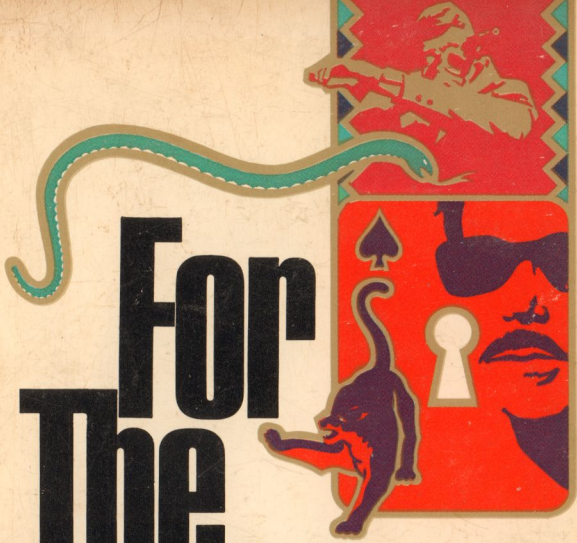

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CONTENTS

BOOK ONE
Sam Carson 1

BOOK TWO
Simon Kincade 93

BOOK THREE
Keyhole 183

BOOK FOUR
Sam Carson 327

A man has the right to be let alone . . .

—*Thomas Cooley,*
TREATISE ON TORTS (1878)

BOOK ONE

Sam Carson

If you serve time for society, democracy, and the other things quite young, and, declining any further enlistment make yourself responsible only to yourself, you exchange the pleasant, comforting stench of comrades for something you can never feel in any other way than by yourself.

—*Ernest Hemingway*
GREEN HILLS OF AFRICA

1

KILLER WHALES have bad breath. Especially the one who tried to collect me. He also had a pair of jaws laden with some eighty back-curved fangs and no molars. He didn't need molars. He just grabbed and gulped, no chewing involved. He smashed up through eight solid inches of Antarctic ice like a black missile, less than a yard from where I stood. His breath exploded noisily from his blowhole, congealing like a ball of cotton when it hit the frigid air. Then it enveloped me with a stench of such ancient slime, it could have been prehistoric. With his ugly head poised up out of the Ross Sea, he transfixed me with a hunter's eye and then snap-clacked at my buttocks. The clatter of those fangs was terrifying. He missed my parka by less than a man's hand, and even so, when he dropped silently back into the blue-black waters, he did not go empty-bellied.

Here's how the stick floated. It was April first, which is All Fools' Day and my birthday, a fact which is no longer coincidental. At McMurdo Station, which is the base for the United States Antarctic Research Polar team, the seasons are reversed. I was one of twenty-three hundred idiot volunteers for this duty. You have to be soft in the head to seek the peculiar privacy which exists only eight hundred and twenty miles from the South Pole. McMurdo Station is situated on Ross Island, which connects to the mainland by a massive bridge of blue ice over a thousand feet thick. The latitude is 78 degrees south. Summer lasts from October to April. Now, winter was setting in fast. The waning sun, pale and sick, was already three-quarters over the rugged rim of the Prince Albert Mountains. The thermometer stood at minus 55 degrees and was skidding into the cellar.

With utter immodesty, let me say that I am an electronic genius. My function on the USARP team was chief of experimental communications; more about that shortly. Since it was my birthday, I wanted a change of bag, so I offered to assist one of the team's zoologists, Dr. Averill Stroud, a wispy, gentle and fearless man whose specs were always getting smoked up. He was trying to tag a Weddell mother seal and her newborn pup. Weddells are big animals, going to twelve feet, and can give a good fight. While he and his assistant

tried to hang up a burlap bag over her snout so that she couldn't bite them, I was supposed to keep an eye on the pup, who was about five feet long and very aggressive for a suckler. The mother led Doc Stroud and his aide away, leaving the pup alone with me. I watched from a distance as they finally bagged her and then implanted their homing transmitter into her dorsal fat.

That's when the orca saw my dark shadow on the ice and came up for lunch. The terrific power of his breakthrough shoved my section of ice away from the main, making it a small floe, and tipping it so that the Weddell pup slid right off into those gaping jaws. I didn't hang around. I headed for the heavier ice, from which I was now drifting, and made a flat-out dive across the gap like a belly-flopping penguin; I made it sliding another fifteen feet inland, hoping the stuff under me was strong enough. Not to hold me up. To hold him down. Sure enough, he struck directly under my belly and created an instant nova in the ice, radiating silver streaks in all directions from the impact point. I rose and ran clumsily farther inland. When I was sure I was safe, I contributed a bit of my own ambergris to the ages and sat down shaken.

That was the day the bad luck started.

I was not reluctant to return to the boredom of the Communications Pod. The mercury had dropped to minus 58 degrees and was still falling. Most of the volunteers had departed for the winter, leaving behind three hundred self-elects. During the dark months, the complement was flown north like the petrels, or swam north like the penguins. The winter team, including me, was left astern. The last supply planes had flown in the week before with the winter gear. All but one had flown safely out. We called the single remaining Hercules C-130 the *Last Gasp*.

One of the secret experimental devices I had been shaking down with the local radar crew was a brand-new, highly classified three-dimensional radar named X-TRR-3, of which I was the proud father. I had tested it thoroughly with Cy Blackwell, the black engineer of Communications, who was in command of the group, under me. Since the *Last Gasp* would be our last live target until spring—barring the ninety-minute Polar satellites or a stray UFO from the Belt of Orion—we were hastily rigging the X-TRR-3 for the departure, while I vividly described to Cy my frightening experience with the killer whale.

His only comment was "You oughta be glad to find somebody who likes white meat these days."

By the time the *Last Gasp* was ready for takeoff, the temperature outside was 59 degrees below and still falling. During winter, the average is minus 90 degrees, and over at Vostok, in the Soviet Zone, they once hit 126.9 degrees below, which is still the record for the coldest place on earth.

I was a civilian, employed on a volunteer basis by the National Security Agency of the United States. I was cleared through Top Secret. My rating was Electronic-Counter-Measure-Expert, among many other things. I was the inventor of the People Snooper, a Doppler-type hand-held radar which had been brought to the Pole to prevent personnel loss in flash blizzards. It operates on body heat, and it had saved many a man lost in blinding snow, no more than ten feet away from safety. When NSA thought the South Pole might be a nice place to iron out the wrinkles of X-TRR-3, I went along with it; I had already put in seven months at the station, dealing bleary-eyed blackjack and stark-eyed red dog, all played on the frosted radarscopes.

The loudspeaker growled: "Navy 4907 ready for takeoff."

"Navy 4907 cleared," I said. "Blow your bird."

We watched the plane go out. The tri-radar functioned perfectly. All of us were silent, staring into the scope as the *Last Gasp* headed for Cape Hallett and finally, much later, got lost behind Mount Sabine on the way home. Home. Each one of us was thinking of it. I raked up visions of a Wyoming spring, warm chinooks melting the low snows, grizzily bears stirring irascibly out of hibernation, aspen leaves shimmering like bright silver in the winds, chokecherry buds shaking off the melting flakes and bursting out, green and fearless, the elk and the pronghorn heading back to timberline, away from the hunters' rifles. It had me by the throat. But the others looked misty-eyed and just as nostalgic.

Cy Blackwell said, "That's everything on the menu till next vernal. Shall I secure?"

"Let me check Happy first," I said, but before I could, the interphone buzzed; it was Administration. Rear Admiral Harry "Happy" Butler was on the blower. He is the CIC of all Antarctic Support Activities and the Sachem of McMurdo. We called him "Happy" because whereas most of us suffered the chronic McMurdo complaint of lassitude of the large colon, Happy had come down with acute constipation of the smile.

