive for murder need not be proved—that is, if the D.A. can show in some way that you gave the poison to the doctor, he's under no legal obligation to show your reasons for doing it—but he'll probably harp on possible motives regardless. Now, Verna, what basis can he have for believing you poisoned the doctor?"

Verna blinked her mild eyes. "There's been trouble between us for years, Mr. Lindley. He was always blaming me. Nothing I did ever suited him. Whenever anything went wrong he'd take his spleen out on me, as if it was all my fault, when really I had nothing to do with it. He seemed to watch me all the time, to follow me around, just so as to find more things to scold me about."

"Had you finally come to feel you couldn't stand any more of his browbeating, Verna?"

She shook her head. "I came to expect it. I got so used to his temper it didn't seem natural when he missed a chance to be mean to me. It was terrible at home. He always abused my mother too."

"I look out for myself," Mrs. Doremus put in promptly. "Verna does not have to kill the doctor to take care of me."

That I could believe.

"Please be specific now, Verna. Did you hold certain definite grievances against the doctor?"

"He wouldn't let me go to college. He said high school was enough, too much education spoils a woman. He said a woman should make herself a good wife and mother, things they don't teach in schools, and live for her family." Verna added with a bitterness that surprised me, "He wouldn't even let me try to work my own way through college. He helped that Vic Bray, but not me, and I hated him for it."

"How could he stop you, Verna, if you really wanted to go?"

"I was afraid of him."

"But this was years ago too. It's so far behind you now, I

doubt the district attorney will try to whoop it up into a motive for murder."

Having begun to let a little pressure off her chest, Verna went on more rapidly, "He wouldn't let me go steady with any boy. Some of them wanted to, but he kept getting in their way, being nasty to them, until finally they just stayed away." Tears glimmered in Verna's eyes. "It wasn't fair. He'd storm at me and say I ought to find myself a man and then when a man got interested in me he'd growl them off. Sometimes I thought it was just crazy, the way he seemed all the time to be trying to ruin my whole life."

"Did an instance of this happen recently, Verna?"

She shook her head again. "It got so bad boys stayed away from me. Word gets around. I'm not so attractive they'd date me in spite of the doctor, so they just lost interest. Except once in a while a boy would try again. Well, I'd learned better. I wouldn't let the doctor know any more. I'd sneak out and back, and wouldn't say a word, so he couldn't make trouble. That's one big reason I took the job at Lindwood—so I wouldn't have to sneak past the doctor. But it wasn't often."

"Were you seriously in love with any of them, Verna?"

Now she lifted her chin. "No."

"Then you'd say the district attorney has no grounds for claiming the doctor was breaking up a romance between you and a young man you really loved and wanted to marry?"

Her smile was slow and rueful. "No. That was one thing the doctor never needed to worry about. No boy ever got as far as wanting to marry me."

I gazed at her a moment, pitying her. "I can't imagine where the district attorney's case is coming from. Go on, Verna."

She said wearily, "I can't think of anything else."

"Keep trying, Verna. And don't forget what I've warned you about holding out on me—don't do it."

"I can't think of anything else," she insisted. "I'm sort of dizzy, everything's happened so suddenly—I can't seem to think."

Mrs. Doremus spoke up. "The insurance."

"Insurance?"

Mother and daughter gazed at each other, Verna open-eyed, Cora firm-faced, before turning back to me.

"The life insurance," Mrs. Doremus explained. "Before this, the doctor have three, four policies; but when he need money he cash them in, and now he had only one left. Small policy, but only one left. Again there is too little money; he need more, so he talk about cash in this last one. But if he do this, then there will be no more insurance. He can't buy more because no company will give it to him—too much drink—so then there will be no more insurance at all. There will never be insurance again if he lose this last policy, and then when he die I will be left with nothing."

I asked earnestly, "You knew about this, Verna?"

"Yes"—but she seemed astonished to recall it now.

"And this policy is still in force? It's payable, now that the doctor has died?"

They exchanged another brief stare, and both nodded to me.

"But soon—within a few days, perhaps—that policy would have ceased to exist as insurance?"

More nods.

"How large is the policy?"

"Small," Mrs. Doremus said, "but the only one left."

"How large?"

"Small," Mrs. Doremus insisted evasively in her maternal instinct of protection.

"The policy is a matter of record, Mrs. Doremus. Just what is its face value, please?"

Reluctantly: "Five."

"Five thousand dollars."

I sat back. Murders had been committed for less money. This case, of course, was not one of that sort. But at least, so far as the state's theory of Verna's motive went, it seemed we'd gotten warm.

Not that I found reassurance in it. On the contrary. What defense could you muster against such an accusation, except a simple denial? How could we possibly prove Verna had *not* desired to collect five thousand in insurance money and had *not* dropped poison into that damned bottle? Mere presumption of innocence in itself wouldn't tempt the jury to take our uncorroborated word for either fact. My case badly needed

bracing—and this my clients counted on me to produce by means of my nonexistent powers as a legal sorcerer.

"Well, we've made headway," I announced, again on that note of uncalled-for optimism. "Of course we'll have further conferences—" And Cora Doremus nodded, gratified to anticipate the conjuring up of more subterfuges. "Rest assured, Verna, I'm doing my best for you."

She could indeed rely on my sincerity. I had never wished more earnestly to win an acquittal. Once it had been achieved, of course, the death of Sylvester Doremus could remain forever an unsolved mystery without protest on my part. Privately I felt quite willing to allow the real culprit to go unpunished. But as for this haplessly involved girl—

"I want you to believe in my desire to help you, Verna, as strongly as I believe in your innocence."

"Oh, I do, Mr. Lindley."

I squeezed her large soft hand, then her mother's small hard one pumped mine. I returned the prisoner to the custody of Deputy Sheriff Bommer, who reluctantly smiled his good-by to my secretary. Through the window—the same window through which I'd seen the ambulance bearing Dr. Doremus to his deathbed last night—I watched Verna getting carted back to the county jail where her lawyer might more justly be the tenant of her cell.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SAM WREGG, his basket empty on one arm, emerged from the inner office of District Attorney Griffith West.

Sam paused to glare at me while chewing on a cud of licorice root, his unkempt beard wagging in righteous asperity.

"Danged if Griff West ain't as big a dang-blasted fool as you are," he announced vehemently. "Headstrong young idiot won't listen. On account of I ain't livin' my life the same way he is, he thinks I ain't got good sense. Whole world's fulla

people like him, blinder 'n bats, can't see where they're standin' in broad daylight, don't care who they crowd off the cliff so long's they keep a foothold for themselves. Phahl!"

Since Sam had already declared a cryptic partiality to Verna, I said, "The D.A.'s so busy he's likely to overlook a fact or two here and there, Sam; but whatever it is you have on your mind, I'm interested."

"Aw, phah." The waspish force of Sam's indignation sent dark juice trickling from the quirked-in corners of his mouth. "Y're no better'n he is. Too smart, both of ya, to listen to a man who knows what he's talkin' about." And he slammed out.

Griff stood in his doorway, not smiling. Our dynamic district attorney looked a little worn this afternoon and more than a little burned up. He didn't greet me like an old pal or invite me cordially into his office; instead, he simply stood there with a fishy gaze fixed on me.

"Since you seem to have no use for the information Sam volunteered," I said, "would you mind telling me what it is?"

"I would mind," Griff answered grimly. "It's of no consequence whatever, but I don't trust you any more. I'm through letting you make a sucker out of me."

"That's not entirely fair, Griff. I——"

"Go ahead, treat me like a halfwit," Griff broke in, his face flushing. "Tell me again you haven't any interest in the Doremus case. You're just here to suck around for some more inside dope under false pretenses."

"Listen, Griff, I couldn't refuse——"

"Never mind the alibis. Save your breath, you're going to need it at the trial." Really sore, he turned his back on me and went to his desk. "And stay out of here from now on. Quit smelling around this office. You're wasting your time and mine."

No doubt he was justified in taking a crack at me; but on the other hand he might have been a little less stuffy about it. Besides, being pretty well fed up with the wilfulness of humans and the perversity of circumstances, I felt in no mood to mollify this stumbling handboy of blind Justice.

I stepped uninvited into his inner office to face him across the desk whereon he was industriously constructing his mis-

directed case against Verna. "I won't waste your time and my breath, then, by explaining how I happened to become Verna's lawyer against my will. I came here to apologize, but evidently you want no part of it."

He kept his hurt, challenging eyes on me. "As I've mentioned before, I'm a very high-principled fellow. I play square with my friends. I don't like it when they take underhanded advantage of me."

Griff's new animosity toward me wasn't a protective measure adopted for the duration of the case; it would last. I'd lost a friend.

"Look here, Griff. I don't want you to hate my guts for something I couldn't help. Neither one of us is in this case by choice; but since we are in it we're both trying to work it out the fairest way we know how. We'll save ourselves and others a lot of headaches by getting together on it right now instead of letting it——"

"You're wasting our time," Griff interrupted, and he sat, taking up a fistful of scribbled notes as a plain hint of dismissal.

"Griff, the grand jury's in session this afternoon, isn't it?"

"It's sitting right now."

"Believe me, this case is nothing to concern them," I persisted. "I'm convinced Verna is no murderer."

In heated exasperation he slammed the notes down. "Your convictions don't happen to be the decisive factor here. The defendant's paying you money to beat the rap for her."

"Now just a min——"

"Sylvester Doremus is suddenly dead. Possibly you can manage to be convinced of that much."

"Griff——"

"He was poisoned," the district attorney added, his tone crackling like high voltage. "Could you try hard and be convinced of that also?"

The question left me tight-lipped.

"He didn't swallow that poison intentionally. Somebody else slipped it over on him."

Yes. Yes, Griff, but——

"So if it wasn't Verna who poisoned him," Griff asked with a snap, "who the hell did?"

I drew in a slow, deep breath.

"Can you answer that? Who else but Verna could have poisoned the doctor?"

I said soberly, "Let's take a good look at it, Griff. What kind of poison killed him?"

"Never mind that. I'm sore, but not so sore that I'm going to blurt out my whole case to you. I tell you again, you're wasting your time trying to pump me."

"On my word, Griff, I'm not here to trick you in any way. I do freely admit I'm trying to persuade you not to force an innocent girl through a trial for murder. Listen to me. I realize this is a big thing. The trial will make bigger news than any other trial in Stagg County in years. A conviction will be a feather in your cap. In the same way a verdict for the defendant will enhance whatever reputation as a lawyer I may have. But on my part I'm not only willing but eager to forego the whole show. The only fair way—"

"I've told you before, I don't demand victims," Griff said stiffly. "I don't send innocent young women to the chair just to make my record look good. I'm going to prosecute Verna because I believe she's guilty. It's as simply as that."

"For God's sake, Griff," I persisted, "you must have a doubt or two about her. Poison, you say—evidently an unusual kind, so how did this quiet little homebody learn about it in the first place, and where did she get it? Think about all this, Griff. What occurred to prompt her to feed poison to the doctor last night, as you allege she did, rather than last year or last month?" And since Griff remained obviously unimpressed by these questions, I added another calculated to jolt him: "And what connection has Sylvester Doremus's death with Bruce's?"

He sat up and stopped swinging his short legs. "What about Bruce's death?"

I began piloting myself gingerly through dangerous waters. "You thought there was something a little strange about it, didn't you?"

"How do you know I did?"

Steering around the fact that I'd eavesdropped on him here in his own office, I answered, "You gave me that impression. Aren't there certain similarities between the two deaths, Griff?"

Vic Bray thought so, and so did the nurses at the hospital. Don't those similarities suggest the same cause? And if so, what possible connection could Verna have had with my brother's death?"

"I hadn't noticed any similarities between the two. If there were such similarities they still wouldn't rule out Verna. The same symptoms in another man in Verna's immediate vicinity would indicate her use of the same poison another time. If pressed for a theory I might produce one to the effect that Bruce had been playing around with his young housekeeper and when he neglected to divorce Lydia as he'd promised her——"

"Good Lord, Griff, that's crazy!"

He shrugged. "I didn't suggest it to begin with and I don't believe it either. I feel there can't be any connection between the two cases."

So easily again he dismissed the truth as impossible—like the poison in the sugar.

"If you're intending to ring your brother's death into this trial—I warn you, I'll fight any such attempt to confuse the case."

I shook my head, feeling heavy-hearted. Confuse his case? More than he had already confused it himself? No. But as from the beginning, I was rather handicapped in my attempts to clear it up by stating my true position.

"Bruce's death is a closed book and it can't be reopened now," Griff stated flatly, "or, for that matter, ever."

Lydia had made a much neater job of her murder than I had of mine. She must have a knack for homicide which I lacked.

"If this is a sample of your reasons for thinking Verna's innocent," Griff went on, "you're certainly stretching the thing 'way out of shape."

"Goddammit, the girl is innocent!" I blurted. "Believe me, Griff, she doesn't deserve to be put through the wringer like this. These criminal proceedings should be stopped right now, and you have all the power needed to stop them. You can end them at any time at all with a word, a decision——"

"I can," Griff admitted, "but in this case I'm not doing it. I still think I know my job a little better than you do. At any

rate, let me remind you this is my office, not yours. I told you, you're wasting your breath."

I faced him with a set jaw, tapping my knuckles on his desk. "This gets me. I can accept so-called acts of God as valid hazards of existence. We've got to take our chances with floods, epidemics and the eruption of volcanoes. But too many acts of Man are avoidable catastrophies—ranging from world wars down to all manner of smaller self-made crotchets and errors, including unjust criminal charges. This needn't be one of them. Here, Griff, justice can be served so easily and so simply. All it requires, for mercy's sake, is for you to change your mind."

Griff said pungently, "Perverse bastard, aren't I, disagreeing with you like this? For the last time, save your breath for the courtroom."

Nodding, I said resignedly, "I can see I'd better."

"Speaking of how a change of mind might make things easier for everyone, you might go back to that question I've asked you several times already. It will help you to see this thing for what it really is. Just ask yourself, if Verna didn't kill the doctor, who did?"

I stared at his stubborn chin and kept a fist clenched inside my coat pocket.

"If Verna didn't kill the doctor, who did?" he persisted. "His wife?"

"No," I heard myself answering. "Definitely not Mrs. Doremus."

"At least we agree on that point. Who, then? If not Verna, who else? A disgruntled patient, perhaps? Some unknown grudge-carrier? A fanatical temperance worker? A mysterious tramp with a penchant for dropping poison into liquor bottles when passing by? Any of those?"

"No, none of those."

"Who, then, but Verna? If it wasn't Verna who killed the doctor, who did? The answer is, nobody else. It was Verna."

So said the district attorney, immovably convinced of an innocent girl's guilt, as he faced the actually guilty man.

Griff West came to his feet, picked legal documents off his desk and turned decisively to his outer door. "You'll have to

excuse me now. I have a date with the grand jury. I'm about to ask for—and get—a true bill against Verna Doremus for the first degree murder of her stepfather.”

CHAPTER NINE

UNDER THE bright sun of this Sunday in late June, Lindwood appeared as well-groomed as its mistress.

Although Lydia still suffered almost unbearably from house-keeper trouble she had succeeded in keeping the outside of the place dressed up—the externals being, after all, in Lydia's estimation, the most important part of anything. She had phoned me at the office, in the midst of an important interview several weeks ago, with the jubilant news that she had found a landscape architect's crew willing to keep her lawn mowed for only ninety dollars a month. “Not including any gardening, of course, Web—just the lawn.” I admired its costly beauty as I rode in along the driveway. It looked as if it might have been cropped a blade at a time with barbers' scissors—and lonely, its meticulous trim unmarred by a little girl's romping.

A gray sedan, not new but shiny-clean, stood in the parking space. As I braked beside it Dr. Victor Bray came out the main entrance of the house. He approached with a dreamy smile, as immaculate as always, unaware of me until suddenly the smile flashed off.

“Afternoon, Vic. Is Lydia indisposed again?”

He had been transformed in a twinkling from the charming physician of a charming patient into a public official facing an adversary in guarded position. “Nothing serious,” he answered properly and noncommittally, swinging himself and his medicine case into his car; and as he drove away with a technically flawless shifting of gears the bemused smile returned to his lips.

About to turn to the more convenient back door, I came to

a cautious pause, sensing another presence—this time a furtive one behind the garage.

I'd glimpsed a vanishing motion, as if someone on watch had at that instant jerked back out of sight. It seemed an odd time and place for prowlers—a show-place estate on a bright Sunday afternoon—but unmistakably someone wanting to remain unseen was hiding there.

Instantly concerned for Juliana—her mother's money would make her a prime choice in a kidnaper's scheming mind—I adopted the tactic of giving the skulker enough rope. Going on to the kitchen door as if I'd noticed nothing, I stepped through, then shifted quickly to a curtained window and placed myself so that I could spy on him unseen.

Several moments passed before he ventured out of cover—our local boggy-man and long-time squatter on the rear reaches of this property, Sam Wregg.

Sam peered all around, chewing excitedly on his cud, his beard flickering like a goat's. His eternal basket hung on one arm, empty; both of his hands were empty also. Moving with the quiet craft of a forest animal, warily glancing about at every step, he sneaked across to the side of the house. Then cupping his hands to his slyly narrowed eyes, he stooped to peer in another window.

He saw me and immediately wheeled off in loose-jointed flight.

I reopened the door quickly and stepped out. "Sam!"

He stopped short, beard rapidly wig-wagging, hating me for having caught him. I walked slowly toward him and in shameless defiance he let me come.

"What are you after, Sam?"

"'T ain't of no dang-blasted interest to ya," Sam snapped. "Don't go and bother yourself about me or nobody else."

"Sam, I want to know the truth about—"

"Ya don't wanta know nothin' of the sort, dang-blast ya!" Sam blazed at me. "Looks to me like ya don't even care nothin' about gettin' Verna outta trouble. Well, I'll tell ya this much right now, I ain'ta gonna let no harm come to her. Verna's a nice girl and I like her, and I know what's goin' on better'n people think I do, and if you can't get her outta this, you

fancy shilly-shallyin' lawyer, why, then, by dang, I'll *make* somebody listen to me."

He broke again into a rambling run across Lydia's expensive grass.

"Sam, come back here! I want to listen to it right now. . . . Sam!"

"Aw, phahl!"

He flung himself toward the woods flanking the gardens in the rear and went scurrying out of sight.

I turned back and just inside the kitchen I paused again. I felt the cavernous distances of this house and resisted an impulse to yodel for an echo. It had its own sort of silence, a silence so extensively cellular that it could never be displaced wholly—a silence that kept following you around as you went from room to room, that kept closing in on you like a fog. It was a structure of silence; but Juliana's phonograph was bravely filling a small high corner of it with the Waltz of the Flowers.

I had been stopped by a peculiar odor, one I couldn't quite identify, mingling with a sensation of warmth—an abnormal sort of warmth like that of an elusive fever.

No pot sat on the stove, no food had been left forgotten on a burner. Perhaps Lydia had fixed something for Juliana to eat a short time ago—the sink and the tables, messier than Verna had ever left them, were enough to suggest several meals—but a small girl's lunch would hardly account for a strange odor faintly suggesting—yes, putrefaction.

It seemed to be coming from the pantry where all the gadgets were kept, but they were all in order there.

Could it in any way be related to Sam Wregg's furtive interest in the place? I felt a creepy sense of evils committed here only a few moments ago—as if a witch's brew had been freshly mixed and bottled, ready for use. But—

I shrugged it off and went on to the main stairs.

"Lydia?"

She didn't answer; but reaching the door of her bedroom I discovered her sitting at her favorite spot, at her vanity, waiting for me to come into view in her mirror. Despite the ailment that had urgently required Dr. Bray's ministrations on a Sunday, whatever it was—if anything—she looked lovely.

Her hair spilled beautifully across her shoulders, dark behind her long slender neck. The lacy thing she wore was no doubt her most expensive and most alluring. She sat there as quietly as a still-hunter waiting for unwary game; and she gazed out of the mirror with the mysterious smile of a woman secretly gratified.

"I've been expecting to hear from you, Lydia," I said.

"Have you, Web?"

"Yes, about the Reece-Dodd will case. I got another postponement, you know."

"I know," Lydia murmured.

"Unfortunately one of my chief witnesses is still missing. Once I've found her I'll be only too glad to get the case settled for my client."

"Oh?"

"Meanwhile I've had to play for time—to the extent that I'm pretty sure Harv Tasker won't let me put the case off again. The court doesn't like it any better than you do, Lydia. So, this being my regular day to see Julie, I thought you'd prefer to denounce me personally instead of over the phone."

Lydia's smile grew a little, cryptically, and she began brushing her hair.

"The last time I postponed the case you threatened me with dire punishment, remember? Well, this seems to be the occasion for it."

She brushed her hair and smiled.

"Aren't you even going to cut loose with a few ladylike screeches, Lydia?"

She kept on brushing her hair and smiling.

"Does this mean you feel better about the situation now?"

"Much better."

"Even though Ernie's trip must be postponed again?"

"It's only a matter of a little time, Web."

"How sweet of you to take it so nicely."

"Ernest will go to Reno a little later than we'd thought, that's all. There's no real hurry and we do have important things here to attend to. But he will go, definitely, as soon as he conveniently can. Once he's obtained his divorce we'll be married, probably the same day, in San Francisco."

"You make it seem so inevitable."

"Oh, it is," she assured me. "Of course. And it will be better this way. We'll both be glad to have various problems off our minds by then, such as this bothersome will case. Then the rest will be smooth sailing. As it is, right now, my own plans are up in the air because both you and Griff insist I've got to testify at Verna's trial. But after that's over"—Lydia's lips took on another Mona Lisa twist—"everything will work out perfectly for us. Everything."