"Sam!"

"Sir?"

"Keep the bug-eyed monster burning."

"Something wrong, sir?"

"Sam, you nosey civilian sonofabitch, can't you ever just say 'Aye, aye, sir' and execute a plain order?"

I said, "Well, sure, Admiral. Certainly. It's just I thought maybe we'd been tagged with a Norad red alert and if that was the case—"

"God *damn* you, Sam!"

"Aye, aye, sir," I said hastily, but the line was already dead. I stewed for a minute, wondering if the *Last Gasp* had bought some trouble and was doing a one-eighty before the point of no return, but that seemed unlikely; we would have heard a Mayday on the distress frequency. I turned and found Cy Blackwell regarding me with polite curiosity. I said, "Keep the biscuits in the oven."

He told the crew, "We're still green."

"Yes, sir," said a wide-eyed young radarman named Lacey, staring at the radarscope in some puzzlement. "And a good thing too. Because I have a spook."

He was indeed haunted by a hot blip, and it was not the *Last Gasp*. This unknown was approaching McMurdo from the Palmer Peninsula far to the east, and that meant it had reached south latitude from the Latin America route, which was long and hazardous. For a split second I thought we might be tracking an ICBM, but the tri-radar quickly identified the intruder as a Boeing 707, flying at 31,000 feet, and dropping, at a speed of 658 miles per hour. It was less than an hour out. When we flashed an IFF (Identification Friend or Foe), it gave us the right reply. Also, a big fat green carnation popped up on the scope where the blip had been. This was a transponder double blip which indicated an emergency.

It was a bad time for one. Our star was nearly over the hill. The ice was darkening deeply. I told Cy, "Call the airport and tell them somebody's coming for dinner." While he did that, I telephoned Happy Butler and briefed him, rather urgently.

"Look at your scope again, Sam," he said coolly.

As I did, the green carnation vanished. A normal blip assumed its place. I said, a little gung-ho, "Just what the hell is going on?"

"Belay that," Admiral Butler said. "And hear this. Have Snow Control get out the banjo teams and the Snowblast plows and wipe down the strip. Anything over three inches

will be sucked into the jets. Have a crew with glycol standing by for the wings. We want no icing on that ship tonight. Be prepared to refuel her, the full twenty-five thousand gallons if necessary. Do you read?"

"You mean this child is going right out again?"

"God *damn* you, Sam!"

He hung up on me angrily. I called the Shelf Strip and gave them the information while I watched the Boeing coming in on the scope. In my seven months at the base, we had never had a jet of three hundred thousand pounds make a landing, and if winter had not set in, I doubt if it could have managed. Summers, we used Williams Field, on Ross Island, built on eight feet of ice. The biggest plane it had ever handled was a Super Connie. But in winter, our rare Hercules C-130s used the Shelf Strip, which had been rolled out of summer slush until it was flattened harder than coral.

It also occurred to me we had never had this VIP an arrival, and he'd cut it pretty fine. He'd be tight getting in, but if he got out, he'd be the last and the luckiest of the season. We made radio contact and gave the pilot the beacon frequency. There was plenty of power at the airport, no problem. Our nuclear power station PM-3 generated electricity from atomic heat. We called the monster the Nooky Poo, and it was awfully nice to have around the house.

The phone buzzed again.

"Sam," said Happy Butler, "you're relieved of duty. Turn everything over to Blackwell. Present yourself here at Administration on the double."

"Wait a minute, sir—" I said, startled, but he was gone. I was shaken. I pointed at Cy and said, "Your tattersall." He nodded, and then helped me struggle into my scarlet parka, which is standard USARP issue. After I put on my boots and mittens and hugged him goodbye, he said, "They haven't had a hanging at Leavenworth in years, Sam." Then he shoved me out into the darkness.

The sun was gone. The frigid air socked me hard to the bottom of my hot lungs. It was 60 degrees below zero and still dropping. I stuffed myself into my motor toboggan and churned a trail toward Observation Hill, where there is a wooden cross built in 1902 to the memory of Robert Scott and his men. The trail took me past the outer edge of the Shelf Strip. I was there when the Boeing screamed in, snow crystals spilling from her jets like sparkling diamonds. It was a beautiful sight. So was the touchdown.

But what shook me up when the silver-blue bird passed overhead was her Air Force number: 26,000. On her towering fin was the legend: AIR FORCE ONE.

This was President Nixon's airplane. Was he aboard?

The ground crews started hasty refueling as two passengers debarked. They were so heavily wrapped in parkas, it was impossible to identify them. They stowed in a big Sno-Cat and rumbled squeakily away over the snow. I hung around a little longer and watched the ramp lice unbuckle the afterhatch. Very shortly they removed a glistening copper coffin. It was lashed onto a second Sno-Cat and shipped off toward Hut Peak in the distance.

That told the whole story. Up to then, as the memorial plaques in the chapel could tell any necrophile, we had lost twenty-nine men on the USARP mission. The copper box would make the tally a round thirty.

I shoved my motor toboggan into gear and slued cheerlessly toward Administration. I was cold inside myself, despite the snug parka. I wondered who the poor bastard was and I didn't have to wait very long to find out.

The poor bastard was me.

2

WHEN I WALKED into Admiral Happy Butler's headquarters, which occupied most of a large Quonset, the tourists had reached there ahead of me. One was a vice admiral, a hard case, never to be forgotten. I recognized him from his rare pictures. The other was a lean and sensitive commander whom I did not know.

Happy Butler made a vague motion toward me and said, "Admiral McCabe, this is Sam Carson."

I saluted automatically and so smartly I damned near poked out my right eye with my thumb, but he didn't even look up at me.

He was Vice Admiral John Jeremiah McCabe; he happened to be the reigning chief (the post rotates among the Army, Navy, and Air Force commands) of the National Security Agency, the superintelligence organization of the United States, which—although it occupies over fifty million dollars' worth of cement, equipment and acreage at Fort George G. Meade between Washington and Baltimore and employs over

thirty-thousand spies and assistant spies—pretends not to exist at all.

Happy Butler looked like a grinning ghoul compared to Admiral McCabe's great, flat, stone face. He was a barrel of a man, not quite as tall as I, but heavier, wider and meaner. His puckered, tough mouth looked as if it had just sucked on the sourest lemon of a sugarless planet. His eyes were a void, with the glassy coldness of a female cobra about to devour her young. He finally looked right through me, with unspoken contempt, and said, without feeling, "Hope we didn't take you away from anything important."

I shrugged. "Time and I were killing each other."

He spared me the kind of smile a baby uses when it has a gas pain. Then Happy Butler said, "This is Commander Sampson."

"Paul Revere Sampson," the commander said warmly. He extended a strong hand for shaking. It was ice cold. He seemed nice but nervous, not unusual when you are deputy to the chief of NSA.

McCabe said (and it was an order), "Get out of that Santa Claus suit, Carson."

I struggled out of the gear. Happy Butler was staring at the wall chronometer and checking it with his wrist watch. Commander Sampson was hysterically drumming a hole into the desk top with his fingers. But Admiral John Jeremiah McCabe was snoring a catnap. The whole picture suddenly irritated me. What the hell, I was a civilian, I hadn't polished brass since I had gotten out of the Navy. I stamped my feet loudly, as if putting circulation back into them, and said brashly, "Well, gentlemen, who's dealing?"

McCabe awakened instantly. He said to Commander Sampson, "Paul . . ."

"Yes, sir?"

"You're sure the 7094 has never aborted?"

"Never, sir. Not since invention."

"This is the first time," McCabe said.

Sensing the tension, Happy Butler threw himself into the breach. "Have a drink, Sam."

I reached eagerly for a glass and the bottle of sourmash, but McCabe shoved the jug aside. "Not that popskull," he said. He nodded to Sampson, who tugged out a sterling silver flask, embossed with the fouled anchor ensign of the United States Navy.

"You'll like this," Sampson said. "Very Superior Old Pale

Reserve cognac." He handed me the flask. I thought at the time that it was a little too hospitable of him, but I didn't want to wozzle the waters, so I poured off a generous three ounces and swallowed them in one long gulp. It instantly expanded my satchel mouth.

I said, "Admiral, I haven't been offered free rotgut, much less Very Superior Old Pale Reserve cognac, from a CIC since I was wounded bucking for a ticket home. Get out the nails. Erect the rood. When does the crucifixion begin?"

Admiral McCabe shuddered. "I knew Indians couldn't drink," he said, "but this is ridiculous."

"Actually," I said, "I'm more Irish than Indian and possibly more Spanish than Irish. You see, I'm what they call a white Indian, which means I have only one-eighth Shoshoni blood—"

"I know that," McCabe said.

"—but the fact is that my forebears came from Corcagh, which is pronounced Cork, which accounts for the other seven-eighths of me."

"I know *that* too," McCabe said, but he was much too late to stop my dithyramb.

"But what you might not know," I said, "is that when the Spanish Armada was bilged in 1588, the survivors among the crews were washed ashore off the Head of Kinsale, in southern Ireland, not far from where that kraut sank the *Lusitania* in 1915—"

"I know that *too,*" McCabe said grimly.

"—so everybody down that way, from Clonakilty to Courtmachsherry, looks like a Spanish grandee, even if their national anthem is 'Mother Machree.' There's where the old folks came from originally, around Blarney—"

"You're full of it," McCabe said. He did not mean Blarney.

The intercom buzzed, saving some of my face. Happy Butler answered it, listened to a meteorological report, then just said, "Roger," and hung up. He wheeled urgently on Admiral McCabe. "Sir, you're bankrupt on time."

"What's the foul-up?"

"No foul-up, sir. Just weather. Your refueling is completed. But the wind is rising and the mercury has dropped down to sixty-one degrees below zero. At sixty-five below, your hydraulics will burst, and your fuel will jelly in the wing tanks. It could be a long winter."

"Uh-huh." McCabe stirred reluctantly. He was melancholy,

as he tugged at his long jaw and finally came to an unhappy decision. "Carson?"

"Yes, Admiral?"

"Seems the United States has a problem, and circumstances have singled you out to be the man for the mission."

"No sweat," I said, anxious to please.

"You're volunteering for the duty?"

"If you want to put it that way."

"It must be put that way."

"Okay, I'm volunteering."

"Please come to attention," Commander Sampson said.

I did so automatically, but I was beginning to have some doubts. He went on, "You are herewith reactivated into the United States Navy with your former rank of lieutenant commander. I will now administer the oath of allegiance—"

"Not necessary," McCabe said. "His former oath will suffice."

Sampson nodded and continued, "You will be under orders of Admiral McCabe and the National Security Agency."

"Wait a second—" I said.

"Wait a second, *sir,*" McCabe growled.

"Wait a *second,* sir," I said. "This isn't what I expected. You primrosed me—"

"Hell with the protocol," said McCabe. "Let's get this crazy redskin out of here before we have to use dog teams."

I was now alarmed. "Where are we going, sir?"

He smiled for the first time. "To the morgue."

I turned to Happy Butler for help. "So long, Sam," he said happily.

The McMurdo morgue is an ice house, literally. The crypts are hollowed out of the ice wall, with wooden covers over the holes and with a plaque on each cover for identification of the corpse within.

In the center of the small room the glistening coffin sat emptily on two sawhorses. Commander Sampson made pious gestures of dusting it off and straightening out the sleep-pillow inside, after he had raised the copper lid. It was a beautiful casket. If you were dead.

McCabe growled behind me, clearing his throat. When I turned, he said, "Hop in."

"I still have a very strong pulse, sir," I said.

"There are plenty of air holes. Nothing to worry about."

"The Shoshoni like to be buried in trees, sir," I said. "Or

at least a scaffold nine feet above the purple plain. We even get claustrophobia in a closed tepee."

He sighed wearily and turned to Commander Sampson. "How soon, Paul?"

"Right now," Commander Sampson said.

He was dead right.

3

WHEN THE DOSE wore off and I finally regained consciousness, I found myself in a comfortable bed with a blanket thrown over my legs. I also had one hell of a headache. The blanket was flag-red with a white eagle woven in its center. On the bulkhead opposite me there was a framed flag, the first Union Jack of 1775, red-and-white striped, with a rattlesnake stretched across it diagonally. On the bottom was a legend: DON'T TREAD ON ME.

I looked out a port and realized I was airborne, in some minor turbulence. The white reach of Antarctica stretched away toward the Pole, scarred by sastrugi and cleft by enormous crevasses. We were gaining altitude.

The replica of the Presidential Seal on another bulkhead informed me that I was lolling in President Nixon's bed. I rose from it in respect and straightened it out, and then went to the head. I saw the President's electric shaver, and for the sake of history I used it until I was as clean-shaven as an Indian. I even used some of his cologne. And the truth is, I also used two of his Alka-Seltzers to wash away the sodium amytal I had been slipped. Then I hand-held my way aft into the main cabin, which had been changed considerably from the way President Lyndon Baines Johnson had used it.

First thing, Mr. Nixon had had all the dark paneling stripped off the ship, and he had reopened all the portholes which LBJ had masked. Also Mr. Nixon had moved the President's stateroom far forward, ahead of the wings and engines, just abaft the pilot and engineering compartments. This rehabilitation had deposited the noise of the screaming jets behind, which had allowed me a longer coma. I looked into the radio room before I lurched aft, and was stunned. The communications console was vast, with as many facilities as the earthbound White House. I finally came to the conference room amidship.

At a quarter-circle desk in the conference room, opposite a color television set, Admiral McCabe swung north and south on a revolving chair, glumly. He was being sated with multitudinous intelligence reports by a special NSA operator and a top-secret-rated NSA decoder. He was operating the National Security Agency from Antarctica—no mean feat. Commander Paul Sampson was seated at a smaller desk, near the aft bulkhead. Before either one of them saw me, I said, "What are you guys—a couple of white slavers?"

Sampson spasmed, startled. McCabe never blinked an eye. "Thought you were going to pound it all the way to New Zealand."

"Is that where we're headed?" I said, walking back to him. "How chic! And just in time for the sheep-shearing season."

"It's just a fuel checkpoint," Commander Sampson said.

"Then where are we going? Sir?" I asked McCabe.

"Nandi. North of Suva." McCabe couldn't be bothered to look up.

"Admiral, sir, why are we going into the Fijis?"

"Because they are remote."

"So is Howland Island. And uninhabited at that."

McCabe shook his head. "A real walking, talking gazeteer. . . . Sam, we are going into the old cannibal country on the north island, Vanua Levu. That is the tribal ground of the traditionalist Nangas. It is secure. Nobody can get in unless they have a pact, or unless they're on the menu. And that is important." He leaned toward me and pointed a hard finger. "If you value your life."

I said, "How did my life get to be so dangerous so quickly?"

"Have a drink," Commander Sampson said, indicating the bar where loomed a bottle of Chivas Regal, some ice and soda. He poured one for me.

"No thanks," I said. "One tipple with you lads was enough. When I get back to Wyoming, I'm going to build a memorial to Carry Nation."