"Lydia," I said, "I've learned how to take your selfishness in my stride, but when you're quietly reasonable, like this, you make my blood run cold."

She stopped brushing her hair to gaze at me again through the mirror. "I do, really, Web? Why?"

"It means you're absolutely sure of yourself in some way. You've got somebody exactly where you want him."

Lydia put on a pretty expression of puzzlement. "I wonder who it could be."

"Me, perhaps, Lydia?"

She smiled and resumed brushing her hair; and the gesture reminded me, with a shudder, of a lioness licking her chops.

"Lydia," I insisted, "just what the devil do you imagine you have in store for me?"

Again she lowered her brush, and she opened her eyes wide and said with broadly simulated bewilderment, "Why, Web, dear, I simply don't know *what* you're talking about."

"Good-by, Lydia," I said quickly.

I climbed more stairs to the third floor, feeling dogged in spirit by a merciless Lydia who was poised to pounce. Previously I had sensed a subtle power behind her, and now she seemed to have strengthened it. As to what its nature might be, I warned myself not to abuse my already jumpy nerves by making wild guesses. I'd be wise simply to wait, keeping myself on guard against a surprise attack.

Worse was the sour fact that the situation which I'd tried to correct with murder was left untouched. Lydia still intended to marry Ernie Reece and both were still capable of wasting all Bruce's substance, of robbing Juliana of the inheritance which was rightly hers and which he had wanted her to have. If only Lydia had died, as I'd thought I had so neatly ar-

ranged for her to do, the matter would have been so much improved. But no; she was still exasperatingly alive.

And still worse, having bungled my first murder operation, what the devil could I do about murdering her successfully now?

I had become murder-shy. My deadly project had backfired too damned disastrously. One miscarriage of murder was, for me, enough.

Besides this, a third strange death in Crossgate, so soon topping off those of Bruce and Dr. Doremus, would add up to something just a bit too thick. Griff West would certainly give this one the works; and this time, if my bad luck held up, as seemed probable, he would be all too likely to come up with the right murderer.

No; I'd be wiser not to risk another venture into homicide again just yet—at least not until I'd done my best to clean up the mess of the first attempt. Wiser, yes; but the pressure was still on me as relentlessly as it had been at the moment of planting that poison—the intolerable pressure of the fact that Lydia remained perniciously alive, the bounty on her still to be collected.

Bounty: a recompense for destroying noxious animals.—Dictionary.

Opening the door of Juliana's room on this grimly reflective note, I was hit in both ears by the incongruously sweet Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy at deafening volume. I saw Juliana speaking to me with a little voice that was lost in the din of the melody. Having leaped to the knob and reduced the decibels to a bearable level, I asked, "What did you say, Julie?"

"I said hello, Poppa," she informed me.

"Hello, Julie, honey."

"Where's Verna now, Poppa?"

"Still in jail."

"You mean you haven't got her out yet?"

"Not yet."

My daughter gazed at me in reproach. "But isn't it getting to be time for you to bring her back, Poppa? I miss Verna. 'Cept Bethany she's the only one who pays any 'tention to me. I keep wishing she wasn't gone."

"So do I, Julie."

"Well, Poppa? When are you going to hurry up and get her out, then?"

"The trial begins next Wednesday."

"Oh, that's fine!" Juliana's gamin face wrinkled up into her funny little grin. "So then you'll be bringing Verna back Wesdy afternoon, won't you, Poppa?"

"I'm afraid it won't be as quick and easy as all that." I tried not to sound too discouraged. "Not *quite* so quick and easy."

CHAPTER TEN

THIS WAS Wednesday. This fine day would see the opening of the case of the people versus Verna Doremus.

Nine o'clock—an hour before curtain time—didn't however, find me frantically busy with last-minute office work. Instead, alone in my car, and having not yet shown up at my desk, I'd driven outside Crossgate's village limits and along the dirt ruts of a back road winding through rugged woodland.

My destination: Sam Wregg's shack.

As a murderer I might reasonably expect myself to know more than anyone else about the crime I'd committed; but apparently not. Other persons, comparatively minor participants in the case, seemed to possess more inside information about it than I did. Moreover, for various reasons of their own, they had chosen not to let me in on any of it. A damned unnerving thing, this, being blackballed from the inner circles of a homicide of one's own making. It was one more way wherein my first murder, necessarily lacking the artistry of practice, had gotten out of hand.

The district attorney, for example, had been busy as a bone-hunting terrier all along, digging up more material for contention than all my efforts had uncovered. Lydia, as another example, had not lost her air of cryptic complacency; if anything, she'd grown more confident than ever that I was carry-

ing around some sort of time-bomb set to explode momentarily in my face. And Sam Wregg.

It was Sam's impression he'd delivered significant information to my office doorstep the morning following Dr. Doremus's death. It had made no sense to me then and it still didn't; but my case remained so uncertain that this morning, with only an hour to go until the court crier's first oyez, I'd decided I had nothing to lose by seeking the counsel of an illiterate hermit.

Leaving the car beside the road, I found a passage through an unfriendly hedge of wild blackberry bushes and went on through the trees almost at random.

When had I last seen Sam Wregg's shack? While in high school, I thought it was; I'd gone out to hunt pheasant and had happened on the hut by chance. I recalled a little valley with walls of rugged outcropping rock above a stream, a tucked-in spot that wasn't there at all unless you approached it from a certain angle. Legend and fact agreed as to how well Sam had hidden it. Having no time to waste on this pilgrimage into a squatter's utopia, I'd need a little luck.

Layers of last year's fallen leaves concealed loose stones and boggy spots. No signs of Sam were visible anywhere. There was no path except the disturbance left by my own awkward citified feet. These eternal woods in their natural way were as tidy and tranquil as a graveyard, and I was an intruder.

"Sam?" I called. "Ay, Sam!"

My only answer was a dropped hush—the birds stopped their chirping and even the foliage overhead seemed to cease its stirring in the idle breeze, as if I had offended the peace.

I went on, trailed by a special perturbation—something persistently elusive, something quite apart from all my other anxieties. It wasn't a nagging of my conscience now, nor the tantalizing secrecies of Griff and Lydia and Sam Wregg; it was something else, something that had begun casting a shadow in the back of my mind at some indetermined moment and had been haunting me ever since. It said to me repeatedly somehow that I'd missed something vital which I shouldn't have overlooked. It was an itch begging to be scratched while eluding my reach. What the devil was it? I

didn't know, couldn't even guess; and yet I sensed that once grasped it would magically become the key of a hidden door.

Pausing in the midst of the trees I tried again to trace it, to pinch the fingers of my mind on a trailing corner of it; but always it was gone before I could touch it.

I called again, "Sam—hello, Sam!" and again my voice outraged the serenities.

After fifteen more minutes of wandering I happened into Sam Wregg's private heaven-on-earth. Here was the place I'd recalled as a valley—little more than a wide, rocky cleft, an old eroded gully, the course of a thin trickle of brook. Sam's shack sat against one mossy bank, roofed with rusty tin, loosely walled with tar paper over irregular boards and saplings. In its yard of bare ground sawed-off tree stumps served as outdoor chairs and table supports. A curl of smoke spiraled up from a broken terra-cotta chimney.

"Are you in there, Sam?"

I crossed a crude sagging bridge of saplings and gazed into Sam's front door. His filthy cot occupied one corner, and opposite it stood his stove, a wood-burning contraption beaten together of sheet iron, with bricks for feet. A coffee pot steamed on its lid and on a table sat a skillet, cold, containing the left-overs of last night's dinner, fried puffballs. The floor was earth packed and worn so smooth as to appear waxed. The adjoining toilet offered the convenience of an inside entrance. Sam had never bothered to pretty-up the place, but in all ways he had it exactly as it suited him.

He'd been inside here only a moment ago, I felt; he'd heard me coming and dodged out.

"Sam?"

I turned about and bawled, "Sam, I want to talk to you."

He lurked somewhere near by, watching me. I sensed the wariness of his gaze, its resentment. But there was no other sound or sign of him.

"Do you hear me, Sam? Verna needs your help. I want to talk to you about Verna, Sam."

The water fled thinly past the empty hut and the trees whispered among themselves. The birds, the squirrels and Sam Wregg eyed me from secret chinks, all hidden, all silent.

Feeling silly and frustrated, I went back the way I had come.

Cars occupied all the parking space near the courthouse and more buzzed about looking for places to light. Spectators had crowded in early in order to get the best seats and a flock of talesmen had responded to the court's summons from all corners of Stagg County. Men and women clustered on the brownstone steps and the clock in the old tower above announced the show would begin very shortly now.

Cora Doremus, sitting stolidly in my office, answered my greeting with a formal nod. She had never looked more like an accomplice after the fact. At my desk Bethany and Ruth had gone into a huddle.

"Morning, Webster," Bethany said without looking up. "What do you think of this?"

"Isn't it beautiful, Mr. Lindley?" Ruth asked eagerly.

She stepped aside to make room for me and Bethany curled an arm through mine to draw me closer. On my blotter lay nine square tiles forming a larger square. As a whole they formed a design derived from the Pennsylvania Dutch, of clear primary blue and bright orange against a background whiter than snow. It sparkled under a flawless glaze, boldly individual in line and concept.

"Hey, this is pretty damn beautiful," I said. "I didn't know you'd gone in for tile-making, Bethany. You've really got something here."

"Not me," Bethany said, admiring them at my side. "Verna."

"Verna?"

Mrs. Doremus obviously felt the tiles were irrelevant and immaterial. Her conspiratorial manner said, Never mind that, come on, hurry and get Verna out.

"Verna painted them?" I inquired of Bethany. "I've had a dozen long talks with her but she never gave me any reason to suspect her of this."

"No one else ever heard of it either—not even her mother, did you, Mrs. Doremus? She began doing it only a short time ago, in her spare time. I'm the first person she ever mentioned them to—when I saw her yesterday."

"You've seen Verna at the county jail, Bethany?"

"Why, yes, Webster, quite a few times." Bethany smiled the smile of a woman indulging a man's preoccupations. "I told you but you didn't hear. She was so glad to see a new friend she sort of unfolded herself in sheer gratitude. Once you get acquainted with Verna you discover she's got quite a lot of stuff."

"In our discussions of a situation involving life or death she's seemed a little reserved," I said.

"Because you're a man, Webster. Her reactions to men get all tangled up, she's been so dominated by her stepfather most of her life. Really, she's warm and sweet and she does so want to have a good life."

The girl who so wanted a good life had only a few more minutes to wait before her lawyer would submit the matter for the court's consideration.

"These tiles were her own idea and, as you say, she's really creating something with them. She baked and glazed these at Lindwood, using a special clay in the gas oven there. She didn't dare risk the doctor's ridicule at home. Yesterday afternoon when I visited her, she asked me if I wouldn't see that nothing happened to her tiles. It really touched me, Webster. She'd sneaked them home past the doctor and hidden them in the woodshed—dozens of them, all as beautiful as these."

"You've gotten to be pals with my client, have you?"

"I only went a little out of my way to be friendly to a girl who must be feeling desperately alone; and I'm everlastingly glad I did. Verna will be a long time losing her shell, but she'll slowly come out of it and show everybody the individual she really is—given the chance. I want to hold an exhibition of her tiles at the school—when the trial's over."

So my client couldn't remain what she'd seemed, a little nonentity of a housekeeper. No. She had to spring a creative talent on me. She must blossom out as an artist with a future that would seem highly promising except that she'd inadvertently gotten messed up in a homicide case. Now that she need no longer fear her ogre of a stepfather—thanks to me—she would really begin to live a life worth living—provided I could arrange a longer future for her than the electric chair would permit.

I took Cora Doremus's arm, and Bethany stepped out the door with us, to hurry back to her school. Children must be watched over and taught and cared for, and the town's thousands of tasks must be done—checks cashed, valves ground, washing machines filled, paint sold, cretonne measured off the bolt, batteries charged, eggs crated and all the rest—a murder trial notwithstanding.

About to cross the street toward the courthouse with the defendant's mother I glanced wryly back at that damned office door of mine and wished to God my parents had named me Darwin Lindley, or Lord Nelson Lindley, or, better yet, Lewis and Clark Lindley.

"Good luck, Webster."

"Thank you, Bethany. I gratefully accept your good wishes on my client's behalf."

Indeed, if ever in this world I was to measure up to my alien name, now was the time to do it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE *Courier* hit Crossgate's front porches that afternoon with a headline proclaiming the completed impaneling of the jury in the Doremus murder case earlier than expected.

I sat alone in my office, mulling over the opening skirmish with no possible way of knowing how cannily or lucklessly Griff and I had permitted each other's approvals to stand unchallenged. We had made our choices not on the basis of any ability to weigh wisely a mortal issue, of course, but in blind surmise that each candidate would lean favorably to our side. Having been drawn by lot—that is, through sheer chance—the veniremen had assembled as an average assortment of citizens from which Griff and I had then, as is practically unavoidable, eliminated the more intelligent and competent. Any among them having already formed any sort of attitude toward Verna Doremus's guilt or innocence was, of

course, instantly banished. Since every man and woman in town had exchanged views about the case, and had read Dave Dredger's biased accounts in the *Courier*, it was difficult to see how any of them could remain ideally impartial, but nevertheless we had found six men and six women claiming to have successfully avoided all vestiges of an opinion.

For Verna's sake I had tried to collect in the jury box as many fat-faced, jolly live-and-let-livers as fortune afforded; but it was not to be forgotten that even these were subject to unpredictable spasms of dyspepsia which could be fatal to the defendant.

Ruth's pretty face appeared in my door and she said, "Mr. Dredger's bargaining in again."

He gently jounced her aside and trudged in urgently, white hair rumpled, vest open over his blue-denim shirt, big-knuckled hands stained with printer's ink.

"How's that jury shape up for Verna, Web?"

"There's only one thing sure about a jury, and that's the fact that you can never be sure about a jury at all."

"If they've got a grain of sense in their twelve heads they won't let themselves be influenced by this three-ring circus Griff West wants to put on. Heard about the Lucas family?"

"I've been pretty busy today. What about the Lucas family, Dave?"

"Carl Lucas, wife and kid, little chicken farm out on Swamp Road? Know 'em? Woke up dead this morning, all of 'em."

"What? All three? Dead?"

"Whole family wiped out in their sleep. Died in their beds durin' the night. Neighbor found 'em. Place neat as a pin, just the way Mag Lucas liked to have it, but not a soul left alive. It's all in today's paper. Don't you read my paper? Hah?"

"Been sitting here thinking. What killed them, Dave?"

"The very question, Web. That new coroner of ours, Vic Bray, and Griff West, cocky young sprout, they aren't sayin'. Public's entitled to know about the facts in such a case, but they're keepin' it to themselves."

"The cause of death?" I frowned into Dave's worrying face. "Why?"

"Ain't sayin'. Ask 'em about it and they put you off. Talk's

goin' around it was coal gas leakin' from the kitchen stove, but that don't account for those dead chickens."

"Dead chickens?"

"Half a dozen pullets lyin' out in the yard, all stiff as a board. Coal gas couldn't've done that and coal gas is nothin' for anybody to get hushed-up about. Web, the way that whole family died of a sudden, it puts me in mind of the way Syl Doremus went."

Sitting up, I said, "What do you mean?"

"Well, Griff West and Vic Bray, they could be keepin' mum about the Lucases because it might affect their case against Verna somehow. Hah? What say, Web?"

"I'll try to find out, Dave."

"Sure. Me too. Don't let 'em put you off, Web. Keep workin' on it."

"I will."

He hustled out, still trying to catch up with the day's never-ending tasks. For moments I searched for the significance in his news, more puzzled than a less informed person might have been. As I knew better than anyone else, Sylvester Doremus had died of a white powder absorbed through the stomach—a deadly stuff still nameless to his poisoner. What possible connection could exist between his death and the extinction, weeks thereafter, of a family far on the opposite side of the village? If such a connection did exist, had it actually thrown a new light on Griff's case against Verna? If so—

The telephone rang as I reached for it. Letting Ruth take the call, I heard her dubious, "Why-y, I'll see-e." Then she looked in my door prettily again and whispered, "Ernie Reece. Are you in?"

"To one of Crossgate's most up-and-coming young businessmen? Naturally."

Ruth disappeared shaking her head as if she would never really understand me. I took up my phone and waited until she had cradled hers before speaking.

"Evening, Ernie."

He said, in what seemed to be a newly cultivated executive tone, "I've got a message for you."

"Yes? Who from?"

"Can't say—except it's a witness who hasn't come forward in the Doremus case so far."

"A witness? Why hasn't he?"

"For certain private reasons. Wants to stay out of it. Thinks it might work out better that way. Maybe you'd like to hear what this witness knows."

Distrusting Ernie's purposes, I asked, "Is this on the level?"

"See for yourself. I'm a pretty busy guy, but I'm taking the time to give you this chance."

"Being big-hearted about it, are you, Ernie?"

He said evenly, retaining his new-found self-assurance, "Could be, but a lot will depend on how you take it. It might turn out I'm being a little rough on you. Maybe I'd better explain the situation. I got a lead to this certain information, understand, and it's simply a question whether you want it or does the D.A. get it first."

"What're you trying to do, Ernie, cook up a slight case of subornation of perjury? Or is this actually important to Verna's case?"

"Handled the right way, it might help get her clear."

"How?"

"I'm talking about certain private, important information which nobody else has heard so far."

I asked, after a groping hesitation, "Who's the witness?"

"Hold it. You're coming to that part a little too fast."

"Playing games, Ernie? Twenty questions? All right. Male or female?"

"This is one time it makes no difference."

"Send him over—or her."

"Take it easy. I'm handling this end of it. I know a better way."

"Cut it out, Ernie. If you're acting in good faith, remember a murder case is nothing to horse around with. Let's have it. Just what does this bashful witness profess to know?"

"Maybe I'd better not mention it over the phone."

"Why not?"

"It could turn out to be some pretty hot stuff—about the movements of a certain lawyer at a certain place on a certain day a few weeks ago—the same day Dr. Doremus died, I think it was."

I stiffened but managed to sound more irritated than alarmed. "You're beating around too many bushes."

"Not interested?"

"Some other time, Ernie."

"Okay. Make it tonight, say ten o'clock. There's a place up the road called the Black Cat. Ever been there?"

"No. I keep my appointments here at this office."

"Except this one. Maybe you ought to get out and around more anyway." Ernie's tone had turned slightly sinister. "Black Cat, ten tonight—just a quiet little conference that might make a lot of difference to—the murderer in your case."

"The hell with this stuff, Ernie!"

I broke the connection, sat there clenching the phone in a cold prickling hand.

"A bluff," I told myself. "A bluff and the hell with it."

But—"The movements of a certain lawyer at a certain place on a certain day a few weeks ago—the same day Dr. Doremus died". . . .

Ten o'clock found me heading for the shabby roadhouse called the Black Cat.

The black-top road bent past the general store at the Fountaintown crossroads, six miles from Crossgate's center, bringing into sight a roadside sign glaring scarlet.

I denounced myself as a sucker for nibbling at Ernie's bait like this; I was off my beam, I'd gotten too damn skittish. But on the other hand a conscientious non-murderous attorney would overlook no lead that might benefit his client; and as one who was homicidally tainted I'd be smart, strictly in my own illicit interests, not to ignore any threat.

Before leaving home—I'd spent most of the evening incidentally puttering about my basement workshop while wrangling with myself—I had reached both Griff West and Vic Bray by phone. It had taken two hours and perhaps twenty tries. Finally I'd stirred up a response from Griff's office, where he had returned in zestful delusion to the job of shaping up the prosecution's opening attack for tomorrow morning.

"Lucas family?" he said impatiently. "No question of murder there, of course."

"I know, but—"

"Since the deaths were accidental, this office has no reason to interest itself."

"But as to the cause of death, Griff——"

"See the acting coroner," and he'd hung up.

I had finally connected with our acting coroner at his office at a few minutes before ten. Dr. Victor Bray said he had been making a few late calls on patients and also mentioned cryptically an "important bit of laboratory work."

"I can't give out any information on the Lucas case until my analysis and report are completed, and this will take time—a week or perhaps a little longer."

Was this a shrewd evasion maneuvered by the district attorney who had nudged him into office? "A week or perhaps a little longer," would see the Doremus trial ended. However, Vic Bray had answered my next questions without equivocation—and without fear of upsetting the state's case against Verna: "No, the cause of death in the Lucas case is not similar to that of any other case in Crossgate in recent months. I may say definitely, having made a careful check, that the Lucases and Dr. Sylvester Doremus did not die of the same cause."

So much for Dave Dredger's hunch, although he'd been justified in feeling, and I still felt, that the Lucas episode was being treated with peculiar reticence in our official circles.

I turned the car off the road. The Black Cat, surrounded by cornfields and woods, sat in a cindered lot where ten or twelve other cars lurked in the bordering darkness. The low frame structure looked like, and was, a firetrap. Its few windows were dim with grime. Even before entering it you knew it would be dirty inside and thick with the smells of stale smoke and slopped beer. Anyone of ordinary taste and prudence would pass it by.

Stepping in, I became the focal point of a sudden silence and wary scrutinies. Every man at the bar stopped talking to size me up. In the booths other men and women eyed me. I might have been a revenooer entering corn likker country. Nobody moved or spoke until the general assurance stole around that I was not the vanguard of a raid.

The man who came with a yellow-toothed grin from be-

hind the wet bar looked almost as unwashed as his floor. Nick Quattri ran the Black Cat, or vice versa.