Commander Sampson smiled contritely. "Sam, everybody has an uncontrollable claustrophobia when it comes to coffins. They would have had to give me a pill if the 7094 had elected me to be the carry-out. You have our apologies. It was essential for McMurdo Station to see that Sam Carson was dead and that we hauled him home in a box. So have a tot. If you pass out this time, it'll be on your own freight."

"Soda. What is this 7094 you keep bowing to Mecca for?"

Commander Sampson glanced at McCabe. "Tell him," McCabe grunted.

"It's the IBM Stretch supercomputer of NSA. It cost over three million dollars. We fed it all the prerequisites necessary for a successful possibility of this mission, and it came up with one card. Yours."

"Out of how many candidates?" The booze sat well.

"Eighty-seven thousand plus."

"Mama always said I was one in a million," I said, getting a flicker out of McCabe's glass-doorknob eyes. "She usually said it when she was chasing me with a skinning knife when I was chasing her grandaughter with dishonorable intentions."

"Smart woman."

"My wife's grandmother," I said.

"Yes." McCabe ruffled through the dossier on his desk. "Black Buffalo Woman, Wind River Agency, Wyoming." I showed surprise. He smiled thinly. "Lots more. Everything concerning you since the day you were born until you woke up with Mickey Finn fifteen minutes ago." I leaned back annoyed. "You don't like that."

"I'm not sun-dancing."

McCabe stared at me. "You don't have much respect for authority, do you, redbelly?"

"Only when a majority votes for it."

"There are no votes in the NSA," he said flatly. "And I'm the majority rule, understand? Which is to point: you're not only in the Navy now, you're in *my* Navy now, and I'm proud to say that I am the meanest sonofabitch who ever held a command. Just so's you know that at the start. If you have any comment, let's hear it."

"May I have another drink?"

Sampson poured it for me as McCabe repressed the glimmer of a twinkle in his eyes. "I am now clearing you through a higher classification. *For the President's Eyes Only*. Put down the tangle foot and come to attention—don't get up, you silly bastard—and listen to Sampson, and secure from jawboning."

Commander Sampson droned, "Anything you hear in the conduct of this mission is classified under the Espionage Act of 1917, the Yardley Law of 1933, and Public Law 513, U.S. Code Title 18, Section 798. If you are unfamiliar with Public Law 513, let me say it rates ten-thousand-dollar fine and ten years for disclosing classified information regardless of whether it is United States or foreign cryptosystems, or any

material obtained by the process of communications intelligence. The Espionage Law of 1917 has penalties for treason—"

"Let's galley up," McCabe interrupted. "We got a thousand miles for chow before the Christchurch check."

"Aye, aye, sir."

When he was sure that Sampson was out of earshot, Admiral McCabe beckoned. I leaned in, seeing he wanted to be confidential. He put his flat unfriendly face no more than an eighth-inch Bowie from mine. "*Now,* you arrogant little bastard," he said crisply, "you are going to knock off this supercilious civilian shit and start acting like a Navy man, and start listening to every single word I tell you, or I am personally—I said *personally*—going to beat the buffler chips out of you. Savvy, Injun?"

I just sat there. I didn't dare answer. I knew the Old Man could do it. I was bigger, younger, maybe even harder. But he was like a silvertip. A grizzly bear will kill you until he's dead, and then, just to be cantankerous, he will go on killing you after he's dead. Admiral McCabe was pure Cuffy. I ought to know—that's how I got my Indian name of Bear Paw. Here's how it shined: A group of archaeologists came to Wyoming to visit the Medicine Wheel. It's an ancient site atop a ten-thousand-foot mountain and looks like a miniature Stonehenge, except where Stonehenge has fifty-six monoliths in a circle, the Wheel has only twenty-three. Indians didn't build the Wheel; they believe it was erected by the People-of-the-Dawn.

Anyway, it was grizzly country, and these eggheads hired me as the Great Red Hunter. (They thought I was pure Shoshoni at the time because Pa was then Indian agent at Wind River.) I took along a Weatherby .375 Magnum rifle, which will kill an elephant microseconds faster than instantly. And to fill my hand, I toted an S&W .44 Magnum revolver, with six flatnosed biscuits in the chamber.

Well, we sure enough met up with Nasty Ned, the second day in camp. When he charged, I took easy aim and blew his heart out with one whistler. Everybody saw the shot. It was beautiful. They knew that bear was dead. *I* knew that bear was dead. But that damned bear didn't know that that damned bear was dead. Ten seconds later, he ate the stock of the Weatherby as if it was a buffler tongue. The tree I climbed was a quaking aspen; I was doing the same. This dead grizzly rose on his hind legs, with this hole in his chest,

his hot breath singeing my backside. I unskinned my hogleg and put six shots into his mouth. *That* killed him, and damned near me too, with that eighteen foot-pound recoil of the .44 Magnum. Before he died, he gave me a malevolent look, swiped at me with a clawful of paw, ripped off the trademark of my Levis. Then he melted carefully into a curled-up death. So the name Bear Paw stuck with me.

In any case, I waited for McCabe to pull back his face. He didn't. He froze it and me. "Why, you half-assed half-breed, you think you're the only Injun expert in these parts? I was foaled four miles south of Standing Rock Agency. I grew up with *real* Injuns—Lakotahs—the great Sioux Nation! Not a parcel of damned Diggers!"

He continued: "There are only five men in the world who know everything you are going to be and do on this mission: The President; Secretary Laird; Commander Sampson; Sir Julian Keys, chief of British counterintelligence; and myself."

"I'd make a lousy spy, sir."

"The worst."

"Then *what*, sir?"

"Crow bait."

There were dirty pennies in my mouth as I looked at him dismally. "Good," he said.

He pulled an attaché case toward me and unlocked it. He took a black Moroccan manuscript folder from it, zippered it open and plucked a plastic portfolio out. He flipped this agape; it contained a red card and some letters. Casually, he tossed the card to me.

It was no different from any of the modern credit cards. Same size, same feel as Diners Club, American Express or Carte Blanche.

Except the color. It was flaming scarlet, bright as blood. In the center, there was a punched-out gap in the shape of a keyhole. On the left side, a code number, 085-10-6195. On the right side, an embossment which read: *Good Until Death.*

There were no other instructions.

I handled it like a molting sidewinder and peered at McCabe through the slot. "The Keyhole Club?"

"You could call it that."

"Loose broads, lousy liquor, late nights?"

"Nothing so sweet," he said grimly. "It's a card for losers, kiddie. The one you're holding was carried by one of the best agents of the Central Intelligence Agency. Guy named Dan

Gallagher. He was smarter than you, could outthink you, outshoot you, outplay you. He's dead."

He thrust a letter toward me. I took it warily.

"Liftoff. Read that carefully. That's where this all began."

4

"DEAR BASIL," the letter read in clean elite type, "I have seen my third square sunset. I caught the phenomenon in the desert, west of my present location, which is Timbuctoo. You ask, what's a nice boy like Billy doing in a dunghole like this? To paraphrase Mark Twain, everybody talks about Timbuctoo, but nobody does anything about it. As you know, I'm shooting a travel series for TV called *Around the World in Eighty Ways,* and I aspired to be the first Phileas Fogg to give the real Timbuctoo to the telly. For a while, it was strictly a disaster area, with nothing to immortalize but camel turds, storks, and Red Chinese tourists. But then a wild thing happened."

The writer was an American television producer named William Doremus, of Hollywood, California, a television packager who loved peripatetics and polygamy.