"Ah, Mist' Lindley." Several years ago his wife had retained me to divorce him on thoroughly valid grounds and he seemed still to feel, gratefully, that the operation would not have been successful without me. "Somet'ing I do for you, Mist' Lindley?"

"Ernie Reece here?"

"The boot' in corner."

Ernie had placed himself so that the entire room could watch my approach to him. He was alone in the booth, wearing beige slacks, a brown-and-green checked jacket that would have attracted notice even in Hollywood, and an ivy-green shirt. He had an empty glass before him and a faint I-knew-it smile on his preposterously beautiful face. Taking the opposite bench, I found that Nick had dogged me. I ordered the standard straight rye for myself and Ernie—any mixed drink, even a highball, in a place of this kind being considered a foppish affectation, even for a lady—and Nick slouched off for them.

"Your favorite hangout, Ernie?"

"Not any more. Been talking business with Nick. Thinking of buying the place."

"Buying it?"

"Planning to fix it up a little and hire somebody to run it for me," Ernie said with casual managerial directness. "It's just one of a couple of deals I'm working on."

I looked at the fuming cigarette coals in the booths, at the butts flattened on the gritty black floor, at the spittoons, at the back door near the stairs leading to the "private dining rooms" overhead. Then I looked back with no less aversion at the pretty young man who aspired to become not merely Juliana's new stepfather but also the new proprietor of the Black Cat.

"Speaking of business, Ernie, let's get down to it. Where do I meet your elusive friend?"

"What friend?"

"You spoke of a witness."

"Did I say I'd bring somebody?" Ernie shook his blond head. "This is the way I'm working it, strictly between me and you."

"Look here, Ernie. A witness in a homicide case can't be so

damned coy as all this. I don't like this business of trying to keep the witness's identity under wraps. If you——"

"So you don't like it," Ernie broke in. "But this is the way I'm working it."

He adjusted the knot in his splashy tie while Nick delivered the drinks. Swallowing his at once, in one neat show-off toss, he said, "Do it again, Nick," and smiled at me thinly, amused to keep me guessing. An entertaining basis for a guessing-game, Ernie felt—murder.

"All right, Ernie. You want something—obviously, since your time is too valuable to waste. But this play you're making isn't too smart, because the deal you're trying to put over won't stand up. In fact, it will fall flat on its face the minute I find out this tricky witness of yours doesn't actually exist."

Ernie inspected his cufflinks, his smile growing taunting. "Think you're calling a bluff, do you? Your mistake. See for yourself. Remember the afternoon of the day Doc Doremus died? Need any help to remember it?"

Trying to seem as casual as an innocent man, I assured myself it was impossible, completely impossible, there couldn't have been any sort of witness; and I said aloud, "I remember it in detail—naturally, having discussed it over and over, as Verna's lawyer."

"This is one detail Verna didn't tell you about. She couldn't because she didn't know about it. She wasn't at Lindwood at the time—that is, about one forty-five in the afternoon. That was when this car came into Lindwood—the driver probably figuring nobody would be around, because Lydia was in town, shopping, and it was Verna's regular Thursday afternoon off."

"Who saw this car coming in?"

Ernie lifted his handsome eyebrows. "A certain witness, I keep telling you—whose name stays under my hat as long as it suits my purposes, understand?"

"You'd be more convincing if you could manage to be less mysterious, Ernie. What's your point? Who did your non-existent witness see driving that car?"

"A certain man who seemed to resemble a certain lawyer in Crossgate. So far we can't say definitely who this man was, but the identification might be verified later—under the right circumstances."

"To sum up this hocus-pocus of yours, then, a nameless witness professes to have seen a man of uncertain identity driving into Lindwood on the afternoon of the day Dr. Doremus died."

Ernie smiled the smile that had caused many a female heart to thump. "The time's definite, at least."

"What of it?"

Ernie said, fingering his breast pocket handkerchief, "The driver of this car acted as if he'd come just at that time because he figured there'd be nobody at home. He saw the garage was empty, and that told him the coast was clear, so he went into the empty house."

We were necessarily silent while Nick delivered another double-bottomed shot-glass of rye. As Ernie gulped it I recalled Sam Wregg spying on Lindwood from behind the garage and felt the penetrating dankness of this murky saloon.

"This guy sneaked in," Ernie resumed, "like he had a job to do—something that had to be done while nobody was looking. He used the kitchen door. Then he went up to Lydia's room."

"Wait a minute." I tried to keep the tension out of my voice, thereby putting more tension into it. "Your witness sees through solid walls, does he?"

"Through windows," Ernie answered. "The ground rises on that side of the house and the sun was in the room."

Yes.

"This guy could be seen moving around in there. Imagine. What's worth fooling around with in a lady's bedroom when the lady isn't there?"

"Then?" I said tightly.

Ernie shrugged. "That much ought to give you the idea. This guy tried to work it so nobody would ever know he'd been in Lindwood at just that time. He seemed to figure he was putting over a pretty slick one. Fact is, he came pretty close to succeeding—he'd be getting away with it clean, except it just happened he was seen sneaking in and out."

"This is supposed to mean something, is it?"

"To Doc Doremus it seemed to add up to something, yes. The doc went into that same kitchen and that same bedroom just a little later. And that same evening Doc Doremus was dead."

Every nerve drawn, I asked with simulated skepticism, "Are you seriously suggesting this man's visit to that house had some relation to Dr. Doremus's death?"

Ernie countered enigmatically, "What do *you* think?"

I pressed him with an inwardly frantic insistence, "Are you actually insinuating this same man even *caused* the doctor's death?"

Ernie shrugged. "Something did."

"Not necess—"

"Was it your client?"

"No. I believe—"

"If it wasn't your client, who the hell else could it be, then, except that man?"

Almost the same infuriating question that Griff West had repeatedly flung at me! I stiffly ignored it and snapped, "It's crazy. Nobody had any reason for killing the doctor."

"But somebody did it," Ernie insisted mockingly. "Anyway, who said anything about a reason?"

"What? Now you're being fantastic—intimating that somebody killed him without a motive!"

Ernie said, shrugging again, "Do you think it's impossible?"

"Quit horsing around, Ernie. This is serious. If you know more than you've already told me, let's have it."

"That much will do for the moment," Ernie said, feeling of the perfect knot of his tie.

"I can slap a subpoena on you, Ernie. That'll persuade you to talk."

Ernie ran his hand caressingly over the golden waves of his hair. "You know even better than I do, the court wouldn't let me tell it. With me it's all hearsay. Besides, if I ever had to climb onto the witness stand I'd probably forget all about it." He laughed at me. "Don't try to bluff *me*."

His gleaming grin was a tempting target for a fistful of knuckles; but socking him in the teeth would scarcely improve the situation.

"Anyway, what's the hurry. After your client has been acquitted," he added, "the question of who poisoned Doc Doremus will be left wide open—so this certain witness's information will be even more valuable then."

I put both fists inside my coat pockets and asked tersely, "What are you after, Ernie?"

"And in case of a guilty verdict, the people who feel sorry for Verna and want to see her cleared might like to hear——"

"*What do you want, Ernie?*"

"Nothing." Answering lightly, Ernie Reece slid out of the booth to a pictorial standing position. "Nothing at all."

He turned his dazzling grin down at me, raising his voice a little so that the denizens of the dark booths could notice him putting a period to this cozy little interview for which I'd sought him out.

"I just thought you might like to talk things over with me. Well, good night. When you have anything else on your mind, just let me know and come around."

He sauntered out, leaving the bill for me to pay—leaving me also with a new fear, formless but heavy, added to the smothering weight of all my other fears.

Now I could proceed, bright and early tomorrow morning, after a night that promised to be long and sleepless, to defend a murder charge with less than no peace of mind, my case backed up with little more than uncorroborated denials and character witnesses.

CHAPTER TWELVE

RETURNING FROM another futile visit to Sam Wregg's shanty next morning—again it had seemed the habitation of an elusive and exasperatingly intractable troll—I drove past the home of Judge Harvard Tasker, wherein dwelled, between promulgations, the Voice of the Old Man.

Here, behind the Tasker home this morning, a black robe hung flapping on the washline. Evidently the Court had unwisely caught its skirts on a nail; a rip was visible, waiting to be mended, not by the Court itself, of course, but by a less noble agency—Mrs. Tasker.

Watching for a moment the torn and awesome vestments of the Law billowing fat and empty in the sweet extralegal breeze, I walked on toward our local coliseum of justice—as we called it, having nothing else to tie the tag on.

Early in the afternoon session Judge Tasker tapped his gavel and the tipstaff announced a recess.

When the judge had retired to his chambers for mysterious purposes I took Verna into the attorney's room. There we could escape for a few minutes the pressure of the massed spectators' eyes. We were playing to a full house—in fact, standing room only. Many women having brought their box-lunches, the floor between the pews had become littered with sandwich wrappings and orange peels. I had searched the faces in that amphitheater for Sam Wregg's without spotting him. He might be there, lurking in ambush again, but I'd had little time for picture puzzles. District Attorney West, staging a well-rehearsed, fast-paced performance, had begun springing his surprises early. The recess had come as an opening I felt glad to seize.

Verna looked tensely bewildered, as well she might. She held her appealing eyes on me and I tried to conceal from her my own growing anxieties.

"So far, fine. Griff wasn't too tough on you in his opening address—but don't trust that, he's sure to get tougher. The witnesses he's calling now are all laying the basis of his case, all routine. Everything's fine so far—except that I'd like to clear up a point in the testimony just given by the state trooper, Patrolman Esties."

Verna sat still, her gravely eager eyes never leaving my face. Meanwhile I hoped the defendant's mother would attract no special attention. I'd taken a chance on leaving Cora Doremus there in the open, stolidly stiff-spined in her ring-side chair. I'd constantly felt her mistaken cynicism at my back. It wasn't easy to take in a catch-as-catch-can contest, one demanding alertness to the wording and inflection of every phrase uttered.

"The trooper testified that Dr. Doremus tried to speak a few words to him. Did you hear that—the doctor mumbling?"

"No, I didn't, honestly, Mr. Lindley."

"As you saw, Verna, I tried to shake the trooper's story, but

he stuck to it. No doubt it's perfectly true. Dr. Doremus did try to tell him something about the bottle."

"Mr. Lindley, honestly, I didn't know anything about that until just now."

"Trooper Esties insists he heard at least that one word distinctly—'bottle,' apparently meaning the bottle of whisky. You see what this means, Verna? On the basis of this testimony concerning the doctor's dying statement the district attorney is going to try to make a strong point. He'll try to show that the doctor himself believed he'd been poisoned by the liquor in that bottle—the bottle you'd given him."

Round-eyed, Verna blurted, "But—that must be wrong!"

"Verna, are you absolutely sure there was no poison in that bottle?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Lindley!"

I straightened, wagging my head—not over Verna, not over the mockery of circumstances, but at myself. Why in heaven's name had I asked her that last question? Didn't I know—hadn't I known from the beginning—better than Verna, better than the trooper, even better than Dr. Doremus, exactly where the fatal dose had come from? . . .

"We'll go back now." There was a rustle in the courtroom. "The recess is over."

My client hesitated. "Mr. Lindley, I—I can't seem to make out *what* the jury is thinking."

"You're not the only one, Verna," I said. "Neither can the jury."

The technical testimony of our acting coroner had warned me of a crisis straight ahead.

In my office that evening alone, I paced around and mulled over Vic Bray's statements again and again, feeling they were potentially dangerous.

"No, alcoholism alone could not account for the symptoms I observed in Dr. Sylvester Doremus."

As our acting coroner sat there in the witness box, proud, pink-cheeked and freshly laundered, I'd had to admit to myself he was right so far.

"Yes, definite indications of poison—delirium and convul-

sions followed by syncope, coma and death. Post-mortem indications of an acute inogenous jaundice."

The district attorney had asked, "What is your opinion as to the cause of these toxic conditions?"

"The symptoms are those of poisoning by phosphorus."

Phosphorus? . . . Phosphorus? . . . Our acting coroner had no doubts of it.

In answer to the district attorney's instruction to explain his findings in detail he'd said, "Certainly. In the case of Dr. Doremus there was evidently a delay between the ingestion of the poison and the appearance of its first effects. In acute poisoning from phosphorus the symptoms are delayed at least two hours but usually from six to twelve hours or even longer. In fatal cases they then follow as I have already outlined them—delirium, convulsions, collapse and coma ending in death."

"This is your official conclusion, then, based on your first-hand observation of your dying patient and your findings at autopsy—that Dr. Doremus died of poison by phosphorus?"

"It is."

The direction of my first attack had astonished nobody. Its target was not the acting coroner's conclusions, but the acting coroner himself. I emphasized carefully the fact that Sylvester Doremus was not only his first official subject but his first problem in toxicology of any nature.

"In other words you've arrived at this conclusion on the basis of no previous experience whatever with poison cases?"

"I painstakingly checked my findings against the best authorities," he had snapped at me.

"All authorities know, Dr. Bray—even many schoolboys know—that yellow phosphorus is an ugly, fuming waxy substance having such a strong offensive smell and taste that anyone, even a drunken person, would spit it out instantly."

"Death may be caused by very small amounts, as little as two or three milligrams. The odor and taste of phosphorus are readily masked by other substances of strong taste or odor—especially alcohol."

"You read that in a book somewhere, no doubt?"

There had been objections and bickering in the course of my cross-examination, and smouldering resentment on the

part of young Dr. Bray. But he was not alone in his painstaking consultation with such toxicologists as Peterson, Haines, Witthaus and Becker. I had done considerable boning up. And it was still true, also, that I was better versed in the demise of Sylvester Doremus than was this "expert."

"Is it not true, Dr. Bray, that the symptoms you've described are also those of acute yellow atrophy of the liver as it often occurs in cases of alcoholism? . . . Is it not true, Dr. Bray, that phosphorus exists normally in the human body in the form of phosphates, phospholipins and nuclein compounds? . . . Is it not true, Dr. Bray, that phosphorus is frequently used as a therapeutic agent in medicine taken by mouth? Can you swear Dr. Doremus had not been taking medicine of that kind? . . . Isn't it true, Dr. Bray, that there are no symptoms of poisoning by phosphorus which are not variable, indefinite and almost negative—that the only reliable indication of such poison is the presence of unoxidized phosphorus in the excreta and vomitus? Did you find such traces of free phosphorus, Dr. Bray?"

Stiff with restrained rage, detesting me with a sterilized animosity, Vic Bray had been forced to answer, "I did not."

"Yet, despite your total lack of experience and on the basis of such vague assumptions you dare—"

But the wrangling precipitated by my attempts to discredit this witness, loud as it was, could not destroy the simple fact of poison. The jury in its apathy would forget many things, but not the basic truth that some sort of poison, no matter what its name might be, actually had caused Sylvester Doremus to die. Also, I reminded myself, as I moved restively about my office that evening, trying to outguess my adversary for tomorrow, the danger signals still flew. This fancy guesswork as to the nature of the poison had merely prepared the way. Now the D.A. was winding up his Sunday punch."

First thing next morning he cut loose with it.

At the noon recess Deputy Sheriff Bommer had politely taken Verna back to jail. Skipping lunch, I'd rapidly checked over the morning's sensational testimony, then had hustled over to the jail to get my client's story on the jarring blow that Griff had sprung—one that had really rattled my wits.

Lew Hixon, warden of the Stagg County prison and a kindly man, had suggested we use his private office. A square room crowded by two rolltop desks and several mission tables, it had scabby linoleum on its floor, walls papered with notices of wanted criminals, and barred windows—a privileged place but hardly more pleasant than a prisoner's cell. A trusty had brought Verna a bowl of bean soup for lunch but she hadn't tasted it. She sat in the warden's swivel chair, hands in her lap, pale and stunned, gravely self-reproachful, and she watched me—this time more intently than before.

Once outside the courtroom and out of the jury's sight, I had dropped all pretense of optimism, of calm confidence. This was no occasion for either. If my client hadn't already recognized it fully, my agitation should be enough to warn her that the jam we were in had taken a sudden turn from bad to desperate.

"Verna, why, for God's sake, didn't you tell me about that tube of rat poison?"

"I forgot, Mr. Lindley."

"Forgot?"

"Honestly, Mr. Lindley, it just slipped my mind completely."

"Enough poison to kill a courtroomful of people," I groaned, "and you merely let it slip your mind!"

"I'm s-sorry, Mr. Lindley, but don't you see, it"—Verna choked up a little, her voice and eyes growing teary—"it doesn't really mean anything."

"The D.A. is making it mean plenty, Verna. I don't for a minute believe you fed rat paste to your stepfather, but the D.A. intends to prove you did it regardless. He scored one hell of a powerful point this morning. I hope to God we can find a way of arguing it down. But this thing's piling up on us; we've got to work fast."

I faced her and she held her wide-open eyes on me, frightened and white-cheeked.

"You saw that tube of rat poison when the D.A. put it in evidence. You heard the county detective testify he'd found it in the trash can at Lindwood, part of its contents having been used. You also heard George Keller, the druggist, testify that a few days before Dr. Doremus's death you came into his

drugstore and bought a tube of that same brand of rat poison called Rat-Not. Is he mistaken about that, Verna?"

She murmured contritely, "No, Mr. Lindley."

"Then you did buy a tube of Rat-Not at Keller's pharmacy and this occurred a few days before Dr. Doremus died of poisoning?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you buy it, Verna?"

"To get rid of mice in the kitchen and pantry."

"Of course you were acting under orders from Lydia—Mrs. Lindley?"

"No, sir."

"You were *not*?"

"No, sir."

I drew a deep breath. "It was not Mrs. Lindley's instructions that sent you to Keller's drugstore to buy a tube of Rat-Not in order to get rid of those mice?"

"But Mrs. Lindley never even *knew* about such things and didn't want to be bothered by them," Verna wailed. "She left everything like that to me—the marketing and any little things the house might need, like fuses for the switch-box, or light bulbs, or a new broom, or maybe a new paring knife. So when we needed to get rid of the mice it never occurred to me to ask her permission first."

"So," I summarized it with my hopes dragging, "buying the rat paste was your own idea entirely. And you didn't even mention the mice to Mrs. Lindley?"

"She would have told me to do just what I did," Verna said indignantly, "so I bought the rat poison in just the same way I'd bought ant buttons and fly-spray and a DDT bomb and moth-proofing stuff and other such things that any home normally needs."

"But the rat poison is different from all the others in one important way, Verna. George Keller testified also to this very detail, one that makes the rat poison fundamental to the D.A.'s whole case. The poisonous ingredient of that damn stuff you bought is phosphorus."

Verna sat silent, feeling the stupefying force of Griff West's case against her.

"The D.A. will ask you why you bought a dangerous type

of paste, which is poisonous to every living animal, rather than the safer type containing red squill, which kills rodents but not humans."

Verna shook her confused head. "I don't know why. I did the same thing thousands of other people do every day for the same reason. I just wanted to get rid of a few mice."

I shook my head also, this being a standard falsehood advanced by practically all the none-too-bright murderers who resort to the over-the-counter types of poison.

"Then, Verna, how did that partly consumed tube of rat paste happen to be found among the trash the day after Dr. Doremus died?"

"I threw it there, Mr. Lindley," Verna said.

"Why?"

"To get rid of it."

"Why?"

"There was a little hole broken in the tube and the stuff oozed out. It smoked and smelled bad. It made me uneasy having it around, so I threw it away."

All the wrong things had happened to Verna Doremus. My client was innocent as a babe in arms, and yet it was hard to see how a Borgia could look guiltier.

Obviously—at least it seemed obvious to me in my special position—Griff, having first discovered the tube of rat poison, had proceeded to construct his case upon it. The symptoms of phosphorus poisoning as vaguely sketched by Vic Bray had conveniently fitted this evidence, as they might fit a dozen other poisons described by leading toxicologists in their texts as causing no characteristic post-mortem appearances. To this effect I would most certainly marshal impressive medical testimony to refute our inexperienced acting coroner. As the holder of certain inside knowledge which no one else possessed concerning the death of Sylvester Doremus, I could be certain of the validity of my argument on this point. But it was anybody's guess how much strength we might recover in a disagreement between experts. The fact remained that the district attorney had hit us a smashing wallop on a tender spot.

"So you actually did buy this damned rat poison containing phosphorus, not at anyone else's urging, but entirely of your

own volition, and after using part of it—to kill mice—you did throw the rest away.”

“Yes.”

“The district attorney is going to make it tough for you when you take the stand, Verna. He’ll insist you dropped some of that rat poison into the doctor’s whisky bottle. Of course you really didn’t.”

“Oh no, Mr. Lindley!”

“I know damned well you didn’t, Verna. You’ll answer the district attorney with a wholehearted and completely truthful denial. I’ll do my damndest to back you up with professional testimony to the effect that an intended victim would be certain to notice such offensive stuff in a drink directly under his nose. I’ll even stage an actual demonstration if the court will let me get away with it. That’s the most we can hope to do about this angle, except possibly pray a bit. Now, Verna, listen carefully to me.”

Still wide-eyed in her fright, she murmured, “Yes, Mr. Lindley.”

“This kick in the teeth caught me off guard. I don’t want to be taken by surprise like this again. If there’s anything else the D.A. can hit us with, let’s get prepared against it now, while there’s still time to build up a defense. You understand how vital this is.”

“Yes, Mr. Lindley.”

“All right. Now think. Think hard. What else can the D.A. spring on us?”

She was silent, thinking.

“Try your damndest to remember every single thing, Verna.”

“I’m trying, Mr. Lindley.”

“Don’t overlook any possibility, no matter how far-fetched or trivial it may seem.”

“I won’t, Mr. Lindley.”

“Well, Verna?”

“Honestly, there isn’t anything else.”

“Are you sure, absolutely sure?”