"What is a square sunset? Let me describe it to you, Bazz. In the western reaches of the Sahara—an Arabic word for emptiness—the setting sun often looms misshapen, because—as it dips over the Mali horizon into Mauretania—it is sometimes beclouded with invisible dust pockets, swirling seas of *erg,* held high in the sky. Rarely, as the other night, these pockets are dense enough to erode the roundness of old Sol and create an Euclidean square. Simultaneously, due to refraction of the sun's rays against water drops beyond the dust, a prismatic effect is created, and great flashes of green fire burst across the face. I kid you not! A square sun then sinks slowly into the west with its kisser the color of an Irish funeral!"

Doremus then explained the square sun was important because it dated the evening when a gray-bearded rascal named I'bn Faizal Koum witnessed the death of Dan Gallagher.

I'bn Faizal Koum was neither Berber farmer, Bedouin warrior, nor Mzabite merchant. He was an Algerian who sold salt, camels and slaves. To accomplish this, he would depart from Marrakesh twice yearly and trek across southern Al-

geria past Tindouf to Zouirat, where the Idjil salt mines are situated. Here, he would load salt on his camels, which were also for sale. He would continue his trek south through Timbuctoo to the new republics of Ghana and Nigeria, sell his wares, and then return to Marrakesh. Except that he would steal black men along the way, to be secretly auctioned off back in Algeria. It was an enormously profitable venture, despite its built-in dangers.

This particular night, he had camped in a wadi twenty miles northwest of Timbuctoo. He soon heard an eerie whistling in the darkness, like high wind. Looking up, he found a twin-motor airplane gliding in on him, below the moon. The engines were just ticking over, throttled down. In the moonlight, he could discern that the plane was bright scarlet. He could not make out the numbers.

As he watched, the starboard hatch of the aircraft was forced open against the slipstream. I'bn Koum was fascinated now. Then, without warning, a man was tumbled out into the airspace. Koum's fascination instantly became terror. The falling man, still alive, made his final comment: He looked up and deliberately thumbed his nose at his assassins. Then he plummeted into the desert and struck the *fesh-fesh* with ghastly impact. *Fesh-fesh* being thinly crusted dust, the body raised an opaque mushroom cloud of filth which blotted out the scene. I'bn Koum looked back up at the plane, which now revved engines in a noisy lack of synchronization and banked sharply left to make a circle back. Koum thought they were just going to check the position of the body, but when he heard the nasty chatter of an automatic weapon and saw the founts of *fesh-fesh* erupting on a line toward him, he dived aside and played dead. It worked; the plane leveled off, gained altitude and continued on a southerly course in the direction of Lagos, Nigeria.

I'bn Koum did not dare stir until they were out of sight. He was shaking with terror, but not enough to prevent his pilfering of the corpse, knowing the gunfire would soon bring his own greedy cutthroats to his side. He found the corpse half buried in the soft dust, jacket half off, both shoes kicked away.

There seemed to be no identification in the jacket or the trousers, but the right shoe had a red card sticking out from under the sole, disclosed only by impact. Koum thrust it into his robe. Using his ornate silver dagger, he dug the left shoe apart until, under the inner sole, he found a card which said

the man was Dan Gallagher, with an address in Los Angeles, California. Koum could not read English very well, but he knew that "USA" meant *baksheesh.*

When his men arrived, he stationed two to guard the body, which they did reluctantly. Then, taking his nephew, Ali Fzouad, with him, he mounted his dromedary and drove across the darkness into Timbuctoo. In the local caravansary, he found Bill Doremus. He was already aware that an American movie tycoon had been shooting in Timbuctoo, when he had passed through, going north two days earlier.

"Imagine me as the local caliph," Doremus had written, "sitting in the local pub, gorgeously gowned in my new *gandoura,* which is a pullover robe of exquisite turquoise brocaded silk, trimmed in real gold. I was quaffing camel's milk laced with Scotch (my ulcer, you know) when in comes this Saladin of the Sahara, jabbering in French and Swahili, and demanding a C-note and presenting me with the cards which I enclose. The keyhole card meant nothing to me, but the ident was something else. The small world has grown puny. It so happened that Dan Gallagher and I graduated from Washington and Lee University the same year, '49, he from the law school, me from the arts. We were friends. When I went west to try for an Emmy, he was assigned to the LA office of the FBI as Special-Agent-in-Charge. Later on, they switched him east and, from the ident, obviously into the CIA."

Next morning, Doremus, with his wife, his assistant and his production manager, followed I'bn Koum's camels in a lusty Land Rover and found the dead man to be indeed Dan Gallagher.

Doremus paid off Koum with a one-hundred-dollar traveler's check. They packed Gallagher's body on the rear of the Land Rover and made a wide swing to return to Timbuctoo. At that point, high atop an ancient dune which was down to bed dirt and no longer shifted in the sandstorms, Janet Doremus pointed off and said, "Looks like snow patches."

To the northeast there was an area where flecks of white littered the darker ecru of the hard gravel. Doremus investigated.

"For a moment," he continued in his letter to Basil, "I thought we had found the great lost burial ground of the elephant. But these bones were human. Three men. One woman. We wouldn't have known one from the other anatomically. It was the clothes."

The find was made in an area southeast of a place named In Alaye, and it was off the regular caravan trail. But it was dead on a vulture flight from Marrakesh to Lagos, as remote a boneyard for those whose presence was deemed unnecessary in the world as could be found. Fortunately, the desert floor was a dirt bedrock called *reg* which did not shift when the khamseen blew. The sands slid right across the ancient hard-top.

Normally, the desert's desiccation will evaporate a body's fluids and leave the mummy in good condition. But there were also creatures out there, the foxy fennecs, the bare-ass bustard, carnivorous vipers, sand scorpions, along with the ubiquitous blowfly. Although the clothes remained in fair condition, the bones were picked clean. One interesting fact emerged as Doremus sifted evidence. The suits on the bones of two men came from a London shop called The Seven Needles with an address on Savile Row. The woman's suit was from Les Sept Aiguilles in Paris. The third man wore a U.S. Air Force uniform with the rank of colonel.

Back in Timbuctoo, Doremus arranged for Dan Gallagher's burial. The body was sewn into a waterproof camel's skin and placed in a dusty grave. Doremus knew the cadaver would keep there awaiting further investigation. The other bones were sewn into goatskins and posted in the constabulary to await an inquiry in depth.

Doremus thought of radioing the Lagos airport to check on the identification of the scarlet airplane, which should have arrived this same day, but in view of the carnage, he thought better of it. He did not want to identify himself as cognizant of its existence. He had no desire to join the Keyhole Club.

"And so, Bazz, old fruit, there's the lot. I will retain the other four Keyhole cards for the present. It is vital that you relay this breath-taking synopsis to a Very High Authority at the grist mill in Eisenhower Platz. Being an American, I know absolutely nobody at the Embassy except a cute little backscratcher from Middlesex who verifies visas. Among other things. But you—as the most charming flesh peddler of them all—seem to know everybody in Grosvenor Square. I have no doubt of your discretion (as well as your mad Hungarian moments) and so I am trusting you to get these data to the right man. *Secrecy is essential.* My melodramatic nose tells me this is something Very Big and Very Dangerous. Pass the word to me here in Timbuc when something happens.

"Give my love to your adorable wife, or, if you prefer, I'll do so in person some night when you are out.

"Ever thine,
"William the Conqueror"

5

McCABE LEANED back, looking sinister, never removing his hostile eyes from me as he asked Sampson, "Did this tinhorn *hou-ke-hey* buck really win the Navy Cross or did he swap a scalp for it in his local hock shop back on the reservation?"

"He won it," Commander Sampson said, disapproving of the question.

"How?"

"As I recall, he was commanding a hovercraft in the delta during a bandit ambush. He laid the boat right on top of a machine-gun nest. He was the sole casualty aboard. Shot in the right shoulder." Sampson sounded proud of me.