“Yes, Mr. Lindley. I’m positive there isn’t anything else.”

But there was. There was something else and in due course it landed on us with bombshell effect.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NORTH MAIN, as observed through the slats of my venetian blind, was as peaceful as a small-town street ever gets on a summer evening with adolescents batting balls until the last glimmer of visibility, radios laughing inside open windows, insects squeaking out their one day of life. I was watching for a royal-blue sedan to come looming into dock like the latest thing in ocean cruisers. I had phoned Lydia—reaching her after many tries—to join me here on a matter of concern to her. She had consented, but irritably, and of course she was already a little late.

I resumed pacing and retracing the path I'd worn from my secretary's desk in the outer office to the tiny library-lavatory in the rear.

In a chair facing my own sat Cora Doremus. Here by request—and a grim, flat request it had been—she sat there like a cynical female Buddha awaiting judgment day, which, she could be damned sure wasn't far off now.

Although she showed no signs of it at the moment Cora Doremus had had a rough day in court. Certainly Griff had shown her as little mercy as he'd dared. Every lawyer learns sooner or later, through sorrowful wounds, that a woman on the witness stand is to be treated with all the deference he would show a tetchy cobra, and it was not to be forgotten for a moment that six women were sitting in our jury box; but Griff, showing admirable footwork, had managed to put his point across with a certain quality of courteous relentlessness. Meanwhile I had listened, inwardly squirming and cursing the simple-minded myopia of Cora Doremus.

"Why did you dump the whisky out of that bottle, Mrs. Doremus? Did you pour it down the sink to prevent its being analyzed? Did you get rid of that liquor because you had reason to believe it contained a deadly poison? Isn't it a fact that you knew your daughter had put poison into that bottle? You

wished to protect Verna by destroying the evidence of her guilt, did you not?"

"I wanted only to put that stuff where the doctor couldn't get it for another drink."

"But by that time, as you yourself told us only a moment ago, the doctor had lapsed into almost total unconsciousness. At that time he was unable to take another drink; he had already taken his last. You believed him to be dying, did you not, Mrs. Doremus? Is that why you made haste to get rid of that liquor? If you were not absolutely certain in your own mind that your daughter had poisoned your husband, why did you empty that bottle? . . . What was your true reason for emptying that bottle? . . . Why? . . . Why? . . ."

My bombardment of objections could not have distracted the jurors from the inevitable damning inference. Cora Doremus had left the stand badly ruffled and blind to the fact that she had surpassed all the other witnesses in the damage she had unwittingly done her daughter.

After that Griff had allowed the proceedings to level off in a deceptive lull. Lydia, called next, had looked lovely, of course, and had set off no fireworks. Her testimony had, in fact, seemed dull—to everyone other than the attorney for the defense. For me it had had an ironic fascination. It might have fascinated the jury also had I felt free to share my viewpoint with them.

"I drove into the city to shop that morning, intending to stay until midafternoon," Lydia had explained, "but I developed a hideous headache and started back without even having lunched."

"Did you drive directly back home, Mrs. Lindley?"

"Does it matter?"

"I'd like to give the jurors a clear picture."

"Well, the car gave me a little trouble on the way back, dirt in the carburetor or something, so I left it at the garage and one of the mechanics drove me home."

"Was anyone else there at Lindwood at the time?"

"No."

"Then, after you'd been alone at home for a short while, the defendant, Verna Doremus, returned?"

"It was her afternoon off, but she came back anyway, as she

often did, so I asked her to call her stepfather, Dr. Doremus, for me. Then when the doctor came it was the usual thing. He left me some new medicine and we talked together over our coffee for a few minutes——”

“About this coffee, Mrs. Lindley. Verna had made it?”

“Oh yes. We used what was left in my vacuum jug, then I had Verna bring up more from the kitchen.”

“Both you and Dr. Doremus drank the same coffee from the same pot, then?”

“Yes.”

But the sugar, Mr. Prosecutor. Are you going to bring out the fact that Dr. Doremus took the last spoonful of sugar in the bowl so that Mrs. Lindley had to have it refilled for herself?

“You suffered no ill effects from the coffee, Mrs. Lindley?”

“Why, no.”

In this manner Griff had narrowed the possibilities to the one best fitting his theory. He was showing the jury that Sylvester Doremus could not have swallowed the poison with the coffee, the truth notwithstanding. This proved beyond all doubt that the doctor could have been fed the phosphorus, which hadn't killed him, in only one way—in the whisky which hadn't contained it.

“I want to make this point perfectly clear, Mrs. Lindley. Both you and Dr. Doremus drank the same coffee from the same pot at the same time that afternoon and you did not feel the slightest distress from it afterward?”

“Of course not. None at all.”

But the sugar, Mr. Prosecutor. Aren't you concerned at all with the question of whether Dr. Doremus suffered any ill effects from that special spoonful of sugar?

“Thank you, Mrs. Lindley; that's all. Cross-examine.”

Lydia had faced me from the stand as from a throne, a lovely woman, my daughter's mother, my ex-wife, my ex-sister-in-law and my brother's murderer. The murder of my brother was not, however, and never would be the point at issue here. Lydia was much more fortunate in homicidal matters than Verna, and much more skilled than I. She was more fortunate than she knew, in fact. I had expected to accompany her in a ritual, but it was to have been her own funeral. Again

I thought, more pungently than before, how much simpler and pleasanter everything would be today if only Lydia had lethally sweetened her own coffee that afternoon—if only my aim with that deadly stuff, whatever it really was, had been truer.

Lydia had gazed at me from the witness box with the ghost of a knowing smile on her lips and the whole courtroom had hushed itself to hear my first question.

Was anything to be gained for Verna by transferring the poison theoretically from the liquor bottle to the sugar bowl? Would my client seem less guilty if the real medium of death were revealed? Would our case be bolstered by introducing a new suspicion, confusing and equally untrue, to the effect that it was Lydia Lindley, not Sylvester Doremus, whom Verna had meant to poison?

"No questions just at this time, Mrs. Lindley. I'll recall you later."

In the shattering light of Griff's bombshell, which even then was falling overhead, I could thank God I'd avoided the subject of that deadly sugar.

A car had purred to a stop in front of my office. Turning, I hustled to open the door. Lydia came in with a gentlewoman's air of dutiful long-suffering, ultra-smart in a jacket of shaggy black fur, a new one. I'd long since given up trying to keep count of Lydia's new fur coats.

"Web, must you really keep on bothering me about this dreary trial?"

"Dreary? Not to Verna, or to me either. This shouldn't take long; then you can rush back to more amusing things. Verna's mother is here."

Verna's ex-employer nodded to Verna's mother. Cora Doremus looked poker-faced at Mrs. Lindley, then turned her eyes away, feeling in her silent contempt that the patrician Lydia inside her fineries was no better than anybody else.

"Take my chair, Lydia. You left the courtroom as soon as you'd finished testifying this afternoon, didn't you? You didn't hear Griff call his next witness, Nick Quattri?"

"I was already late for my appointment with the hair-dresser," Lydia said.

"You mean you haven't heard about it at all?"

"Is it in today's *Courier*?"

"No, it came too late, last thing before adjournment. Griff pulled off a perfect second-act curtain."

"Oh. Well, I was terribly busy—first the hairdresser, then I made tea for myself, then Julie's supper. It takes so much of my time, not having a cook at Lindwood now." Lydia had grown resentful of Verna's carelessness in letting herself get mixed up in a murder. "And I lay down for a while too, resting."

Cora Doremus sniffed. Ignoring her peasant crudeness, Lydia gave me a look of impatient puzzlement.

"What *are* you looking so grim about, Web?"

"Stick around, Lydia. You're one of the few people in Crossgate who hasn't picked up this tasty little morsel. You'll be entranced, in a slightly nauseated way."

I turned back to the door, having heard the squeaking brakes of another car. Deputy Sheriff Bommer in his gentlemanly manner opened it for his prisoner. His glance sprang eagerly to Ruth's desk, but his chaperonage must go unrewarded tonight; my secretary was elsewhere, no doubt enjoying herself more than any of the rest of us. Bommer gestured Verna in and in glum disappointment dropped into a lonely chair.

Verna's was the tear-softened, wan face of a heartsick young woman. Her puffy eyes begged for forgiveness. I had none in me tonight. In spite of all my warnings Verna had committed the unforgivable sin, against herself chiefly but me also, of lying to her lawyer. Innocent or not, it could be suicidal. Her innocence had not prevented her making a critical situation worse and I was in no mood to be tender with her.

I signaled her to the chair at her mother's side. Moving toward it, she caught sight of Lydia and froze to a standstill.

"You—you must hate me now, M-Mrs. Lindley," Verna stammered.

"Must I?" Lydia said softly, her guards up. "What for?"

"Never mind that, Verna," I put in. "Sit down. Leave this to me." When she was seated, her large soft hands squeezing her knees through her wrinkled dress, looking like a cowed child with her head lowered and eyes lifted, I stood over her. "So

there was nothing else you could think of to tell me, Verna. Nothing at all."

"I'm s-sorry, Mr. Lindley."

"Apologies and tears aren't going to help us now. I'm not going to waste precious time bawling you out, either. The damage has been done. Or rather, it's just getting a good, ruinous start. As much as it may hurt already, Griff isn't half finished with you. He's aching for the moment when you'll take the stand. He can hardly wait for his cue to go to work on you."

"I'm t-terribly s-sorry, Mr. Lindley!"

"For God's sake keep a hold on yourself. We need more than sorrowful sobs to get us out of this mess. Thank God I'm able to work on you ahead of Griff. If I have to grill hell out of you in order to get the truth, Verna, I'm going to get it, starting right now."

"I—I'll tell you all the rest, Mr. Lindley."

"Honestly, Verna?—to use one of your favorite words!" I let myself sound as sour as I felt.

"I'll tell you everything now, really I will, I swear it." Verna was breathlessly in earnest. A little late, but wholly in earnest now. "The only reason I didn't tell you before—besides being so terribly ashamed of it—I didn't think it would come up."

"Why not?"

"I didn't think anyone else knew."

"My good God," I almost snarled at her. "You'd gone to the Black Cat with Ernie Reece not once, but a number of times, and you were actually so naïve as to think nobody else even suspected it!"

A quick glance aside, while Verna sat there nibbling at her swollen lower lip, showed me Lydia's strikingly stylish face retaining its magazine-cover aplomb. I should have expected to find no upsurge of anguished astonishment in it. A woman capable of murdering her husband without batting an eyelash wouldn't let a frolicksome lover discompose her too much.

"Well, Verna, as we've all found out now, your romantic interludes with Ernie Reece were not quite a complete secret. At least Nick Quattri was in on it. After all, he's the man who collects the rent for those upstairs rooms at the Black Cat.

You heard him testify that Ernie had you there—as a guest for late supper, Nick called it—five or six times.”

“He—he never saw me when I went there, Mr. Lindley. I’m pretty sure he never did. We—used the back stairs and I was careful—”

“Possibly you overestimated your escort’s sense of gallant discretion. He might even have a slight tendency to brag about his sexual prowess. Anyway your visits there didn’t go entirely unnoticed. Now let’s fill in the rest of this pretty picture, Verna. How did all this start?”

Verna twisted her hands together. “Must I—tell it—in front of Mrs. Lindley?”

“But why not, dear?” Lydia said too sweetly. “As Web says, it’s hardly a private matter any more and, really, I never had any illusions of Ernest’s being a virgin.”

Verna murmured, “I—I’m so ashamed I let it happen.”

“But don’t be,” Lydia said in brittle tones. “After all, it’s been a rather prevalent failing in Crossgate. Something in the water, perhaps. Anyway it gives you an interest in common with so many other women.”

“At least you recognize it wasn’t pure aggression on Verna’s part, Lydia,” I remarked. “Please let me go on with this.”

“Oh, by all means, Web. As for your worrying about your job, Verna, dear, in case you get out of this,” Lydia added icily, “why, don’t be ridiculous. I must have a tiny bit of the Victorian in me somewhere. I mean I’d scarcely hire you to stay conveniently in the same house with the man.”

“Stop it, Lydia!” I said through closed teeth; and Lydia, seeing new tears in Verna’s eyes, was satisfied to let it go at that for the moment. “Don’t let it get you, Verna. Mrs. Lindley’s fine cruelty is just a fair sample of what’s in store for you. You can’t possibly sidestep it, so let’s go into training against it. Let’s have the whole story right now—not forgetting that it won’t be any less bitter or humiliating or shameful when it’s pulled out of you fact by fact in the courtroom. All right, how did it begin?”

Verna straightened her shoulders. “Ernie—Ernie began dropping in at Lindwood when Mrs. Lindley was out.”

“When he knew she wouldn’t be there?”

“He tried to pretend he didn’t know it. He’d come right into

the kitchen and stay until he heard Mrs. Lindley's car in the drive, then he'd go into the living room and let her think he'd been reading. As soon as he came in the kitchen he started being fresh with me. I'd slap his hands and that would start him tussling with me—and he'd back me into a corner and kiss me—" She stiffened herself, defiantly. "Like I told you before, boys never gave me much time. Well, when one did—the way Ernie did—" After a moment's silence she added, "I sort of lost my head—couldn't think straight and—I guess I didn't really want to."

I frowned at my client's mother. "Did you know about this, Mrs. Doremus?"

"No, I know nothing until the night the doctor bring Verna home."

"The doctor what?"

"He catch her in that place, that Black Cat, and make her come home with him."

I stared at Verna appalled. "Dr. Doremus found you at the Black Cat one night with Ernie Reece?"

She shrank from the memory, nodding and swallowing hard.

"What night was that, Verna? How long did he live after that?"

Verna counted them mentally. "Four nights."

I'd kept telling myself this was as bad as it could get, it can't get any worse, it can't; but it had, steadily, and it was about to get still worse right now.

"How in God's name did the doctor happen to catch you there, Verna?"

"Somebody in one of the other rooms—a girl—took sick or passed out. Anyway the boy who'd brought her was scared enough to call a doctor. My stepfather came and brought the girl out of it and started to leave. He was coming down the hall just as I came out of our room with Ernie. I didn't dream he was anywhere near until that very second when he stopped stone-still in the hall staring at me."

"Did the doctor explode then and there, Verna?" I asked incredulously. "Unnoticed by others?"

"He knew somebody would surely hear him if he let himself go right then and there, so he held himself in. His eyes

were so fiery and terrible Ernie bolted—ran right out, too scared to face him—but the doctor held himself in till he got me into his car. Then he started storming at me. He kept it up after he got me home, like a crazy man, threatening me and calling me dirty names over and over. He went out looking for Ernie and was gone for hours, prowling all around Crossgate; but Ernie was hiding. After he came back home I heard him pacing the floor for hours more. He drank and walked the floor and muttered curses at Ernie and me all night long.”

“Did he go after Ernie again?”

“Yes, next morning. He found Ernie at the filling station and told him—right there in front of Mr. Hill, Ernie’s boss—he’d have to divorce his wife quick and marry me. Ernie didn’t dare argue, he was so scared. The doctor swore Ernie would marry me the soonest possible minute or he’d get him arrested and sent to jail.”

“Did he mean it—he’d actually go to that extreme?”

“He was so worked up it was hard to tell just what he did mean, Mr. Lindley—he was full of liquor and half crazy.”

“And just how did you feel about this ultimatum, Verna?”

She lifted her chin. “I wouldn’t marry Ernie Reece—anyway, not under those circumstances.” She said this boldly while gazing straight ahead to avoid Lydia’s coolly amused gaze. “The doctor couldn’t have forced me to go through with it. And I—I told him that. It made him storm even worse and he kept ranting about how I’d get punished because when he sent Ernie to jail everybody would know all about it and see what an evil woman I was.”

I gazed again at the defendant’s mother, this time with a cynicism almost equaling hers. “You heard all these threats, Mrs. Doremus?”

“I hear everything.”

“Did you believe the doctor was fully prepared to make them good?”

“When he was in such a temper, with too many drinks, he would stop at nothing.”

“Verna, in the event of his actually forcing this public humiliation on you, what did you intend to do? Leave town? Let him send you into exile, separate you from your job and

your mother and your few friends in Crossgate? Could you have stayed and faced the scandal afterward?"

"My mind was in such a whirl, Mr. Lindley, I couldn't think what to do. I was just sort of playing along, seeing how it would work out, waiting to decide when the time came."

And that time had never come. As it had worked out, she'd had no such decision to make. The pressure had gone off, the problem had been solved by the sudden death of Sylvester Doremus.

I wondered whether in all creation I could have picked a more ill-contrived place to plant that goddamn poison.

Lydia rose. "Web, dear, it has been rather captivating, in its way, just as you promised; but I must run now. Tell me, what did you expect when you invited me? That I'd fume with rage and order Ernest never to darken my door again? Really, Web, dear"—she smiled beautifully, lightly patting my cheek—"you've always been kept guessing about me, haven't you? You've never quite caught up with me."

"Never quite, Lydia. I've been close at times, although never quite close enough. But I still have high hopes. It'll be delicious when it finally happens."

"Why, Web, you never said such sweet things while we were married." She seemed flattered. "But as to Ernest—I think we'll simply consider it a closed book—one in a rather extensive library, but definitely closed—shall we? Yes, we shall. I must rush now; I've a date. Good night, dear."

Deputy Bommer eagerly did the honors at the door. Lydia tick-ticked out on her spike heels, trailing, a wraith of costly scent. Heavy-hearted, I gazed down at a client whose need for perfume of any kind seemed dwindling.

Such a short time ago I'd said, "I can't imagine where the district attorney's case is coming from."

I knew where now.

Griff West had not overestimated its strength. It had everything he needed and more. The traditional forensic necessities were well satisfied. The means: a tube of rat poison. The opportunity: a bottle of liquor delivered to the victim by the defendant. Although required to prove no motive at all, the district attorney had two: the insurance policy and—I could hear Griff ringing it out to the jury—"the frantic desire of this

accused to escape the public shame which she feared her righteous stepfather would bring flooding down upon her at any moment."

This murder case was stoutly built, neatly jointed, complete in all its parts—a district attorney's dream. And it led step by step with flawless logic to an utterly wrong conclusion. But misdirected or not, each one of those steps was solid, provable fact.

"Verna, it would be foolhardy of us to try to twist our way out of this. Let yourself get tripped up in one little falsehood and nothing else you say will be believed. You've got to stick meticulously to the truth—and hope the jury will see it for what it is. However, that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to put a more favorable light on the situation so far as it's legitimately possible. Now let's go over it again, very carefully."

It looked like a long, wearing night ahead. A long, wearing night to be followed by an even tougher day.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHEN I returned to the office shortly before noon of the second day following, Ruth looked up in astonishment.

"So soon?" she asked quickly.

"The show's over, Ruthie."

"Gosh. The jury's gone out?"

"Just now. Nothing left but to wait for the reaction of the critics."

"What do you think, Mr. Lindley?"

"I think I'm bushed."

"I mean about Verna's chances."

"Thumbs up, thumbs down, who knows?"

"You *look* bushed, Mr. Lindley. Maybe you'd better have yourself a couple of good stiff drinks or something."

"Verna's under a slight strain, too, but they don't serve cocktails in jail."

"Mr. Lindley, it's not your fault she's there."

"Isn't it?"

"It certainly isn't," Ruth said stoutly. "You've done your best for her. I know how hard you've worked. No matter how it turns out you can't blame yourself."

"Can't I?"

"Nobody could have put up a better fight—I mean in a clean, honest way. Everybody's saying so."

"Thank you, Ruthie."

"Another lawyer might have tried to fix the jury or ring in a few phony witnesses, but otherwise you did everything possible for Verna."

"But did you watch our dynamic young district attorney? He was positively brilliant. Pressed his case hard, yet went out of his way to seem fair, honest and understanding. Performance perfect, with the exception of just one minor detail—he pleaded superbly for the conviction of the wrong person."

"You haven't changed your mind about that, have you, Mr. Lindley. You still believe Verna's innocent."

"Funny, but I guess I always will." Turning toward my office, I paused. "Sort of keep an eye on the courthouse, will you, Ruthie, and if you should happen to notice any little stir, maybe indicating the jury's coming back, let me know?"

"You bet I will, Mr. Lindley, quick like a bunny."

Closing the connecting door, I sat behind my desk with my eyes closed and felt as if I'd been digging ditches in circles for the past forty days without sleep.

For a solid two hours Judge Harvard Tasker had instructed the jury upon all the points of law involved in the case, all of which had slipped their minds by now, with the possible exception of the fundamental fact that they had only two verdicts to choose between. Since our state's statutes stipulated murder by poison to be invariably, and sensibly enough, murder with malice aforethought, the jurors had merely to decide on the one hand to hold Verna guilty of first degree murder, or, on the other hand, to acquit her.

No doubt they'd take too many hours for the job, or so it would seem to the innocent defendant and her guilty attorney.

A fine way to drive yourself crazy, this, I reminded myself—sitting around and wondering how capricious, how blind and

knuckle-headed *this* jury might turn out to be. Of course, on the other hand, in the event it brought in an acquittal, it would thereby show itself to possess a high order of intellect, extraordinary discernment, rare virtue and the most praiseworthy probity. Meanwhile it was anybody's guess, and the anxiety of my waiting was a trivial thing to endure compared with the undeserved anguish of Verna's.

I picked up my hat again and said to Ruth, "In case you want me you'll find me at the inn."

"Gosh," she said, "I couldn't eat a bite."

"Who said anything about eating? I'm going after those drinks you prescribed. While I'm gone keep an eye on that courthouse and a telephone close at hand."

"Leroy promised to let me know the instant something comes to life over there."

"Leroy?"