McCabe's eyes softened. "Make a note of that. We'll have to invent a cover story. Kincade had no bullet wounds." As Sampson nodded, McCabe returned his unpleasant attention to me. "So what's the sweat then, redbelly? Why worry so much about dying? You've got no contract with life that'll stand up in court."

"I'll do your mission, sir," I said. "When I finally learn what the hell it is."

The admiral glared at me, then asked, "Ever been in Mali?"

"Negative, sir."

The phone buzzed. Sampson answered it, listened, rogered and hung up.

"We're over Christchurch, sir, turning onto the final leg for Nandi. The *Kitty Hawk* is standing by off Vanua Levu, routine port of call."

I was sated with surprises so I failed to react. Just what the *Kitty Hawk,* one of our largest aircraft carriers, had to do with bleached bones on the Sahara's *reg* was more than I could fathom.

"Did the British governor organize the charivari?" McCabe asked.

"Affirmative, sir."

"And the witch doctor?"

"He'll be there for the surgery."

I glanced at Admiral McCabe impatiently, but he held up a placating hand. "About Mali. I was with the team that flew in there to recover the skeletons. Since we're an hour and a half from Nandi, I'll tell you about that."

6

BASIL FITCH, the recipient of Bill Doremus' letter, had, like many of his countrymen, departed Budapest early in life to seek his fortune in the fleshier pots of the western world. He was now thirty-nine, very attractive and gifted with that impossible Hungarian charm. He had assumed British citizenship as soon as possible, changing his born name Basul Fedoravitch to Basil Fitch; he had begun his movie training with a compatriot, Sir Alexander Korda, at British-Lion Organisation. Thence, by charming certain famous actors and actresses (or, as he called them, female impersonators), he had eased into representation of American agencies abroad. This ricocheted him into higher circles.

So, with the Keyhole card and the Doremus letter, Fitch communicated with the American Ambassador to the Court of St. James's, a Philadelphia publisher named Annenberg, appointed by the Incumbent.

Ambassador Annenberg considered the evidence important enough to dispatch to the President immediately via diplomatic courier. In Washington, the President called in the Secretary of Defense and the Chief of NSA, Admiral McCabe. McCabe, in top secrecy, personally took the team of investigators into Timbuctoo, after he ascertained that Basil Fitch had been sworn under the Official Secrets Act of Great Britain, by MI 6, a secret British organization dealing in counter-espionage.

McCabe and his coroners met with Sir Julian Keys, the chief of MI 6, at Gibraltar, and they all flew across the Erg Iguidi to Mali for the post-mortems.

The first skeleton proved to be that of Colonel Rick Condon, A-1 agent of Air Force Intelligence, a security arm under the National Security Agency.

It required only dental matches with the teeth in Colonel Condon's skull to prove his identity. Born in Boston, the colonel had made a career of the Air Force after World War II, and in the Intelligence branch he had been more than dis-

tinguished. It was Condon, in fact, who first disclosed the existence of Keyhole.

The second skeleton turned out to be an Englishman, Havelock Dunne, age sixty, ostensibly retired from the Black Watch after thirty years of service. The truth was he had never been in the Army at all. He was one of MI 6's crack agents, an operative in Geneva during the second war. Sir Julian Keys was astonished and saddened to find the remains. "This was a sterling chap," Sir Julian said gravely as he tugged at his mustache. "If this establishment was able to tiddle old Dunne, I am afraid we are up against it."

Admiral McCabe felt the same way about Colonel Condon. Until his death, the colonel had been nobody's fool.

The third skeleton was female. She was not instantly identified, but within three days, with evidence at hand, she turned out to be Claudine DuFond, an agent of the secret French Deuxième Bureau, a counterintelligence agency headed by the noted Colonel Alphonse Marat. Colonel Marat, who was descended from the Napoleonic general, was sad indeed at the finding of her bones; she was his own grandniece, and he had personally assigned her to the Keyhole quest.

The fourth and last skeleton was male, and except for the fact that he was wearing an elegant suit from a London house named The Seven Needles and that he must have been youngish, since his teeth were in excellent condition, and that he had a bullet lodged in a rib near his spine, which had nestled there for some time, no further identification was forthcoming. He became a true mystery. Neither the French, British nor Americans could establish his identity. It maddened McCabe, because of all the skeletons on that desolation, #4 was obviously the oldest non-living inhabitant. Every avenue was pursued. Nothing was unearthed to solve him.

However, Miss DuFond's death told MI 6 and the NSA for the first time that Keyhole had penetrated France too. Since France and the Soviet Union were on warm terms, tentative feelers were extended to Moscow and the most discreet inquiries made.

Thus, Admiral McCabe learned that Keyhole had reached the attention of the Soviet Komitet Gosurdarstvennoi Bezopastnasti—the infamous KGB, a Committee for State Security, responsible for external espionage and high-level internal counterespionage. Though their characteristic xenophobia did not melt away, they admitted the loss of two

agents in the pursuit. But the fourth skeleton was not one of them. Until the sharing of this information, KGB had thought Keyhole a CIA gambit (whereas the NSA's first guess was that it was Soviet-inspired). France had thought the establishment an internal criminal sect.

More inquiry was promulgated. In Stockholm, the Swedish Chifferbyraernas, operating under the Defense Ministry, were cognizant of Keyhole's existence. They had been informed by a leading industrialist, Knut Demson, who had since committed "suicide" in Italy. Astonishingly, even the Japanese Naikuku Sosashitso had received a onetime code message through Ango Kenkyu Han (their code research section) that a high official of the Machida Life Insurance Company of Tokyo was alerting them to Keyhole, two days before he jumped or fell from the United Nations building in New York while attending a conference of international underwriters.

The resulting maze proved one thing. Keyhole flew nobody's ensign at the hoist—nobody's but their own, a less than Jolly Roger. It was strictly amateur, but operating at such a high level of efficiency that the nether agents of five major powers had been unable to locate and destroy it.

7

THIRTY MINUTES out of Nandi Airport, we changed to summer whites. Mine had been stowed aboard and were ready for me. Which disturbed me, because the operation seemed to be set for everything, and that meant that it was larger than life and just as unsafe.

But I was glad for the whites. The Fijis are only 16 degrees south of the equator. It was going to be a startling change from McMurdo's 60 degrees below zero to Nandi's 90 degrees above.

With all of McCabe's careful iteration of things past, I still couldn't grab what the hell he was really talking about. I tried to trace more solid answers with probing questions, but he cut me off. "What do you know about the NSA?"

"Nothing. And I *ain't* curious."

"What's Harry Truman's middle name?"

"What is this—twenty questions?"

McCabe took a long breath and, like a Petrine encyclical,

continued my briefing: "President Harry S Truman's middle name is either Shippe or Solomon. The names of his grandfathers. Nobody ever decided which was meant to be used, so he just left the issue in doubt. Anyway, he created the National Security Agency on November 4, 1952."

"That long ago?" I said, surprised.

"The directive was so highly classified that the world didn't even know of the existence of the agency for five years. Then a government manual mentioned it, saying it was an agency under the Secretary of Defense and that its purpose was to perform technical and coordinating functions relating to the national security."

McCabe rumbled into a cacophony of deep laughter. I asked him what was so funny.

"Never," he said, "has so little been said in so few words."

"What *does* NSA really do?"

"This information is classified," he replied, merely to remind me. "The NSA intercepts, analyzes, cryptoanalyzes, ciphonanalyzes, all messages—both domestic and military—of every nation on earth, including friends as well as foes."

I gasped. "My mother-aching back! But that's impossible. The volume of traffic—"

"—would tax even the 7094 supercomputer," he said, chuckling, "and that little Erector set can handle three hundred and twenty-nine thousand items a second!"