"Sure, Deputy Sheriff Bommer, remember? A willing lad. And don't worry, I'll stay right here on the job every minute and find you in a hurry when the time comes, and I hope it'll be soon."

"I may not be much of a lawyer, Ruthie," I sighed, "but at least, thank God, I operate with a capable secretary. Thanks."

"Don't mention it, Mr. Lindley. Just run along now and get yourself a nice little buzz on."

With two young women like Bethany and Ruth in Cross-gate I'd had to marry Lydia first.

Stepping out the door I saw Ernie Reece. He had parked his car a little way up the block again. His attire today was another slacks-and-jacket combination, this time an especially tasty one in tones of beige and brown, admirably suited to strutting about town. This was, after all, an occasion, his tireless vigor as an amatory athlete having been acknowledged by court action. He had not been called as a witness to vouch for his ardent talents himself, however; the information had seemed superfluous. Also, Griff had avoided him as a possible source of sympathy for the defendant and I had felt their brief relationship to be already too well established. He must have been disappointed. Ernie and I had not exchanged a word since that interview at the Black Cat, but the glance he gave me as he settled handsomely behind the wheel of his

open car reminded me of it and seemed to warn me of more hard days ahead. The only answer I could make at the moment was to numbly watch him breezing off.

In the brownstone wall of the courthouse across the street there was a head-high window fitted with iron bars and frosted glass—the sealed window of the jury room. A lighted bulb glimmered behind it—and would continue to glimmer inscrutably how many hours? Perhaps only a few; or perhaps it would burn deep into the night. And while the length of a girl's life was argued in there by a jury of her so-called peers Crossgate went on about its many chores, which, to her, from her cot in the county jail, must seem enviable and priceless trifles.

Jim Moss stood on the corner, chewing gum with the few teeth he had left, filling the void with idleness. Jim was past seventy now. One of the court's two venerable tipstaves, he had seen countless cases won and lost and had outlasted several judges.

"Why, how do, there, Mr. Lindley," he said in high cheer. "Well, things look pretty good for you and Verna."

"Think so, Jim?"

"Yes, *sir*," he emphasized it positively. "No man knows juries better'n me. Been watching juries forty-odd years now. Stand right there at the jury-room door, I do, and watch 'em file in. Always can tell from the way they look just what they're gonta do. Yes, *sir*, always can tell. Never missed yet, not once. This here jury, sure as shooting, it's gonna bring in a nice acquittal for you and Verna."

"I certainly hope you're right, Jim."

"Oh, no question of it, Mr. Lindley. You've as good as won this case right this minute. You got an acquittal coming up, one to be mighty proud of, sure as shooting, yes, *sir*."

Heartened by this self-appointed oracle, I went on to the Colonial Inn.

If Sam Wregg had attended Verna's trial he'd ducked in and out unseen by me. I'd looked for him in town at odd moments, consistently missing him, and had paid a third visit to his woodland grotto without finding him at home. Indirectly I'd heard he'd made fewer trips recently to the Tip-Top Market with his berries, mushrooms and wild chunk honey. I felt

that somehow the end of Verna's trial was important to him in its cryptic way; and his furtiveness was like the phantom-like thought that persistently haunted the back of my mind. It still caused me to feel there was some vital little thing I should have noticed, some significance I should have grasped; but still it hovered just beyond the reach of my mental fingers, like the meaning of that puckish freeman Sam Wregg.

Just as it was his noonday custom to do too, Griff West had perched himself at the inn's counter to eat lunch in his habitual hurry. I climbed on the stool beside him. He gave me a glance, frowned and said nothing. The contest was ended but there would be no sportsmanlike clasp of hands. He couldn't go back to liking me.

"Good show," I said with a touch of acid. "Nice work. Splendid form, old man. Cheerio, good hunting and all that sort of thing."

He didn't smile but bolted another slice of his veal cutlet.

"Drinks, Mike," I said to the man behind the counter. "Best in the house, please. Nothing's too good for our dynamic district attorney, who confesses himself to be a remarkably high-principled character." While Mike filled the two glasses Griff continued to ignore me. "I was especially taken with that high-principled touch you added for a final fillip, Griff. Really sublime stuff, your suggestion of incest."

Griff gulped coffee.

"Just what the case really needed to top it off, a small dab of frustrated incestuous desire. But thinking it over, Griff, do you still feel it was essential to your theme?"

Griff smeared butter on a corner of bread and swallowed it whole.

"I mean, couldn't you let Syl Doremus lie in his grave as simply an ill-natured man without attempting to explain him in terms of a legally unauthorized love for his stepdaughter? Don't you think you pressed the point a little too far in trying to force her to admit she'd felt inclined to reciprocate his evil passions—in that way driving herself frantic—when actually nothing of the sort had ever happened between them?"

Griff broke down and answered. "Potentially it was there. Don't tell me different. She proved it by the way she went to pieces on the stand when I questioned her about it."

"A new technique in truth-finding," I said wryly. "Accuse an innocent girl of the most shocking offense imaginable and take the indignation of her denial as the measure of her guilt. Well, I'm grateful that in this high-principled, backhanded way of yours you didn't prove her guilty of arson, mayhem, treason, counterfeiting and forgery at the same time."

Griff slid off his stool, glaring at me. "I haven't the slightest doubt that that girl's guilty of murder. I told you at the beginning I'd be remiss as hell in my duty if I didn't hit her with everything I've got. Under the circumstances your sarcasm seems a little off the beam."

Off the beam, said the district attorney who had strained every moral ligament to condemn an innocent—and he hustled on his righteous way, leaving untasted the drink I'd ordered for him.

Presently, while waiting, I used it myself.

At six-thirty Deputy Leroy Bommer still prowled the courtroom waiting for the break to come, Ruth kept herself posted at her desk ready to receive the flash from him, and the light still burned behind the jury-room window, interminably illuminating nothing.

At home, in my basement shop, I'd already swept the floor clean of every last grain of sawdust. I'd whetted and oiled and polished my tools until they gleamed cleaner and keener than new.

Verna Doremus's trial for murder was happening over and over in my mind, incidents chasing one another out of sequence, all of unknowable value. Win or lose, no one would ever learn at what point the victory had been achieved or the defeat suffered; I would never know which points I had scored or bungled.

"Nurse Alden, you attended Dr. Sylvester Doremus at the hospital during his last hours? You witnessed his dying delirium? Did you hear him accuse anyone of having poisoned him?"

"No, sir."

"Did you hear Dr. Doremus express any suspicion, even the slightest, of the defendant, Nurse Alden? . . . Nurse Brady? . . . Nurse Janz? . . ."

"No, sir; no, sir."

"Dr. Bray, as the attending physician, did *you* hear your patient direct any sort of accusation against the defendant? You did not? That's all, Dr. Bray. Never mind expounding on the subject, please; you've already answered the question. That's all, Dr. Bray. . . .

"Trooper Esties, you say you heard Dr. Doremus mutter something about a bottle, just a vague mention of a bottle. You didn't hear him say the liquor had tasted odd? You didn't hear him mention the defendant in connection with that bottle? And yet, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the district attorney in his excessive zeal attempts to persuade us to believe this befuddled sound was a clear-minded accusation!

"Dr. Erdmann, you have practiced medicine in Crossgate how many years? Thirty-six; yes. In your extensive experience you have encountered many cases of poisoning, some suicidal, some accidental, even including a few homicidal poisonings? In all your experience have you ever seen a case of acute phosphorus poisoning? Not since the modern safety match came into general use; I see. About 1910, yes. You heard the acting coroner describe certain symptoms shown by Dr. Sylvester Doremus in extremis. Are there any other poisons definitely known to produce the same or very similar symptoms? Boron in the form of borax or boric acid, yes . . . Various salts of barium, used in dyes, hospital work in X rays and so on, yes . . . Magnesium compounds, sometimes even those used in the treatment of gastric ulcer . . . Chromic acid following its use as an escharotic applied to the tonsils . . . The chloride and sulphate of zinc. And others as well. To the best of your knowledge, then, as a physician of thirty-six years' active experience, not phosphorus alone, but any one of these many poisonous substances might have produced those symptoms? Would you say in addition that the poison causing Dr. Doremus's death may have been alcohol taken in excessive quantities over long periods? Thank you, Dr. Erdmann.

"Dr. Yost, you heard the testimony of Dr. Erdmann? Do you agree with Dr. Erdmann's statements as to this and that and that? You do, completely? Thank you, Dr. Yost.

"Dr. Zachary, you heard and concur in the testimony of Drs.

Erdmann and Yost? Thank you for your expert advice, Dr. Zachary; I know how busy your many patients keep you.

"And yet, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the district attorney, blandly overlooking all these many other possibilities, chooses to fix upon one highly questionable theory involving this blameless defendant!"

Amazing, appalling, how blank those twelve faces could appear in response to your most heartfelt pleas.

"Mrs. Doremus, was this the first time you'd dumped the doctor's liquor down the sink? It was not. . . . You'd done it many times before when he became too drunk, too much to handle. . . . You did this as a measure of self-defense. . . .

"Now, Verna, let's make this point clear. You threw that tube of rat poison into the trash pile because in its leaky condition you felt it too dangerous to keep in the kitchen? You were thinking of the safety of the members of that household including a little five-year-old-girl. . . .

"Dr. Erdmann, I have here a small glass of whisky, the same brand Dr. Doremus drank that evening. Also I have here a fresh tube of Rat-Not. You see, I now place a tiny trace of the rat paste in the liquor. It does not dissolve, so I shake it thoroughly. It remains clearly visible, floating on the surface. You can smell the phosphorus, can you not, Dr. Erdmann? You would call it a strong, revolting odor? It actually smells poisonous, yes. . . . Would you say that a conscious man could fail to notice that fuming, obnoxious stuff under his nose or in his mouth? You feel very definitely he would reject it instantly?"

"Would the district attorney, instead of protesting so volubly, care to hold this foul stuff under his own nose for a few seconds?"

Perhaps I'd overdone it, insisting on this demonstration over Griff's well-mannered objections. The jury may have looked on it as a smart-aleck trick.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, this flimsy theorizing of the state would seem ludicrous if the charge brought against this defendant were not so gravely serious. This——"

Was that the phone ringing overhead?

The phone!

I raced up the stairs to the hallway. Too breathless to pant

out anything more than "Yes?" I heard Ruth saying, "This is it, Mr. Lindley. The jury's ready to report."

"Thanks, thanks, coming right over."

"They're looking for Judge Tasker. He's the speaker at a banquet somewhere but they're trying to reach him."

"Leaving right now."

"If he's still orating he'll probably want to finish his speech. I've slept through it three or four times now and that flag-waving finale is something he dearly loves to hear himself spout."

Holding myself down, knowing it would take time to make the stage ready again—the cruelest wait anyone can suffer, ritualistic torture of the most cultured order—I washed my hands thoroughly, put on my coat slowly, then went out the front gate and turned toward the courthouse, strolling.

Moonlike lamps glowed at the courthouse portcullis. A few die-hard spectators lingered on the steps—an indication that Harv Tasker had not yet donned his ceremonial robe to mount the legal altar. Dave Dredger and Tim Bascom came hurrying out of the *Courier* office as I went on, my first task somehow to help Verna to bear the unbearable delay. Jim Moss, the senile tipstaff, munching his gum, opened the swinging door for me.

"Nice acquittal coming up for you and Verna right now, Mr. Lindley," he cackled, toothlessly grinning. "Yes, sir!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I WATCHED Leroy Bommer taking Verna out the side door. I watched him escorting her from the courtroom to the jail for the last time.

Fuddle-headed Jim Moss, having trailed me to the steps, stood at my elbow mumbling. "Can't understand it, Mr. Lindley. Just can't figger it out. First time a jury ever fooled me

like that. Been watching juries forty-odd years now and never saw any durn-fool jury act like this one."

"Everybody makes mistakes, Jim. You, me, juries, everybody."

Verna's face looked bloodless, the face of a girl already dead, as Bommer drove her away in the old black sedan.

It had taken only a few minutes, once the interminable wait for Harv Tasker had ended. The few spectators had heard the verdict with a little mild gasping and clucking. Cora Doremus had clutched her daughter in a fierce embrace and a moment ago had marched out with a glance of stony castigation for me, plainly done with me forever. Harv Tasker, having returned to his chambers, was now divesting himself of his oracle's toga; the tobacco smoke was settling in the deserted jury room and someone was turning off the lights.

On the sidewalk Dave Dredger and Tim Bascom had stopped to hash it over. They eyed me without undue censure as I went to them.

"Well, Web—" The *Courier's* editor raked an ink-stained hand through his shag of cottony hair. "Well, you said right at the beginning, Web, she ought to have a better lawyer."

Tim Bascom piped up in my defense, "Did his best, Dave, his very best."

"Say something, Tim?"

"Said he gave it the best he's got in him! No man can do more'n that!" Having yelled this into Dave's bad ear, the little banker asked, "You going to appeal it, of course, Web?"

"The appellate court will automatically review the trial—and do nothing further about it."

"But in an egg-headed verdict like this one, Web, they just got to set it aside."

"They can't. They haven't the power to reverse a conviction merely because it's unjust. They can't order a new trial merely on the ground that a failure of justice has occurred."

"Then what does the court of appeals do, for mercy's sake?"

"For mercy's sake, nothing. It reviews the law, not the facts. It's bound by the jury's finding of fact no matter how wrong it may consider the verdict."

"But in a case like this, where the fool jury couldn't see as far as the end of their fool noses—"

"The appellate court looks only for a technical compliance with formal rules," I said wearily. "It can reverse a conviction only for errors of law; but in this case there aren't any. Verna's trial was a properly conducted procedure—so far as the law goes."

Tim frowned, seeming to feel I was in some measure to blame for this nonsensical state of affairs, and Dave plainly doubted that I knew what I was taking about. I couldn't be much of a lawyer, could I? Hadn't I just lost a big case?

"You sure of all this, Web?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Evidence of miscarried justice is no grounds for a new trial. It's a matter of record that many utterly mistaken convictions have been affirmed by the highest courts of the state. This will be another of them."

Tim squeaked, "For pity's sake, then, what more can we do?"

"You can't do anything more. The last possible resort would be an appeal for executive clemency, but the governor has no good reason to interfere here. Verna's trial was thoroughly correct in every legal respect, except one, that being the conviction of an innocent girl—but that detail doesn't count."

"Goes to show what I always claimed—people are just wilfully contrary," Dave opined heavily.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

NEXT MORNING, when I passed the courthouse on my way to the office, ten years older after a night of pillow-punching, another crowd had gathered in the sunshine on the brown-stone steps. More talesmen had been called for a new jury; another case was about to begin, and our culture would never see the last of them. So far as it concerned our court the murder trial of Verna Doremus was a play ended, a book finished, a record filed and on its way to being forgotten. No one in our sooty temple of justice, or in all Crossgate for

that matter, would ever see her again. Nothing remained but to transport her to the nearest state prison, prolong her wretched waiting weeks longer, then strap her in the electric chair and throw the switch.

I kept cautioning myself, Don't let it get you. People die inopportunately every day. Week-old babies succumb to fatal blood factors through no one's fault. Blameless children at play get hit by cars propelled by blameless drivers. Look at the morning's headlines. Besides the conviction of Verna Doremus, a minor item rating twenty lines in the second section of today's Inquirer, there are others. Tornado Wipes Out Town, Killing Scores. Eighteen Die in Plane Crash. Plant Explosion Kills Forty. Twelve Miners Trapped by Cave-In Found Dead. All blameless. All undeserving of premature death but all vulnerable to it. It can come to any of us, anywhere, at any moment, without involving the slightest element of rightness or wrongness. That's the way we live our lives, among swarming hazards. Don't let it get you. Unlike a lightning-bolt or cars crashing together at a blind crossroads or a cerebral hemorrhage, it's happening to Verna with advance notice, that's all—with due legal notice, the occasion properly scheduled, a date with the executioner conveniently arranged. In its way it was actually more merciful than a doctor's saying Sorry, miss, but this cancer is inoperable, you have six more months of life left, more or less, no one can say exactly. At least this is more definite, right there on the calendar where you can see it coming at a certain minute on a certain day. So don't let it get you. Think of it as the thing it really is, an accident, a special kind but still an accident, something that could happen to anybody, regrettable but irremediable, and keep your head.

Look around you, I suggested to myself as I walked. No one else is inordinately perturbed. There's Don Knight, the postman, making his well-trod rounds, delivering more circulars. There's Mrs. Quigley, sweeping off her doorstep as she does every fair morning. People are eating breakfast or driving to work just as they did yesterday and will do again tomorrow, provided no fatal mishaps lay them low meanwhile. No stores are closed in sorrow or in protest; they're all open for business as usual.

After all, the case had to turn out in either one of only two ways; you knew all along you'd lose it if you didn't win it. And you lost it, just as every lawyer must expect to lose one once in a while no matter how good he is. A fifty-fifty chance at best and it came up tails. You did your damndest to bend your will upon it in midair, but still it came up tails. So keep your balance. This will be the toughest day. After today it will get easier and easier to carry and presently you won't even think about it any more. . . .

I stepped into the office to meet a frown from Ruth, the first difference I'd encountered. Instead of her cheerful "Hiya!" she greeted me with troubled silence, showing signs of moral disillusionment and a slight hangover.

"Who lost this case anyways," I inquired, "You or me?"

"There's something I keep wondering about," Ruth said.

"Can I help you with it?"

"Well, you've been so sure all along that Verna's innocent. If you're right about it, then, of course, somebody else is guilty. So what's that person going to do now?"

"Does he—or she—have to do anything?"

"That's what I keep wondering—what I'd feel I should do if I were the really guilty person. Heave a sigh of relief, stay nice and safe and let Verna sit in that chair for me?"

I looked searchingly at my bright-minded secretary; but no, she had insinuated nothing as to my own criminal and moral status. She was simply honestly wondering.

"You can be sure of one thing, Ruth. Once Verna has been electrocuted, guilty or not, the case will be closed forevermore. Just what *would* you do?"

"I don't know," Ruth answered. "Maybe I could learn to live with myself. It does look like one of those times when being noble wouldn't pay off too well in a practical way."

"Doesn't it," I said, and leaving her wondering went on to my desk.

While going through the motions of reading my mail I looked up at a sound from the street door and groaned. Bethany was coming in with Juliana.

My daughter marched straight into my office, her short skirt wagging, and stopped to confront me across my desk.

She gazed at me as if in a new light, scared but brave, her eyes rounded, her funny gamin face all earnestness.

Bethany explained quickly, "She insisted on coming, Webster. If I hadn't brought her she'd have come alone."

Juliana and I gazed at each other silently for a moment. Then she said, "Poppa, where's Verna?"

"She's still in jail, I'm afraid, Julie dear."

"Poppa, when you gonna get Verna out of jail?"

"The trial's over now, Julie, and the jury decided"—it was a very difficult thing to explain—"they decided they wouldn't let Verna go free."

Juliana wanted no explanations; she wanted her friend. "Poppa, you promised you'd bring Verna back home."

"No, Julie, I didn't promise."

"Yes, you did, Poppa, you promised you'd bring Verna back."

"I'm afraid you misunderstood, Julie. It wasn't a promise. I always keep my promises to you, but this time I just couldn't say definitely—"

"Poppa, you promised!"

A tear glimmered in each round hurt eye and Juliana's little fists were hard at her sides. She was furious; she was Woman in bitter judgment; she was unfair and unreasonable in full-grown measure; and she would never see any side of it but her own.

"Julie, listen." Manlike, I couldn't help trying to persuade her to grant me the truth. "What I really said, Julie—"

"You *promised!*"

Having delivered the direst denunciation it was possible to utter, she wheeled about and ran to the door. The punishing dramatic effect of her exit was weakened a little because the knob was too much for her tiny hand. Ruth hastened to turn it for her and at a signal from Bethany followed her out. Juliana stopped at the window to reassert with outraged finality, "You *did* promise!" Then she ran toward the school, sniffing back her tears, Ruth watchfully at her heels.

Bethany said, "Don't take it too seriously, Webster. She's only five."

"Just the same another jury has reported. A one-woman jury that used to think I was a pretty good guy has found me

guilty of base double-dealing and shabby breach of trust."

"She'll soon take a more charitable view of it and forgive you."

"I've something in common with Verna now, anyway. We'd both agree it's good to be forgiven for something you haven't done. At least Julie's judgment of me is milder than my judgment of myself."

"You may like hearing that Verna takes a more kindly view of it than either of you, Webster."

I looked hard into Bethany's serene face. "You've seen Verna? Last night?"

"Yes. She's terribly bewildered, of course, but not bitter toward anyone, except possibly herself for not being fairer to you—certainly not toward her attorney. She said she knew from the beginning you believed in her more than anyone else, even her mother, and no one could have done better for her. If she had to go through it again she'd still choose you."

My client's estimation of me was too generous and sweet. I wondered if perhaps I didn't prefer an outright blistering, like Juliana's. Sick-hearted, I said, "That was the right place for you to go, Bethany. Thanks for going there and letting me alone. As you seem to know, it can be pretty ghastly, getting cheered up when there's nothing to get cheerful about. But this morning you're the nicest thing that's happened to me. You can stay away from your school a few minutes longer, can't you? Please sit down, Bethany."

At that moment Ruth opened the street door, having returned from seeing Juliana to Bethany's school in the next block. She sang out, "Gosh, look who's here!"

She had in tow a wizened, beaming, gray-headed, bespectacled little woman who was the perfect picture of everybody's ideal grandmother.

Bethany cried, "Mrs. Shipp!"

"Mrs. Shipp!" I blurted.

"Mrs. Shipp!" Bethany squealed, and she hurried to hug the little old lady in her arms.

"Dear me," Mrs. Shipp said, laughing, holding her bonnet and seeming on the verge of happy tears. She was delighted with herself for being such a warmly welcomed surprise. "Oh, my sakes. Dear me. It is nice, isn't it, seeing old friends!"

Bethany kept one arm around her and I clasped both her fragile hands. "Mrs. Shipp, honey, did you know Bethany and I have been hunting for you all over everywhere, for months? And here you turn up right in our own office like an angel."

"Why, you know, I heard just this morning——"

"You come right over here, Martha Shipp, and sit down in Webster's very best chair," Bethany insisted. And when we'd settled her there we stood over her glowing and Bethany said, "Mrs. Shipp, darling, where on earth did you come back from?"

"Camden," she said simply. "Bethie, child, you may remember me speaking of my cousin Sarah's brother-in-law's half-sister living in Germantown. Well, they moved from Germantown to Camden about the time your Uncle Hosley died. That's where I've been, sort of helping out with the house-keeping."

Small wonder, then, we hadn't traced her.

"Got sort of lonely for old friends' faces, though, so I just thought I'd like to pay a little visit back to Crossgate. That's how I happened to hear just this morning you wanted to talk to me."

"That's putting it mildly, Mrs. Shipp, honey," I said. "There's a lawsuit pending, a very important suit over Hosley Reece's will, and we need you to testify. Ernie Reece is contesting it."

"I declare," Mrs. Shipp said mildly. "Never liked that boy. Just you tell me what it is you want me to testify to and I'll be only too glad."

"It concerns Hosley Reece's mental condition," I explained. "We all know old Hosley was really pretty queer. Fine, upstanding man, but still, he did spend months in a sanatorium, on two or three occasions, in his later years. Well, Ernie Reece is claiming his father wasn't mentally competent to make a will and he's trying to get the court to set it aside so he can get hold of the old Reece home, instead of Bethany. Uncle Hosley wanted her to have it, but Ernie's trying hard to get it so he can turn it into a fancy gas station."

"Why, that would be sacrilege, and the whole idea's just feather-brained, that's what it is," Mrs. Shipp said positively.

"Hosley Reece was saner'n lots of people walking the streets of Crossgate right today."

"That's the stuff, Mrs. Shipp. Hosley had you, his housekeeper, witness that will along with his handy man, Willard Beems. Willard's going to testify Hosley was in full, moral possession of his faculties at the time the will was dictated and signed. We need you to back him up. You see, the court doesn't care how queer Hosley may have been at any other time of his life; it just wants to make sure he knew exactly what he was doing when he signed that will disinheriting his son in Bethany's favor."

"Why, my goodness," Mrs. Shipp declared, "he certainly did know. Never saw a clearer-minded man'n Hosley Reece was the day he signed that will."

"Mrs. Shipp, honey," I said with a long sigh, "I love you." She blushed and giggled and Bethany hugged her again and Ruth grinned at us from the doorway. With the stanch support of both Martha Shipp and Willard Beems we could feel fairly confident that Miss Dodd's Nursery School would endure. So suddenly an occasion inviting a celebration had flowered out of the morning's despair. In the back of my mind I realized how quickly a stratum of new events could blanket the grave of Verna Doremus.

"Bethany, how about taking Mrs. Shipp over to the school and showing her what wonderful things you've done with Hosley's old home?"

"And have lunch with the children and me," Bethany added eagerly. "They love having guests and I know you'll be their favorite. You'll be surprised, Martha, darling—your old room on the third floor is still there, just as you left it, except for a new rug and a fresh coat of paint, and—"

They went out chattering together like the old friends they were. A girl I had failed to rescue from a murder charge had had a mandatory sentence of death pronounced upon her, but I grinned with rare pleasure as I watched Bethany jubilantly escorting Martha Shipp toward the school. I noticed Bethany's limp for a moment as she hurried on in her eagerness, then forgot it again. My smile drooped off the next moment. The door was opening. Ernie Reece was stepping in.

Ernie glanced at Ruth, who gazed back at him intensely,

and he informed me, "Looks like it's time for us to have another business talk."

He sauntered past, glancing disdainfully about, settled himself in the chair just vacated by Martha Shipp, slid low and crossed his legs.

"Make yourself at home, Ernie," I said, shutting the door.

Ignoring that, he tossed his beautiful head and said, "Heard the old biddy was back. Not staying long, is she?"

"Mrs. Shipp? Long enough, Ernie."

He eyed me from a posture of idle power. "Looks like you'll be sitting pretty in a little while, provided nobody talks up. I mean Verna."

"I know what you mean, Ernie."

"She'll still be waiting there in the death house when my old man's will case comes up. She'll stay there, too, providing the will case works out okay—meaning my way."

I leaned across the desk and urged him, "Go on, Ernie."

"Neat job, how you fixed it. I mean you worked it out pretty slick, because nobody'd figure Verna's lawyer ought to be taking the rap in her place. Very neat. But there's still time for people to get wised up to what really happened."

"What really happened, Ernie?"

Ernie grinned. "You're asking me? Okay, I'll tell you. I mean the real way Doc Doremus died. There's still time for the D.A. to get the facts. Of course you wouldn't want that, and who can blame you? So everything's breaking the way we want it—including my old man's will case."

"You're so subtle, Ernie. You figure Martha Shipp might get lost again, is that it? Maybe Willard Beems too?"

"Old people like that, everybody expects 'em to have lousy memories." Ernie stood. "Looks like we understand each other. That's all I had in mind."

"Just a second, Ernie," I said.

I pulled the telephone close and dialed a number.

"Miss Dodd's school," the answer came.

"May I speak with the headmistress, please?"

"Any time, Webster. This is Bethany."

"Bethany, you told me once, briefly, years ago, about your ankle. Happened when you were just a little older than Julie, didn't it?"

"A sledding accident, that's all, Webster. It isn't important any more."

"As I recall it you were sliding down the armory hill when a car shot out of an intersection. Another kid was zipping along beside you. You saw the car but he didn't. Instead of rolling off your sled and saving yourself in that way you veered into his to jounce him aside. As a result he missed the car but you didn't; it ran over your ankle."

"I just didn't judge it quite right," Bethany said.

"The other kid was your cousin Ernie. I just wanted to refresh my memory about it, Bethany. Have a pleasant time with Martha Shipp, and guard her carefully from all mishaps."

I disconnected and Ernie, scowling down at me, said, "What's that got to do with it? Maybe you didn't understand me right after all. Maybe you better give it a little more thought."

"I've given it all the thought it needs, Ernie." My spirits lifted as I rounded the desk. "I'd better express my decision in a way you can understand."

The blow caught him neatly on the button with his fists half lifted.

Ruth, in the outer office, heard a sudden crash. She rushed to open the connecting door and stopped there aghast, as if staring at a desecrated work of art. Ernie lay on the floor on the far end of the room, making feeble attempts to lift himself. Having bounced off the window first, he had dropped there amid scattering shards of glass.

"He seemed to stumble over something, Ruthie. The glass we're getting these days doesn't seem up to standard either. Better call your friend, the repair man again," I suggested, "and have him put in a thicker pane this time."

My secretary flurried across the office and dropped to her knees beside the fallen Adonis. "Ernie, darling!" she squealed. "Oh, gosh, Ernie, darling!"

"Wait a minute," I said in confusion. "You hardly know this guy. You told me you'd always kept him at a distance."

"I always have, Mr. Lindley, but there's such a thing as being too violent about it. Gosh, Ernie, Ernie, darling—"

I'd been aware Ruth had ideas but it hadn't occurred to me

she might feel capable of a possible reformation of Ernie Reece.

Shrugging and turning, I left the office. Just outside I paused. I had put my right hand into my coat pocket and my fingers had strayed upon several small things in a corner. I fished them up—four of them—and gazed at them as they lay on my moist palm.

They were the separated halves of two empty medicinal capsules.

This was the same coat I'd worn that day weeks ago when I'd arranged unsuccessfully for Lydia to die. After sprinkling the contents of the capsules over Lydia's sugar I had dropped them into my pocket. All this while they had remained there forgotten.

I dropped them again, all four pieces, this time into the gutter; and I began walking blindly, talking in earnest silence to myself.

Keep your head, I warned myself; don't let it throw you. You're in the clear. Nobody even suspects you except Ernie Reece, to hear him talk; and Ernie's bluffing. He must be. He can't make a word of it good, can't prove a thing. This witness he talks about is just part of the act. Nobody could have seen you doing anything incriminating that afternoon. If actually you were seen going into the house the rest is just guesswork. Prove it? He can't. Impossible. You've no reason to give a second thought to Ernie's ineffectual threats. Anyway, that question is already settled; you've already answered him. Your answer is right there, lumping out on Ernie's jaw. That's your response to his empty challenge; and you're safe. Recognize that fact. Don't get panicky; don't lose your head.

I'd walked unconsciously along Court Street and had paused, hardly knowing it, to gaze at a low brick building centered in a neat block of lawn. It was the Garvey Memorial Hospital, where Sylvester Doremus had died of the poison I'd guided to his lips. I turned my back on it and walked again.

You didn't mean to kill the guy. Your purpose may have been murder, but murder in better deserved quarters, certainly not in the Doremus family. Of course you hadn't the slightest intention of poisoning the doctor. Why should you?

You held nothing whatever against him. You liked him. You considered him a friend of sorts. Like other friends of yours he happened to die; he fell victim to the snares lurking all around us.

What the hell, he was drinking himself to death, wasn't he? He would have died soon anyway. He placed a small enough value on his own life.

Stopping again, I found myself looking over an orderly field of monuments—Crossgate's well-kept cemetery. Bruce was buried here. Here lay Bruce Lindley, victim of murder, and no one had answered for the crime of shortening the life of a man of good deeds. Here lay also Sylvester Doremus, having arrived a little earlier than he might have arranged it for himself; but still, I felt Sylvester Doremus had little to kick about. I turned my back on him and went on walking.

How can you tell what will happen tomorrow? Of course you can't do it. Only charlatans profess the ability. How few of us can really, exactly chart our lives as far as twenty-four hours in advance! Is there ever a complete assurance that something unforeseen won't come up? Of course not. Verna is not immune to such uncertainties. Sacrifice yourself in order to get her out of prison—and then what? She'll absent-mindedly step in front of a truck. She'll climb aboard a train that will be brought up short of its destination in a tangle of steel and human corpses. A tiny droplet of virus floating in the air, too small to be seen under a microscope, too small to be stopped by any filter, will flow with her breath into her throat and shortly thereafter, despite all ministrations of the newest miracle drugs, she will be buried as deeply as if the cause of death had been two thousand volts of electricity, unmerited but legally administered. So keep your head. Be realistic. Look out for your own skin. You're not God rearranging a destiny, you're not blind Justice, you're just a guy trying hard to get along as best you can in a world you never ordered.

And Julie. Think of Julie. Very odd about that little girl. All this started out as your project for providing an advantageous future for Juliana, a plan to prevent Lydia's wasting the substance rightfully her daughter's. As it is you've accomplished nothing for Juliana. Far from gaining security for her,

in fact, you've pushed her into a more precarious position. So let bad enough alone. Don't make it still worse for her.

Although you may debate a hundred other points there is one of which you are absolutely certain: you would prefer Juliana not to become known as a murderer's daughter.

I stopped short again, suddenly cold with an appalling thought: Maybe you *wanted* to lose the case. Maybe you didn't try for an acquittal quite as earnestly as you like to think you did. In cross-examining those witnesses, couldn't you have pressed them harder? Is it possible that in addressing the jury your voice took on an unconvincing inflection by design? Face it: this forensic failure could be an escape of your own contriving. Look at it, how someone else is left holding the bag for you. See how safe you are now, how much safer you will become once Verna Doremus has paid the final penalty for your crime. Can you swear you never wanted it this way?

Something was following me around. That unseen significance, that unrecognized relationship, that ghostly sense of unfulfillment—it was still dogging me. At every glance over my mental shoulder it dodged from sight into a shadow, still eluding me; but it was still there, never losing me for an instant. Whatever it might be, it was of no comfort to me now.

After all, for God's sake! Verna Doremus—who was she? A girl like millions of others, somebody you'd pass unnoticed on the street, hardly educated, of no family to speak of, a run-of-the-car young woman lacking beauty, lacking strength of character, lacking everything except a slight ability to paint tiles. Was that something to weigh gravely, a talent for daubing tiles to decorate other people's kitchen sinks and bathtubs? What good was it? What would be the world's loss without it? How much did the tile-painter herself amount to?—an ordinary servant girl, a housemaid, a slavey. Don't be a fool. Keep your head. Sit tight. Don't let it get you.

Sam Wregg. Perhaps the damn crazy hermit actually knew something important. I could hunt for him again, outwait him this time or track him down, or even beat it out of him. It might be a good thing to do. But not yet. I had something else I must do first.

I had come back to the sidewalk in front of my office. In

the dry gutter the empty capsules still lay just where I dropped them. I picked them up, put them safely back in my pocket, then crossed the street diagonally to the district attorney's door. I opened it, went through his waiting room and into the private office where Griff West sat. He eyed me, saying nothing. Quite deliberately I let myself down into the chair facing him, feeling how good it was to rest.

"I'm here to confess the murder of Dr. Sylvester Doremus," I said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GRIFF WEST stared at me, not stirring. "Did you hear me, Griff? This is why I've been so sure all along that Verna didn't poison the doctor. I'm certain of it, you see, because I did it myself."

Sharply irritated, Griff put both his small hands on his desk. "You actually expect me to take this seriously?"

"Goddammit," I snapped at him, "why would I say this to you if it weren't perfectly true? For God's sake, you can't possibly imagine I'd confess to a young lady client's murder out of sheer chivalry!"

My flash of anger impressed him. Startled for a moment, he went on staring at me in impatient aversion.

"Why the hell don't you give up, Web? Stop trying to wreck my biggest case."

"No. Certainly not. I want to blow it sky-high."

"Quit making this tougher for yourself."

"It's going to be tougher on both of us than it might have been if only you'd listened to reason a little earlier in the game. I told you at the beginning Verna was innocent but you were as busy as a hive of ants piling up a wonderful case against her. I tried to convince you with every argument I could think of, short of confessing, and now, finally, I'm forced to that."

Griff's frown grew darker. "I've sincerely believed that girl

couldn't possibly be innocent. I still can't see, in the face of the evidence——"

"Your evidence is no damn good. Beautifully convincing, yes; but none of it points to the truth. The tube of rat paste, the clandestine meetings, the doctor's threats and all the rest—none of it really applies. It wasn't Verna who caused the doctor's death. Actually I'm the poisoner."

Still peering at me across his desk, Griff began turning one of his needle-pointed pencils end over end. "By God, this is a fine mess, if what you say is true! Just when I've chalked up a first-class conviction——"

"Don't blame me for that part of it, my friend. For all the rest, yes, but not the conviction. That's all yours. I tried my damndest to steer you clear of it. With one special result. In your high-principled way you began holding your nose over my unprofessional behavior. I admit the irregularities. I was a bit handicapped, though, in trying to explain them, and I couldn't press my arguments all the way. But don't try to argue with me now, Griff. We're past that. I'm telling you. This is it. Now that you have an innocent girl in prison with a mandatory death sentence hanging over her, you've got to get her out of there, and fast."

"If this is true—and I still doubt it—aren't you something of a rat for letting it go this far?"

"No doubt, Griff. No doubt. But what would you have done in my shoes?"

He came to his feet, a diminutive, bristly figure. "I just can't see this. What motive could you have had for killing Doc Doremus?"

"I had no motive, no intention at all of killing him. I'd meant to kill Lydia instead, but I missed. I'm not very good at murder. Doremus got the poison I'd put there for Lydia."

Color was fading from Griff's face. Lydia as a provoker of murder was evidently something he could understand. But his tone was still doubtful, his attitude still challenging, as he asked, "Where did you plant that poison?"

"In the one place where you argued so conclusively it couldn't possibly have been planted. In the coffee—or rather in the sugar."

"The sugar!" It was a blow through his defenses, but Griff

persisted in his skeptical, cross-examining manner, "And what kind of poison was it?"

"I don't know."

"What?"

"I didn't know at the time what the poison was and I still don't. I got hold of it at the time Bruce died. It was the stuff Lydia had used to kill him."

"Wait—a—minute!" Griff sounded as if he had begun to question my sanity as well as my facts. "One murder at a time, if you please."

"Yes," I said in a breath of relief. "Yes, let's get it all clear, everything from the very beginning". . .

Listening to me, Griff squirmed in his chair. I told him how Bruce's sudden death had prevented his divorcing Lydia under a hard-driven property settlement, and Griff's agitation grew. But he became tensely still when I fished the empty capsules from my coat pocket again and placed them before him on his blotter.

"They were full of a white powder, Griff. You can see traces of it still inside them. Perhaps you can have it analyzed."

"Before you go any farther—" Griff was badly shaken and trying to conceal it. "Any attempt to pin this on Lydia now—Bruce's death, I mean—we couldn't get to first base with it. We wouldn't have a prayer."

"I know. It's harder, sometimes, convicting the guilty. I'm not suggesting you try. Lydia's murder of Bruce is beside the point now. She pulled it off so neatly it will never catch up with her. At the moment I'm working on a different angle, trying to make you see that Verna had nothing at all to do with the death of her stepfather. I'm simply explaining where and how I got hold of the poison, whatever it was—"

Listening in rising agitation, Griff left his chair, prowled around his desk, got himself a swallow of water at the lavatory in a screened-off corner, then prowled again; and all the while he kept flicking me with the whiplash of his glance—his eyes hurt, scared, even desperate. I finished by telling him of the shock I'd felt when he himself had told me, here in this same office, of the sudden end of Sylvester Doremus. Then he stood over me, this little guy who had abruptly stopped feeling

so cocksure of himself; and of course nothing I'd said had helped to resurrect the old friendship between us.

"I can't take your word for all this. I've got to treat you just as I'd treat any crank or crackpot who strayed in here and confessed killing Doc Doremus. I demand proof. The law requires it. You know as well as I do, a confession like this won't stand up in a first degree homicide without corroboration."

"I know."

"So what proof do you have to make all this stick?—other than these empty capsules, which may actually prove nothing at all."

"There's a witness," I said. "Somebody who saw me going into Lindwood that day when nobody else was there. I can't tell you for sure who the witness is or how much he saw, but Ernie Reece knows."

"Ah?" Griff said, sounding pleased for the first time. "Ernie again."

"I'd enjoy helping you nail him on a charge of concealing evidence. He tried to bribe me on the basis of that witness's information. Possibly it's Sam Wregg. I caught Sam prowling around Lindwood just last Sunday. It probably wasn't the first time he'd done it."

Griff admitted, "Sam Wregg came here with something on his mind. I couldn't make sense of it."

"He tried to tell me something too. In fact he considered he actually had told me his information, but his meaning escaped me."

"Something about Verna's never walking in the woods?"

"Yes. As you say, it didn't add up. But besides that, whatever he meant it to convey, he knew something else. He liked Verna and said very emphatically he'd let no harm come to her. This seemed to imply he was holding in reserve some means of helping her or even saving her in the event her predicament demanded it. He insisted, 'I know what's goin' on better'n people think I do.' He seemed to feel I shouldn't have allowed the district attorney to bring Verna to trial, or else he actually knew I was guilty and expected me to do something about it. At any rate, after Ernie's attempt at coercion I as-

sumed it was Sam who saw me alone at Lindwood the day Sylvester Doremus swallowed the poison there."

"It wouldn't prove much, but—" Griff reached for his hat. "We'll corner Sam about it right now."

I asked as I got back on my feet with a weary smile, "You mean you're actually approaching the point of believing it's barely possible Verna may be innocent of murder after all?"

"Goddammit," Griff retorted in the same waspish tone I'd used to him, "If you're so goddamn guilty, I'll believe it when you can pin it on yourself as well as I pinned it on her!"

The answer, then, was no, he wasn't willing even yet to abandon his case against Verna. Since someone must be punished for murdering Dr. Doremus, she still looked riper for it than I did. This hustling little man demanded no victims, but once a prize specimen had fallen into his hands he couldn't give her up lightly—not in favor of such an unglamorous self-confesser as I was, not in the face of acute professional embarrassment, not at the cost of blighting his future. He was inclined to blame me less for homicide than for causing his greatest court victory to backfire on him.

"My car." It was a grim order.

I complied with it willingly enough. Sitting beside District Attorney West in his old maroon sedan as he started it up, I turned my gaze around Crossgate. A nice town, richer than average in character, a comfortable place to live—peaceful, too, except for a small undercurrent of murder.

Griff turned the car past the rear corner of Lindwood, putting the tract of rolling woodland on our left. The ruts of the road led us past the home of the late Dr. Sylvester Doremus. Cora Doremus had kept its lawn mowed. Most of its old green roller-blinds were down. My victim's widow must be inside, but the place looked deserted.

At my suggestion Griff turned again into the narrower lane where I had previously left my car when scouting for Sam Wregg. He braked at the same spot. Making a belligerent approach, as if he hoped Sam would discredit my whole story, he followed me through the bank of wild blackberry bushes, across a spilled-out gap in the stone wall and into these woods in the rearmost reaches of Lindwood.

Quiet as we tried to be, we were noisy intruders in this

small land of idyllic tranquillity. Fallen leaves rustled underfoot, stones clinked together under them. I led Griff directly to the rocky gully which was Sam Wregg's private paradise. We paused at its edge to gaze at his shack in the hollow below.

"Sam?" I called. . . . "We've got to see you, Sam." . . .