"How do you do it?"

"We do it," he said parsimoniously, "and while we're doing it, we also coordinate all communications and cryptosystems for our own armed forces. Plus those of the State Department. Not to mention the CIA, the FBI and any other governmental body which requires communication in secrecy."

"Your network must be infinite," I said.

"A little more complex than the solar system."

"That makes NSA the world's champion snoop. That means you've broken down every safeguard which insures personal human privacy. That means you've destroyed the very basis on which this country was founded."

"Human privacy." McCabe shook his head. "Was there ever such a thing? We share this ball of iron with billions of human beings who are not as human as you'd think and who don't give a tiddle-de-dee shit for human privacy."

"There *is* such a thing," I said, hard. "I have a right to be let alone. If it's not given to me, I'll take it. I'll defend your right to protect my own."

"I thank you, noble savage."

"I'm not being funny, Admiral."

McCabe smiled. "Oh, I know you're not. Your sincerity is dripping all over your shirt front like a busted egg yolk. Now, now, don't get your Jessie up. I'll be the first to join your club when you lick the problems. But look at those problems, eh?"

He lighted a cigarette with interminable slowness.

"First, there is an organization in this country called Internal Revenue Service, which not only knows everything about you but damned near has the right to seize you, bind you, dun you, flay you, sue you, bleed you, wash you and dry you, with the onus of recourse on *your* taxridden back. Face it, redrump, IRS is a complete tyranny, executed by underpaid zealots. Then there is the NSA, my own organization, which is beyond the laws of the land because it protects the country's security, and security comes first. The security of all measured against the privacy of one. NSA has power that even scares me green and *I run it* . . . Human privacy! How quaint! Like your local bank giving you a blood test before they'll even allow you to deposit your leperous loot in their sterile vaults. Like your State Department, which knows every move you make in both hemispheres, the moment you leave your own borders. Like the FBI, which knows whether you are red, white and blue, or just red, brown and black. Have I said enough? Human privacy! Shall we discuss in depth the case of your wife?"

I said quickly, quietly, "We shall never discuss my wife."

"All right, Sam. I didn't mean to hit a nerve."

There was a moment of silence.

"My point is," he went on, "without NSA, which invades privacy, the fact of true privacy—what's left of it—would be shot to hell. We snoop to protect and defend. Which brings us exactly to this mission."

"Keyhole."

"An ugly word. An ugly idea. And, unfortunately, an ugly fact. They snoop to destroy. They have not played the game with nations yet, which is why they have existed so long without being turned off. They eat individuals. Sooner or later, they might wing over. You are the pragmatic preventive."

I thought for a moment, chilled. "Are they really that good?"

"Don't ask me how," he replied, "but somewhere in Keyhole there is a genius. Maybe two. The sources of information

are not only incredible, they're impossible. Where it counts, they know. Their network—only a fragment of NSA's—is so staggering and so secret, and obviously electronic, that the staff has to be manned by victims. Otherwise, there would have been a leak."

"I still don't tune it. Start up front. How did you *first* learn there was such a thing?"

"I was about to tell you," McCabe said, glancing at his watch as Commander Sampson returned to us. So I sat back and listened to the birth of a club called Keyhole.

8

PATRICK HENRY DUFFY, vice-president of the Falmouth National Bank of Boston, did not, like his Virginian namesake, believe in liberty or death. At the age of fifty-five, he was embracing a more ancient philosophy—larceny and life. He knew he could get away with it. He had, in fact, done so already. The previous year, he had dipped a heavy hand into the bank's assets to the tune of fifty thousand dollars and had even assisted in the prosecution of a minor employee on whom he planted some of the cash. For a while, the theft had frightened him, but he had been desperate for the cash. Time had shown him how easy it was. Conscience had failed to disturb his slumbers. He was ready for a large move.

Pat Duffy, a widower for some two years, had had the good fortune to encounter a young woman of thirty named Diana Deems. The name sounded like a casting agent's concoction but actually was her own. Miss Deems was a striking female with large breasts, a hot wet large mouth and hot large and sinewy hips. Her features were mildly vulgar, but she had brought her unnaturally blond hair down to a more roan tone, and that helped. She had informed Mr. Duffy, when he pursued and propositioned her, that although she was very fond of him, she could not give up her career in the arts. This had forced him into the fifty-thousand-dollar heist. He quickly expended the sum on her, and she signed a quit-claim on her career. What he didn't know was that she actually was a Los Angeles hooker. Her sexual movements were unique, and she instantly told Pat Duffy that he had never employed his tassel properly. He nearly went out of his skull in elemental ecstasy. Added to this forte, Miss Deems's supertalent lay in the oral-

genital inducement of orgasm. It took only one humid vacuuming for Patrick Henry Duffy to realize that he had found a pearl of great price.

Young women of such talent are naturally restless and unnaturally sought, so it occurred to Mr. Duffy that the time had come to retire from the commercial marts and to travel the unextraditable world with his new love machine. He had ten years to go until retirement, and other than the modest pension, the stock options, and the gold watch, nothing loomed as fair as Miss Deems's tousled head buried deep in his tense lap.

On Thursday, the nineteenth of April, Pat Duffy took a last look around the office. He had spent many years here, good years. The Varig tickets for Brazil were in his jacket. One hundred thousand dollars were sewn into the lining of the suit that he wore. Three hundred thousand dollars were lining the new suitcase with which he would travel, neatly hidden behind false walls. The last hundred thousand in ten-thousand-dollar bills with the stern face of Solomon P. Chase warning off forgers, were hidden behind Duffy's Bachrach photo-portrait at home, an item he wisely knew no one but himself would be interested in. These bills would, at the proper time, be transferred into the warm girdle of Diana Deems, an inhibition she normally never wore.

The intercom buzzer spat, disturbing Duffy's dreams of cariocas and carnality. Miss Simonds, a dreary old pelican who had been his amanuensis for seventeen years, said, "Mr. and Mrs. Lambeth to see you. And I told them you were busy, but they said it was a matter of life and death."

Mr. Duffy decided to see them. He set his countenance in a stern cast, instantly discouraging to anyone seeking a loan. He prepared to awe them, but instead was himself awed.

They *were* an odd couple.

"Lambeth!" the man said hoarsely and boldly, extending a black-leathered hand. "Henry Lambeth. This is my wife, Lavinia. Damned nonsense though. Not actually my wife. Not actually her real name at all. We're not really married. Nor even thinking about it. Good Lor'! That'd be a state of ghastly, eh?"

Duffy stirred in incipient fear and hardened his voice. "I'm a very busy man—"

"Busy is the ruddy word for you," Lavinia said flatly.

They both laughed. Duffy slitted his mouth. "Just what the hell do you both want?"

"Now, now, Guv," Lambeth said, his voice gone cold, "don't go nettling yourself because we're not using our real names. Matter of fact, Guv, aren't you and Miss Deems doing the same for your South American holiday?"

Duffy looked from one to the other, shaken. He started to rise.

"Don't get off your bum, dear," Lavinia said nastily. "Sit back and listen. We've come to make a little trouble for you."

She fixed her eyes on him. They were bright pink, and magnified intensively behind the thickest lenses Duffy had ever seen. She had no eyebrows. Her skin was as pinkly mottled as a diseased milk snake. Her teeth were crooked, with the canines predominating like a pair of bat fangs. Her hair was chalk-white, bunched under a ridiculous little chapeau which might have been retrieved from a Salvation Army garbage pail. Her horrid, husky voice had the timbre of permanent laryngitis, akin to the vibrato of a cancerous voice box. She seemed youngish, around thirty. There was no indication of a figure under her curveless sack.