He had never answered me on any of my visits; and this time my answer was the same baffling hush.

Griff heeled after me down the mossy bank. We crossed the shaky bridge, then Sam's yard, and paused together at his door.

Sam Wregg was at home today. He lay on his filthy cot in the opposite corner, staring at us slackjawed as if in abject terror. His expression didn't flicker as I moved toward him and when I put my hand on his shoulder to shake him awake it felt as hard as carved stone.

Rigor mortis.

Sam Wregg had been dead for hours.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I STEPPED BACK from the cot so that Griff might take a closer look. He screwed up his face in revulsion, drawing away again. Sam Wregg watched us with his dead eyes as we stood there in his hovel staring questions at each other.

After a long moment Griff said, almost in relief, "What about corroborating your confession now? Got any other witnesses?"

"Dead or not, Sam may still be eloquent enough."

"How?"

"He left something odd behind him. Something odd and significant. The fact of his death."

"Odd?"

"As soon as Verna was convicted Sam suddenly became

unable to keep his promise to help her. It strikes me as too damned odd to ignore."

Deeply disturbed, Griff jerked out another of those terse, prodding questions. "Promise? What promise?"

"Just before the trial started Sam swore to me, 'If you can't get Verna out of this, why, then, I'll *make* somebody listen.' But whatever he had to say, he'll never utter it now."

"Who was he able to talk against but you?"

Griff's resentful thrust left me groping into emptiness. He rephrased it insistently.

"If Sam actually was able to clear Verna, wouldn't he have had to do it by accusing the real poisoner, and isn't that exactly what you claim to be?"

"Griff, I think I've known all along, deep down in the bottom of my mind, that I'd never let Verna go to the electric chair in my place. If she'd been acquitted I would have gladly let the whole thing ride, probably; but the moment the jury reported last night I knew they'd decided my own fate rather than Verna's. I resisted, naturally, but I knew I couldn't let myself get out of it. When Ernie Reece's threats didn't impress me today I realized what I'd subconsciously decided to do about it. For the same reason I had no fear of Sam, no need to silence him. On the contrary, once I'd confessed, Sam might possibly help me by corroborating certain eye-witnessed details. I say possibly, not being sure he could. But as it is Sam's death gets in the way of my purpose—and what may be much more to the point, it gets in the way of Sam's purposes as well. He's been silenced at a damned suspicious time."

"Silenced?" Griff frowned at me. "He was an old man, living in this pig-pen and eating a wacky diet on borrowed time. He finally kicked off at what happened to be a bad moment for Verna, that's all."

Sam's makeshift stove gave off no warmth this morning—another indication that his death had occurred hours ago, evidently during the night. On each of my earlier visits smoke had wisped from the tile chimney and I'd found a pot of steaming coffee awaiting Sam's return; but this morning the pot was cold. The fire had died soon after Sam.

"He died a natural death." Griff's sharp eyes searched my face. "A natural death. Didn't he?"

"Our conscientious new coroner might like a look at the remains of Sam's last meal," I suggested.

A skillet with a mended handle sat on the table. Inside it a few soggy pieces of fried food lay embedded in congealed grease. Griff gave a few earnest pokes at them with a fork, then turned to several uncooked fragments of the same stuff in a pan of scraps on the table top.

"Mushrooms?" I said.

"Mushrooms of a kind," Griff answered quietly, and he shuddered, stopping there.

"Something strange about them?" I went closer. "Vile-looking things."

"Vile enough to kill you."

I frowned over him. A little less grim now, he'd become soberly thoughtful.

"I'm no mycologist," he said.

Mycology: the science and study of fungi.

"But on the basis of information picked up recently it looks to me like Sam Wregg picked the most poisonous variety of mushroom he could possibly find to cook for his supper last night."

While I watched him he used the fork to stir the fragments in the scrap pan.

"Discolored now, but you can still see the white warts on the white cap. See, the gills give off this purple dust—spores. The color is a danger sign. No indication is definite enough, but the spore test is fairly reliable as a way of identifying these things—the deadliest plant that grows on this earth."

"Deadliest mushroom." I recalled its popular name: "The Destroying Angel."

"Or it's sometimes called The Death Cup. One of nature's most terrible booby-traps. A rattlesnake having roots but no warning rattle."

"I've heard one mouthful is enough."

"A mouthful? A nibble." Without explaining where he'd picked up these esoteric details, Griff went on, "It grows wild everywhere in the woods around here. Sometimes it resembles an edible variety of mushroom closely enough to deceive experts. None of the old wives' tests are reliable, of course, such as if it peels easily or discolors a spoon—they fool you

regardless. One of the human race's silliest, most suicidal follies is eating wild mushrooms. It's so easily avoided. You gain so little if you win."

"We've had cases in Crossgate," I recalled. "Mushroom fanciers who made the error of getting a Destroying Angel or two mixed up in a basketful of the table variety. It's fatal every single time. But Sam Wregg—An expert as sharp-eyed as Sam thought he was—would he really make such a deadly mistake?"

We gazed at the corpse on the cot. It seemed answer enough. But I couldn't shake off a queasy uneasiness. Something here was too odd. And I felt too that something was about to catch up with me with an enlightening shock.

"Sam was enormously proud of his ability to distinguish between mushrooms. He ranted at people—called them dang-blasted idiots—who thought they knew the difference, but as for himself he bragged about the fact that he'd never picked a wrong one. His record seems to prove it—God knows how many years of selling mushrooms to the Tip-Top Market with never a complaint. It doesn't seem possible he'd cook himself up such a fatal batch as that."

We gazed again at the deadly fragments in the skillet, then at the dead man on the cot.

"What the hell," Griff said flatly, "nobody held him down and rammed the stuff into his throat."

His quick glance seemed peculiarly evasive, as if he might be concealing significant facts for his own purposes. Abruptly he turned his back and went out. I closed the shack door quietly on Sam, leaving him alone again, then followed Griff.

In his cocky manner he had hustled deeper along the bank, following the course of the water trickling thinly along its crease. Seeking shady, moist spots, he clambered and bounced and skirmished along until, darting aside, he came to a stooping pause, frowning over a dank little cranny. He pointed to a bed of mushrooms growing amid moss and wild grass. They grew in variety here, some drab, others with an orange blush, or shining bright red; and among them were a number of the pale Destroying Angels.

"Notice the withered stumps," Griff said. "Some were

cropped with a knife and taken away. This is where Sam gathered them last evening."

"Wait. Are you saying he selected the most poisonous ones available? Why would he? For purposes of suicide? Never. Sam liked living; he led a happier life in his way than you or I do. Why did he select poisonous ones, then?"

"Maybe it was too dark when he picked them. Maybe he'd drunk too much of his wild grape wine. A guy with a perfect score is due to miss sooner or later."

"Maybe he was murdered."

"Maybe his eyes were going bad—he couldn't tell the difference so well any longer."

"Maybe he was murdered."

Griff looked hard at me, then gravely at something far away, his face losing a little color. "I'll come clean with you, Web. I'll tell you something you may not know. The toxic element in the Destroying Angel produces symptoms such as those Syl Doremus showed."

I had to make certain of this. "Say that again."

"Syl Doremus would have died with the same symptoms if he'd taken a bite or two of these same poisonous mushrooms."

Staring at Griff, I waited in painful tension for him to go on. I was completely aware that Sylvester Doremus had not eaten poisonous mushrooms. No one could be more certain than I was that Sylvester Doremus's death had been caused by a small quantity of an unidentified white powder. But Griff was making a point, a crucial point, telling me much more than he knew; and I listened hardly breathing.

"I didn't tell you about it, of course, but there was a time when I thought I might have to ask the court to direct a verdict of acquittal."

"When?"

"When the Lucas family died."

"The Lucas family—three of them, father, mother and son. You weren't talking about it at the time."

"I'm telling you now, not much later. Carl Lucas had too much confidence in his ability to distinguish one variety of mushroom from another. He'd gone out into the woods on the other side of town to find some free food for his family. No doubt they enjoyed their supper—they had plenty, with some

left over, so Mag Lucas tossed the leavings into the chicken yard. The Lucases spent a quiet evening together and went to bed as usual, feeling nothing wrong. In fact, they may have felt a little better than usual—the poison acts that way. Then in the middle of the night, while they slept, it hit them. No one saw the three Lucases dying in agony; but the post-mortem appearances gave me something to worry about.”

“Do you mean you kept quiet about the cause of death in the Lucas family because it might weaken your case against Verna?”

“Not quite that.” Griff frowned at me. “I think it’s been mentioned before, I’m pretty high-principled. The Lucas deaths did suggest a new angle on Doc Doremus. If there had been any definite indications that Syl Doremus had died of mushroom poisoning I might have called off the trial. Then you could have laid grateful wreaths on the Lucas graves. But there were none.”

“If the autopsy showed the same symptoms—”

“The symptoms!” Griff snorted in sudden heat. “Not too damned much is known about them with any degree of certainty. Besides, who was it that introduced so much expert testimony at the trial to show that those same symptoms are produced by a long list of other poisons? Doc Doremus had not eaten anything, remember? Both Cora and Verna Doremus testified he’d eaten nothing at all. This was borne out by Vic Bray’s findings at autopsy. That cleared up that point, so I went ahead with my case against Verna. Was I wrong there?”

“You were right about it,” I admitted, “at least about Syl Doremus’s not having eaten anything.”

“All right, then. Poisonous mushrooms killed the Lucases, but we have to rule out mushrooms in the Doremus case,” Griff insisted. “What about Bruce?”

“Bruce?”

“I’m talking about accidental poisoning while you’re thinking about murder. The two kinds of death seem to be mixed up together here. The Lucas family: accidental, caused by poisonous mushrooms. Doc Doremus: murder with much the same symptoms, but mushrooms ruled out. So what about Bruce?”

“I remember now, Bruce never ate them. He detested their

rubbery softness and didn't like their flavor. Mushroom sauce on a steak ruined it for him."

"Rule 'em out in Bruce's death also, then. Lastly, Sam Wregg. Mushroom poisoning for *him*, no question of it; but I say again, that meal wasn't forced down his throat. I doubt he was persuaded to eat it at the point of a gun. No; he cooked it in his own frypan, on his own stove, and he ate it and died of it. You said yourself he liked living too much to kill himself. So what is there left to think?"

Griff gazed in the direction of the shack where Sam Wregg lay dead. "As for what he might have told us, I can make a pretty good guess at it."

"Verna never walked in the woods—where the wild mushrooms grow!"

"That's it. There you are," Griff agreed quietly. "Sam's reason for believing Verna innocent. She was a stranger to the woods, didn't know about mushrooms. He thought, judging from the way Syl Doremus had died, that the doctor had eaten the poisonous variety. In fact, he told me that."

"Sam actually came out with that much?"

"Yes. Therefore, to his mind, it couldn't have been Verna who fed them to the doctor. But Sam's assumption was wrong. I already had proof of that in Vic Bray's official report, with verification in Cora Doremus's testimony, and Verna's too. It was then and it still is an undeniable fact that Syl Doremus had eaten no food to cause his death. We keep coming back to that."

"Sam had something more decisive than that to tell. He must have had."

"Who knows?" Griff gazed again at Sam Wregg's shack. "As for your notion that Sam is another victim of homicide, why should anybody bother to murder him? What good is it doing anyone? So what is there left to think but that he finally made the fatal mistake which gatherers of wild mushrooms are all too likely to make?"

"There's something else to think," I said, hardly daring to voice the hope. "Something is dawning on me. Something that's been hiding in the back of my mind is finally beginning to sneak forward. I feel it."

"Talk sense," Griff said impatiently, his dynamic self again.

"What difference do these mushroom deaths make to you anyhow? There's no connection between them and the mysterious white powder you mentioned. You say the powder caused Doc Doremus's death; you say you put it in the sugar he used in his coffee, so— What's the matter, Web?"

Griff peered at me warily, and I gazed down at him in a sudden upsurge of relief, like a man cured of his worst afflictions in one miraculous instant.

"What the hell's eating you, Web?" Griff insisted. "You've got a damn funny look on your face."

"I didn't kill Dr. Doremus."

"Now listen—"

"It has occurred to me suddenly, just now, that I didn't kill Doctor Doremus. Not really."

"For God's sake, make up your mind!" Griff flared up. "You come to me with a confession, claiming you killed the guy but Verna didn't, then practically the next minute you reverse yourself—"

"Neither of us did it," I said in a whirl of elation. "Neither Verna nor I has murdered anyone."

Griff in his exasperation flung at me a new version of a well-used question: "Goddammit, then, if she didn't and you didn't either, who did? Can you tell me that?"

"Not right now. After all, I've just begun to see the light. There are several points to clear up. But maybe in a short while— You can help. Come on, Griff."

The dry leaves rattled sharply underfoot as we started back through the woods.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

GRIFF TURNED his car into the driveway of the Doremus home and braked it to a shivering stop beside the house. We went across the front porch. I knocked and the sound echoed behind the door.

Griff eyed me in silence as we waited. He had hustled after me to his car and had started it off without asking questions. Perhaps, having come up with the wrong answer publicly and resoundingly, he still shied from the right one, whatever it might turn out to be. Part of it might be found here in this shabby, lonely house.

Firm, slow footfalls came to the door. We heard the latch unfastened, the key turned, the knob twisted. Then the door was opened by Cora Doremus and she showed us her clean, plain, stolid face.

"May I borrow your telephone for a moment, Mrs. Doremus?" Griff asked.

Opening the door wider, she pointed to the instrument sitting on a taboret beside the stairs. Marching past it into the living room, she raised two of the window blinds. Although I had followed her she didn't suggest I sit down and remained standing herself. Griff, at the phone, poked at the dial.

"I'm calling Dr. Victor Bray on an official matter," he explained, watching Cora Doremus's firm face.

If she had any knowledge that Sam Wregg was in line for an autopsy she gave not the slightest sign of it. As for her attitude since my failure to win an acquittal for her daughter, she appeared to hold no grudge; simply, she was done with me. Or so she would have it. However, I'd come here to prod her with questions.

"Mrs. Doremus, did the doctor ever handle any cases of mushroom poisoning?"

She turned her unfriendly eyes on me. "He tell me of one or two."

"Years ago?"

"Long time; yes."

"None recently?"

She bent her shining brushed head as if trying to recall. Watching her from the hallway, Griff murmured into the telephone. Presently Mrs. Doremus lifted her head again, with decision.

"Last time three-four years ago. I do not remember the name."

"The doctor didn't talk to you much about his practice?"

"He talk to me very little about anything. About sick people

only when they make him mad—like such fools, they eat things they find growing in the woods without knowing if it is good or bad.”

“Did he ever mention the last sickness of my brother, Bruce Lindley?”

Mrs. Doremus settled herself more solidly in her flat shiny oxfords. “It upset him, not knowing about your brother’s fever.”

Griff came from the phone shaking his head. “Vic’s out making calls. I’ll catch him later. You through here?”

“I’ve one more thing to check. Mrs. Doremus, your husband had been practicing medicine a long time. He was getting near the usual age of retirement. Did he have any plans for taking it easier?”

A cloud came over Cora Doremus’s face. “He say when his ship come in we all go to a nice place to live.”

I groped at this. “Was it just wishful talk, Mrs. Doremus, or did he really have such hopes?”

A look of reproach was growing stronger in Cora Doremus’s eyes, as if to scold me for intruding upon a dead man’s privacy. “It does not matter now.”

“It does matter, very definitely. Tell me that, Mrs. Doremus. Did you husband speak of retiring as if he really expected to do it?”

She answered reluctantly, “For a long time it is just talk. Then he seem to begin making plans.”

“How could he manage it, considering his small practice and low income?”

Her face turned darker as she retorted flatly, “This does not matter now.”

“But if you could hardly make ends meet here, now——”

“No matter now.”

Griff saw no point in bucking her refusal to discuss the matter. With a shrug he turned away. I followed him several steps, then turned back.

“Mrs. Doremus—about my fee.”

Griff halted, astonished to hear me reminding her of the greedy detail.

“You’re able to pay your daughter’s attorney for his efforts, aren’t you, Mrs. Doremus?”

Her face, stony but troubled, now took on a look of stubborn pride. She turned without speaking and marched out of sight through the dining room. We listened to her noises—a rummaging about as if she were gathering hidden cash from canisters and paper-lined shelves. When she marched back she had a handful of banknotes.

“How much?”

Tugging at one of the bills, I slid it from her grasp. It was a fifty. Evidently it had been rolled up—it tended to curl. I put it to my nose and smelled whisky. It was not part of the money raised by Dave Dredger and Tim Bascom which I had had Ruth leave in the Doremus mailbox.

“Insurance money, Mrs. Doremus?”

Despite the willingness she had shown to twist the truth for Verna’s sake, she had evidently learned to avoid denying it when it was a matter of record. “That insurance money in bank.”

“What is this money, then?”

She stared at me. “The doctor’s.”

“He left you some cash? Did you find it after his death?”

“His money,” Mrs. Doremus stated. “Now mine. How much you want?”

“Not so much as a dollar of it. But I do want information about it. Before Verna’s trial started, the matter of her lawyer’s fee worried you. Now you can pay. You’re apparently better off than you expected to be—you have cash in the house, this money you found, and it seems to add up to considerable. Here, for example, is a fifty dollar bill, and you have several more fifties and twenties in your hand. Did your husband’s patients give him such large bills? Were there many of them in this money you found?”

Mrs. Doremus reiterated obstinately, “It is my money now, from the doctor. You can not take it away.”

Griff put in, “We don’t want to take it away. We just want it explained. Of course we know most of the doctor’s income was in cash. A dollar and a half for an office call, two and a half for a house call, usually paid by the patient in the spot. Was the doctor stashing that money away to dodge the income tax or something?”

Mrs. Doremus pressed her lips together, staring between us.

"An easy guess where he hid it, anyway, Griff," I said. "This money smells of liquor. Sylvester Doremus in his delirium muttered something about a bottle. He probably meant a whisky bottle tucked back on a shelf somewhere—a bottle stuffed with big bills like this one. He may have been trying to say, 'If something happens to me don't throw the bottle away.'"

Cora Doremus glanced at me with edged quickness. Griff looked pained and murmured, "Well, I'll be damned. Is that it, Mrs. Doremus?"

She squared her jaw at us. "The doctor keep this money, yes. In a bottle in the closet of his office. Almost I threw it out before I saw it had something pushed down in the neck, paper it look like. I break the bottle and it is money. Much money. The doctor save it. Now it is mine. No business of yours."

Griff pressed in on her. "It's our business, all right. This man got murdered, this man who was secretly caching his dough, piling it up for a rainy day. He talked about his ship coming in but you didn't know what he meant until after his death, you say, when you came across that bottle stuffed with banknotes. Where'd he get it, Mrs. Doremus?"

She shook her head.

"How much did he have tucked away? Answer me, Mrs. Doremus."

Flat-footed, she forced it out: "More than six thousand."

Griff looked at me round-eyed. Suddenly he hustled back to the phone. Two minutes thereafter, having muttered into it urgently, he put it down with a thump.

"Tim Bascom says nobody at the bank changed any small bills into big ones for Syl Doremus. That means the bills were that big when they came to him."

I nodded, moving to the door. "I think we'd better get Vic Bray over to Sam's shack. Thank you, Mrs. Doremus. Good-by."

We closed the door behind us and walked back to the car.

"Important evidence in Sam's shack, Griff. Shouldn't be left there unwatched. Too easy to lose."

"What evidence?"

"We'll have to check before we can be sure just what it is; but it's there."

"You burn me up with this doubletalk."

"I'm a little feverish myself. A lot of it's still a riddle to me too. I'm filling it out as I grope along. After all, this is the first time I've ever tried myself out as a sleuth. And I'm still a little dizzy. I've been thinking of myself for so long as a murderer, I can't seem to get used to the idea that I haven't actually killed anybody."

"You keep saying that—but all right, work it out your own way. After all, you're the guy who'll feel it if you should happen to fall on your face." Griff was still bristling a little. "But somebody else can guard Sam's shack. I'll trail along with you. It's a nice day for a ride." He started the motor. "Who do we want to grope around next? . . . Well?"

He turned impatiently, saw me gazing into the rear-view mirror and said with a snap, "Well, have you stopped talking altogether?"

"It seems we've been followed."

"Yeah? Who by?"

"The car that just passed was Ernie Reece's. He went by slowly, taking a good look at us."

"Ernie Reece is a guy I want to talk to."

Griff followed through in a characteristic rush. He shot the car backward, veered it into the road, then propelled it forward in the stream of Ernie Reece's dust. Not wishing to scare him off, we rolled just fast enough to keep him in sight on the straightaway.

At the first intersection we lost him for a moment, then, turning on North Main, spotted his car sitting empty outside the filling station where he had worked before Lydia had brightened his future.

"He's inside at the telephone," I said. "Reporting, no doubt."

"To Lindwood?"

"A hundred to one it's Lindwood. Nice, having a lovely wealthy widow to extend a helpful hand when you're falling into hot water."

"Not too damned helpful in this county," Griff said, an

edge on his voice. "I'm not in love with Lydia. She's been a little too snotty to me at moments."

"She's a little too hard on husbands, too, from my viewpoint."

"As for Ernie," Griff added, "I'll pick him up when I want him."

He promptly turned the car into Town Line Road, then through the familiar stone gate in the high wrought-iron fence. Lindwood's expensively groomed lawn would make the most pampered golf course look neglected by comparison. The grass-clipping crew was at work now, in spotless tan coveralls, and it would not have amazed me to find them using tweezers. We followed the broad graveled driveway to Lindwood's main door where it was blocked by a gray, shiny-new sedan.

"Lydia's ailing oftener than usual these days, and probably revising her matrimonial plans as well," I observed. "Convenient set-up, if peculiar in a way, asking the guy to drop in, then paying him for it. That's Vic Bray's car."

"So I can't find him when I need him on official business."

Forestalling Griff's direct approach to the front entrance, I hooked his arm and swung him toward the back door. Here, between the rear of the house and the garage, where Lydia's royal-blue chariot was berthed, was the spot where I had caught Sam Wregg spying, where he would spy no more. Being quiet about it, I steered Griff into the kitchen where Verna had not worked in so long a time, partly thanks to our district attorney's fervor. Lydia had left it untidy again. I recalled the peculiarly disturbing odor and warmth I had felt here last Sunday—a feverish sort of warmth and an organic smell—and I sniffed for it now; but it wasn't here this time.

We passed the pantry with its gadgets also in disarray and turned to the base of the stairway. From above came Lydia's light laugh and Vic Bray's properly professional murmur.

We went up. In her bedroom Lydia reclined, captivantly draped in lace, on her chaise-longue. Beside her, his clean pink cheeks glowing, sat Dr. Victor Bray. They were drinking coffee.

Shock stopped me short. Yes, by God, Vic Bray was sitting

there so pleasantly, so charmingly sharing Lydia's coffee, exactly as Sylvester Doremus had done one fatal day.

"Did you have one sugar," I inquired, "or have you come to prefer it straight?"

Lydia gasped prettily, turning to gaze at us with her startled eyes. Her long hair hung loose on her shoulders. She was beautiful, really more beautiful now than ever. Murder had matured her; and there was something about the process of acquiring another new husband that gave her a certain radiance.

Vic Bray, annoyed by the intrusion, appeared to have achieved a sort of aseptic super-cleanliness to match, an extra-special kind of fastidiousness suitable to the unexpectedly good fortune he was enjoying. Certainly, as a cadaver-picking medical student hoping for a reasonably remunerative practice, he had never foreseen a dream patient such as Lydia.

"Oh, Web, hello!" she said musically. "And Griff too. How nice. Come in a little farther. Won't you sit down and have a cup of coffee?"

"With or without?"

"What? Web, dear," Lydia said, dropping her smile and putting aside her cup, "you're looking rather upset. Is something wrong, Web?"

"Yes. Something's wrong."

"Ask me, too, Lydia." Griff sounded grim again. "I've got a couple of fine answers to that question." He went closer, frowning at young Dr. Bray. "One thing wrong is that I've just distinguished myself by convicting an innocent girl of murder. Or so Web claims, and I'm beginning to feel he's in a position to know. Another thing wrong is that Sam Wregg is suddenly dead this morning. We don't have to take Web's word for that one. I've been out there to Sam's shack and seen it for myself. Now, if you can permit your official duties as coroner to tear you away from this delightful diversion—"

Vic Bray stiffened to his feet, still holding the egg-shell cup Lydia had served him. "Sam Wregg dead?"

"Yes—murdered," I said.

"Murdered?" Evidently Vic Bray in his young career had already encountered too many murders; particularly hearing

of another in these dainty surroundings, he looked offended. "How?"

"Poison—a special private brand. While you're there take a careful look at Sam's coffeepot. Save a sample of that coffee for analysis."

Vic Bray's gaze lowered to the cup in his hand, then lifted again to me, troubled.

I could feel Griff thinking: "What's this about Sam's coffee? He died of eating poisonous mushrooms, remember? Not coffee, mushrooms."

"Before you go, Vic," I went on, "I understand that following the Lucas deaths you and Griff did a little research into the subject of mushroom poisoning, with particular attention to the variety called the Death Cup or the Destroying Angel."

"Yes." Plainly Vic felt reluctant to leave this inviting boudoir for Sam Wregg's filthy hut. "What about it?"

"Let's be scientific and begin with its proper name."

"*Amanita phalloides*."

I recalled my self standing in George Keller's drugstore that night following my test on the rats, wondering what poison Lydia had fed to Bruce. Then I heard again Juliana in Miss Dodd's schoolyard speaking to her little blond playmate: "*Rich-mond-ena card-in-alis*. It's the same thing as a cardinal. Lydia told me. Lydia knows all about birds and flowers and stuff like that, learned it when she was a little girl. *Richmondena cardinalis*." I glanced at Lydia now, reflecting that no doubt she knew better than our young coroner the Latin name of the Destroying Angel and where to find it. Unquestionably, finding lethal mushrooms when desired would be much easier for anyone than avoiding them. I had seen suddenly, then, Lydia's problem of supply was really so simple. The ingredients of her witch's brew grew wild in profusion within the boundaries of Lindwood.

I inquired of Vic, "What's the toxic principle in the *amanita phalloides* called?"

"Phallin, a toxalbumin."

"Pretty bad stuff, isn't it?"

"There's nothing deadlier in the plant world. It's similar to and as virulent as the strongest snake venom—but unlike snake venom there is no antidote available."

"Deaths caused by it are comparatively rare, then."

"Not as rare as they should be. There are about thirty every year in New York City, for example." But young Dr. Bray was gratified to inform me in addition, "It's not mentioned in most toxicologies." And he added with authoritative firmness, "Since it has no disagreeable taste the presence of this powerful poison in the system may not be suspected until it begins to act, from six to twelve hours later. One's best hope against it is early identification and the quick use of the stomach pump, emetics and purgatives. Once it has begun to get in its work, destroying the nerves and breaking up the red corpuscles, it's too late, except for possible benefit from blood transfusions. But in any case recognized at a later stage the prognosis is negative."

Gazing at Lydia I said, "Fascinating, isn't it?"

As she gazed at me, answering with a fetching frown of pretended puzzlement, we heard a car in the drive. It coursed as far as Griff's and Vic's cars, where it was obliged to stop. Griff shifted curiously to a window. Turning back, he informed us, "Ernie."

"Just in time."

Dr. Bray said, "I'll be going."

"In a few more minutes, Vic, please. There's something I'd like to check with you."

He remained there, still holding the fragile cup and saucer as if clinging to a hope, as we heard a door opened downstairs. Ernie Reece hadn't rung or knocked; he'd simply come right in.

Lydia called liltingly, "Ernest! Come right up here."

He had already started to climb the stairs, knowing the way.

Forewarning him, Lydia called, "I've visitors, Ernest, and they all look so terribly official or something."

We all watched through the doorway. Ernie appeared at the top of the stairs and came straight into the bedroom. His bold approach was too obviously intended to seem an innocent man's act.

"Stand aside, Ernie, and keep quiet until you're spoken to." Although a foot shorter than Ernie and certainly less pictorial, Griff exerted the force of his office convincingly. "Meanwhile

consider yourself detained for questioning at least. I can be wrong"—a slight rueful smile quirked his lips at that—"but I think you'll be staying with us a while at the state's expense."

Ernie was smart enough to avoid bluster but he did permit himself a handsomely superior sneer. Lydia at the same moment did a significant thing: she glanced from Ernie to Vic, then from Ernie to Vic again in swift comparison—evidently seeing them together for the first time—and the moment ended with her faint smile lingering on Vic.

He didn't notice it, uneasily watching me.

"Fascinating, isn't it, Lydia?" I asked again.

"What is, Web, dear?"

"The terrible deadliness of the Destroying Angel."

"Oh, that." She murmured, "I had no idea, really."

"Your daughter would be surprised to hear it, Lydia. In fact Julie, without any intention of it, has already proved what a liar you are."

"Really, Web!"

"It's a little too late for pretense now, Lydia. Tell us how you thought of such a clever way of using such a horrible poison."

"I haven't the *faintest* idea——"

"Then I'll do it for you. There will probably be a few details to correct, but on the whole it went this way—starting with the facts that the *amanita phalloides* grows wild in your own woods, that in your little educational excursions with Julie you'd seen them and perhaps warned her against them—and the additional fact that at that point you'd find yourself far better off with your husband dead."

"Web!" She was beautifully pale. "Web it hurts me deeply when you say such terribly undeserved——"

"Please, Lydia. This is an inevitable thing; you can't possibly stop it. Nobody can get you for Bruce's murder now, though. It's too late. Thanks to a neat and evil piece of ingenuity which you evidently thought up all by yourself. You deserve credit for a devilish inspiration."

Lydia looked so abused and bewildered.

"Simple, too. You merely put a few Destroying Angels in the dehydrator."

Vic Bray's eyes snapped open.

"The dehydrator you have in the pantry, Lydia. Along with the pressure cookers you used it for a while, or had your cook use it, for preserving food. Some foods dry down to powder—eggs, potatoes, milk and evidently mushrooms can be powdered too. When you used the dehydrator Verna wasn't around, of course, and Bruce wasn't noticing when you emptied a few of his capsules, refilled them with your own brand of medicine and put them in the bottle at his bedside."

"Web," Lydia said in sickened tones, "you're being so horribly unfair to me."

"You weren't being unfair to Bruce, of course. And in another way to Julie."

"Sam Wregg too. Sam was a danger to you. He'd seen you in the woods, hadn't he? Perhaps he'd even watched you gathering poisonous mushrooms. The reason for Bruce's death must have been obvious to him. At first he didn't ask much of you in return for his silence—just to stop forcing him out of his beloved shack on your property. Plus a few dollars, so he wouldn't have to make so many trips to sell his wares at the market. But when Verna was arrested for murdering her stepfather, Sam's closest friend, in another mushroom death—then Sam became sincerely concerned, didn't he, Lydia? He was prepared to denounce you with the facts of your mushroom-gathering, even at the risk of losing his precious home in the event it became necessary in order to save Verna. And Verna's conviction early last night meant, to you, that Sam would make his threat good."

We watched Lydia as she shook her lovely head.

"You'd prepared in advance to murder Sam. A few Destroying Angels gathered when Sam couldn't see you doing it—or so you hoped. A job of dehydrating them last Sunday, producing an odor and warmth which I noticed near the pantry. Sam must have seen you in the woods in spite of your precautions, and naturally afraid of the deadly plants you'd gathered, he sneaked up to this house to try to find out what you meant to do with them; but you could be quite confident that your tasteless powder would reach past his defenses. It did, too. He'll never tell on you now. But our new coroner may find a strong concentration of phallin in Sam's coffee."

Our young coroner stared at his coffee cup and quickly put it down.

"That was easy for you, Lydia—simply to slip out to Sam's shack when he wasn't there and drop a liberal helping of your powder into his coffeepot. Even if he saw you prowling into his shack he'd never suspect that. Then, once he was dead or well on the way to it, you had simply to make it seem he'd eaten some of the Deadly Angels by mistake. That operation is an entrancing domestic scene, Lydia—you in Sam's shack very late last night or very early this morning while Sam lay dead or dying on the cot beside you, filling out the fake picture by frying a few mushrooms."

I felt Griff thinking: "That will do it. If there's actually this certain poison in Sam's coffee and more of it in his blood and no bits of mushroom remaining in his stomach, that will do it."

Aloud Griff said, "We may not be able to get you for murdering Bruce, Lydia, but we may do a better job of getting you for Sam Wregg. Too bad in a way. Your victim seems so unworthy of you."

Lydia rose to stand slender and tall and coolly patrician. "Oh, really, you can't possibly believe—"

"I've saved the best one for the last, Lydia. I think it's the best. I mean Dr. Doremus, of course. Because I'm not the one who killed him. You are."

Lydia moved slowly back toward her vanity.

"I can be blamed for putting the weapon near your hand, but you actually used it. I think perhaps you were only too glad to make the most of the position I'd placed myself in. Syl Doremus had been waiting his turn to be murdered by you anyhow."

Lydia stood against her vanity bench, her chin lifted in defiance.

"Dr. Doremus recognized a case of mushroom poisoning when he saw it—and he was Bruce's doctor. He also knew a good thing when he saw it—and an especially good thing this murder had appeared to be in the light of the information concerning your woodland prowlings as given him by his crony Sam Wregg. He was blackmailing you, Lydia. Not heavily—a few banknotes at a time—but it was adding up and

in time would add up to plenty. And as a danger—one who might blab out too much when in his cups—Doremus was too uncomfortable to have around. So when I unwittingly put the weapon in your hand you didn't hesitate to use it."

She stood there backed to her mirror like a lovely cornered doe; and I turned to Griff.

"I drove in here just before two o'clock that day, during a recess of the court. I saw no car, judged the place was deserted, came here to this room. I took the sugar bowl—the same bowl you see here on this little table. I went over there to that door into the bath connecting this room with Bruce's. I might have gone into Lydia's own private special bath, there on the opposite side, but instead I chose Bruce's—perhaps because, in a way, I was acting for Bruce. I emptied all the sugar except one spoonful, then flushed it down the toilet. Next I carried the bowl back to its place, mixed in the white powder—and that finished it. I left."

Lydia said, shaken, "You—you admit putting it there!"

"I do. For you, Lydia. Especially for you; and strangely enough not for my own sake at all. But never mind that angle. That's where I left the poison, in the bowl. I didn't actually put it down my intended victim's throat, as you did to Syl Doremus, Lydia."

Lydia pointed at me. "You did it all! You've confessed you did it."

"Griff—" I spoke to him without taking my eyes off Lydia. "This is something that's been working its way slowly to the top of my mind. Little things put together, adding up. Lydia on the stand saying she'd gone into the city to shop that morning, intending to stay until the middle of the afternoon; but she'd developed one of her headaches and had started back—her words—'without having lunched.' On the way back her car gave her trouble. She left it at the service garage. A mechanic drove her home. All this Lydia herself said as a witness at Verna's trial. Next Verna came back here to Lindwood and Lydia had her phone Dr. Doremus, and the doctor came. After seeing Lydia he stopped in the kitchen, then drove home with the bottle of whisky Verna had bought for him. According to sworn and repeated testimony he reached home before three o'clock."

Griff said softly, staring at me, "My God."

"You see it too, then. All this means this house was not deserted when I came in shortly before two o'clock with the poison in my pocket. *Lydia was here then.*"

"My God," Griff muttered.

Lydia stood against her mirror. Her face had taken on the sick whiteness of mortal fear.

"Your own statements place you here, Lydia. You must have heard me driving in and wondered why I was entering a house that was empty so far as I knew. Where were you when I came into this room, Lydia? In your bath? Yes, that has to be it. If I'd taken the sugar bowl into your bath instead of Bruce's I'd have surprised you there; but I didn't. A tiny incident making a big difference—I didn't make the move that would have revealed your presence. So you watched me from there through a crack of the door, saw me empty the capsules and mix the powder into the sugar."

I took a step toward Lydia.

"It was a deadly force placed close to your hand. Like a knife left on a table or a gun loaded in its rack or the electricity in these lamp-cords, it was potential death. Not death for you, Lydia. My own purpose was already defeated. At that moment the poison became in effect a broken knife, a spent bullet, a blown fuse, a trap sprung on nothing. You were completely warned against it. Condemn me as you may for having tried, I'd bungled and made my own objective impossible. It would never harm you now. You could so easily side-step this clearly visible pitfall. And you did, Lydia. You kept yourself safe from it.

"Then what else did you do about it? Tell the law about me? No; you preferred the hold on me it gave you, and later you went on to tighten that hold through Ernie's help and threats. Did you hurry to throw out that poisoned sugar with a gesture of horrified revulsion? No; you kept it there, meaning to make the most of it yourself. You called Dr. Doremus. Half an hour thereafter the blackmailer, the dangerous drinker, the man who was determined to force Ernie to marry Verna, was seated at the little table with you. You said, knowing exactly what you were doing, 'Coffee, doctor? Sugar,

doctor?" Then you put it into his cup and watched him drink it."

Lydia said—it was a whine—"You—you're so unfair to me, Web."

At my shoulder Griff faced her bitterly. "You'll be surprised how unfair to you we can get. Have you got any of that stuff left?"

She lifted one exquisite hand to her slender throat.

"How big a batch did you make last Sunday?" I said. "Have you any more of that powder in reserve for emergencies? Maybe you keep it right here at your favorite spot, in a drawer of your vanity. Let's look."

Suddenly she was a flurry of lace, a whirl retreating from us. In her frantic haste she left the drawer open. She pressed her one fist against her chest. Something was completely concealed inside it—a small bottle perhaps? Lydia backed from us, tightly clenching it.

"Give it up, Lydia," I said.

Griff warned her, "We're going to take it away from you."

Suddenly she was another lacy burst—running away. I sprang toward a possible retreat—Lydia's bath. Griff attempted to close her in by blocking the doorway connecting with the hall. Unfamiliar with the house, he didn't see the third way out.

"Vic!" I urged. "The other bath."

Already Lydia was flying toward it. I had seen her during a second's pause twisting with both white hands at a little bottle—a little green bottle like the one I'd seen at Bruce's bedside. As she thrust at the door of Bruce's bath she slapped one of her hands to her mouth. Then she was through the door and out of sight. And on the floor a sprinkle of white powder and the small green bottle rolling. Empty.

"She swallowed the stuff!"

The latch had clicked. I ran into the hall. Griff hustled after me.

"She's gone down the back stairs."

We raced down the main flight. Outside the front entrance we stopped together, staring all around. Far across the lawn

now the uniformed men were trimming the grass; but we saw nothing of Lydia.

Vic Bray, alarmed and breathless, stopped behind us.

"She swallowed the stuff, Vic," Griff repeated. "How soon will it be too late?"

"Not for hours," Vic answered. "As I said, six to twelve hours."

"If she slips us it'll probably take longer than that to find her. She must be counting on that."

"A horrible way to do it to yourself." Vic urged crisply, "Don't let her slip away, then. Get her to the hospital as soon as possible. I'll work on her with a stomach pump—save her for the electric chair for you, if that's what you want."

"That's what I want, brother," Griff assured him grimly. "By God—evidence to convict her out of her own stomach. Don't mislay it, Vic. This time I'm going to slap a murder conviction on a woman who's really guilty. That's a promise—provided she doesn't slip us."

We were peering all around. Ernie Reece stood in the doorway, reluctant or afraid to leave. The men clipping the grass went calmly on with their work, aware of nothing else. Lydia might be hiding somewhere in the gardens or she could have run off through the woods. Whatever tactics she might have chosen, she wouldn't get far unnoticed in her satin mules and lace negligee.

A car's engine burst up in a cyclonic roar.

We could see no car moving but instantly Griff went at a wild dash for his old sedan. Staring around as he clambered into it, he glimpsed motion at the garage. The big royal-blue car with the white-wall tires rolled out like a majestic wave. For perhaps forty feet it gleamed over the gravel—but the drive was blocked by three cars, with Griff's in their middle. Lydia swung to avoid them—careened across the velvet grass. The workmen, disturbed now, saw their meticulously smoothed sward tracked by the heavy car swinging crazily to miss willows and rock gardens on its circuitous dash for the gate.

Griff had kicked his own car into action at the first blue flash of Lydia's. He crowded it past Vic's, reversed it and tore

a fender of Ernie's as he swiped past. Then rocking back into the driveway, he pressed toward the gate.

He realized that once Lydia had reached it she could easily outdistance him on the road, cut back into farmland criss-crossed with lanes, perhaps crash the car and destroy herself in that way, or abandon it and not be found for many hours or perhaps even for days—much too late. Lydia in her frenzy to escape seemed also to realize the gate was the decisive goal. She drove for it at an angle, across the lawn. Griff, plunging straight at it, jumped on his brake pedal, twisting his old car to block the gateway as it reeled to a stop with Lydia's pitching at it.

The crash shook all the windows of Lindwood.

When I turned from the telephone to say, "Ambulance on the way, Vic," he nodded, gazing ruefully at the bloodspots on his otherwise immaculate suit.

"Griff won't be trying any murder cases for a while," Vic said. "Not until his right leg's out of a cast. Then he'll be his old dynamic self again."

"Lydia?"

"The heavier car always comes out better. Her head's banged up, concussion, fractured collarbone, shock. Nothing too serious. Except the stuff she put into her own stomach. We'll stop worrying about that as soon as I take it out of her, which will be as soon as we get her to the hospital."

"A couple of close shaves."

Vic stared at me. "You had a rather close squeak yourself." He smiled. "I think I've had one too. I mean, what in God's name couldn't a man expect, being married to a woman like that?"

"Ask me some other time," I suggested, "and I'll tell you in detail."

He paused on his way back to the door to say, "You know, I've a feeling I'm helping to repay a debt of gratitude to Dr. Doremus today."

Turning to the telephone again to dial a familiar number, I thought how Lydia had once been so resolved to keep Lindwood and how finally she had been unable to flee from it fast enough. Much was to be done and undone. Among other

things, Bruce's old interests to look after now that neither Lydia, in her incidental way, nor Ernie in his new executive manner, would have time for them. It seemed attractive. I might even like it better than practicing law.

"Miss Dodd's school," the telephone said.

"Bethany——"

"Webster, you sound out of breath."

"I am. Bethany, keep Julie with you today after school."

"I'll be very happy to keep her here, Webster."

"Please be very happy to keep her with you a long time. With us. I mean I'll see you as soon as I can, Bethany. I want to talk about a trip, a pretty long one, for Julie chiefly, but for us too. I—I am out of breath."

Vic Bray, having hurried back for a moment, was tapping my shoulder. "Hospital when you can make it." I nodded, aware of something else happening somewhere near, and saw Vic hurrying away.

"Bethany, I think I'll just say I'll see you very soon and let it go at that until I get back to breathing again."

"I'll be waiting right here, Webster, with Julie," Bethany said.

"I know you will," I murmured. "I know you will."

Then I heard the bell. I remembered those hours at the very beginning when I had waited interminably for the banging of the ambulance bell; and now at last I heard its beating note as Lydia had scored it in a dirge for herself.