Mr. Lambeth was hardly a relief. He was tall and quite hirsute. His graying beard proliferated in full mariner's style; he looked as if he had just come up from New Bedford after a year of chasing the great white whale. His half-smile disclosed tobacco-stained teeth, with some signs of incisor decay. His bushy eyebrows were astonishing, framed as two neat black triangles over his dark, wicked eyes. Or, rather, *eye*. He had only one. The other was covered by a black patch. His flesh had a greenish color as if he had been dead for some hours and autolysis had begun. His ready-made clothes had the scars and scent of those uncleaned corduroys which the English lower middle class wear to attain the status of the English upper middle class, replete with premeditated elbow patches.

Duffy pulled open his right-hand desk drawer and glanced down at the reassuring form of a Colt Python .357 Magnum revolver, a weapon with a muzzle velocity of 1,550 feet per second, more than ample to perforate not only Mr. and Mrs. Lambeth but also the walls of the bank itself and possibly a parked car at the curb. "This interview," he said flatly, "is over."

"Loverly!" Lambeth croaked. "I'm a tacit chap myself. Don't you love brevity, Lavinia?"

"The soul of wit," Lavinia said.

"But not too much brevity," said Lambeth. "I mean, Duffy, you *should* know the details."

"In one minute I am going to call the police."

Lavinia flashed her crooked teeth. "And the FBI too. This *is* a Federal bank?" She shook her head and glanced at Lambeth. "He's such a stupid arse."

"It's television does it," Lambeth said. "They get to believing what they see." He sighed as Duffy picked up the phone. "Righto, Duffy, forge ahead. I mean, *we* didn't steal the half million stones, *did* we?"

Duffy hung up abruptly. He poured himself a glass of water to try and wash away the bitter taste of copper. His open blue eyes closed piggishly. He said quietly, "What?"

Mr. Lambeth folded his hands across his lean stomach paternally. "*Quid pro quo* would cover it nicely."

"Blackmail," Duffy grunted, on surer ground.

"I'd say extortion," Mr. Lambeth replied. "Blackmail was the Scottish border thing where the chieftains would give you immunity for a fee. Extortion, on the other hand, is intimidation by threat of public disclosure. Or worse."

"What's worse?" Duffy asked, not wanting to.

"Sudden death," Lavinia said, like a foreclosure.

Duffy didn't care for it much. He took a deep breath. "How much?"

"All," said Lavinia.

Duffy stared; his mouth worked to reply. It was useless.

"However," said Mr. Lambeth warmly, "you still have today and tomorrow morning to pick up, say, another quarter of a million for yourself. You can keep that. We're not especially greedy. And please don't lose your head, Duffy, there is no choice. You do it our way or no way at all."

Lavinia said, "Instead of going to Brazil, you will go to the BOAC reservation window at Kennedy Airport. You have two first-class seats there for London, flying out tomorrow night. You will arrive in London on Saturday morning, the twenty-first. You will register at the Dorchester Hotel, Suite 104-105. It is reserved for you. You will carry our half million in a black attaché case which is already measured for you."

Mr. Lambeth put the black case on the desk very politely, dusting it for stray fingerprints, even though he was wearing black driving gloves.

"How you carry what else you steal is your own business," she said. "Repeat the instructions."

To his horror, Duffy heard himself repeat the words perfectly. When he had finished, Lavinia rose silently and went to the door, Mr. Lambeth preceding her gallantly to open it for her. As an afterthought, he looked back.

"I say," he said. "Forgot the clincher. Any attempt to enjoy Rio before London would end in funerals."

Duffy was impressed. He took the painful story home to Miss Diana Deems. She, being untainted by the grandness of his larceny, took a dim view of buying British. "Honeypot," she cooed shrilly, "those shitheads are just trying to put you on. Somehow they got the pipeline, and they're trying to shake you down. They'd never follow you where we're going, and you wouldn't disappoint your sugarmouth, would you? So don't go uptight, honeypot, just grab off the rest of that bread they mentioned, the extra two hunnerd fifty bills, and let's take off and leave those nasty old motherfuckers holding the baggie." Away from Lavinia's wild pink eyes, Diana's tropical mouth was very persuasive. Next day, Duffy heisted the serendipity, and they flew to Rio.

The first and last night in Brazil was a glorious orgiastic melee. It was as if he had spent a whole life in one grand splash of sperm, and he was quite prepared to perish in the sweetness of such destruction; yes, in this ecstasy, he was quite prepared to die—until he heard Miss Deems actually do it.

She screamed once, but it lasted a long time and finally faded in a gruesome Doppler effect. He pawed his way from the fornicative bed where so lately he had indulged in the sticky fantasies of love and scuffled to the open balcony of the living room, where the soft dawn wind plucked at the curtains from Corvocado across the bay. He stumbled to the railing, sidling up to it in dread reluctance at the sight he knew he must see. Their *aposento* was on the twelfth story. It had been a long fall. The tangible and intangible body of Miss Deems was splattered all over the black-and-white tesselated tiles.

There was a letter on the telephone, stuck into the top ring of the dial system. It had one bold word on the front: *Duffy*. He looked at it for a moment, hating it. He knew what it would say. He plucked it from the telephone and ran his finger under the flap, which gave easily, the adhesive still damp.

Inside, there were three things: a brief note, a BOAC ticket, first class, for London, leaving on the morrow, and a

scarlet credit card with a keyhole punched out of the center, a computer code number embossed on the plastic below the keyhole.

The note said, "Don't stay for the funeral. Don't lose your Keyhole card. See you in London on Monday morning."

Next day, a gentleman named Henry Gerry boarded the VC-10 and took off.

When he arrived, he found his reservation at the Dorchester was real. Suite 104-105 was luxurious. There seemed to be nothing untoward looming. He paced the floor to await word from Keyhole. None arrived. Finally, hating the loneliness, and with the vision of Miss Deems's broken corpse constantly recurring, he went down to the American Bar. Everybody in London, native or exotic, pops in there for a quick swig, to check late arrivals. He recognized nobody but wondered how soon the Falmouth National would alert Interpol, who would in turn alert Scotland Yard to cuff him for extradition. He finished his first drink and was seeking the steward to reorder when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder. He froze, stole a glance at the intruder, caught the color of a U.S. Army Air Force uniform, and violently shuddered.

A booming male voice said, "I'll be blowed! Patrick Henry Duffy! How are you, you dirty old man?"

He looked up into the friendly face of the colonel and recoiled in abject relief. "Rick! Rick Condon! Sit down, sit down! Have a drink! I'm fine! How are you? What the devil are you doing in London? Have a drink! Are you staying here?"

Colonel Condon eased his big frame into a chair. "Negative, Pat, staying next door at the Grosvenor. My God, but you are the last exile I ever expected to see in Londonburg. You look like a million dollars! Maybe less, what with inflation. Sorry about Claudia. You did get my letter?"

"Yes," Duffy said. "Very thoughtful. Waiter, two of these, please. . . . Yes, it was a terrible thing. Smoking too much, then that ghastly flu, on top of her emphysema, and . . ." He snapped his fingers. It had happened like that, but it seemed a long time ago. He expanded in Colonel Condon's presence, luxuriating in the old friendship, grateful that he was no longer alone. He measured Condon, whom he had always liked. The lad had grown older, certainly; he must be forty now. But Condon still retained that rugged masculinity that had enchanted Duffy's daughter twenty years before. The only reason that Morgana hadn't married Condon at the time was

because she had been trained by her mother to wed wealth, not reality. Condon was very real. He had candid brown eyes and a huge balding forehead with enough cubic footage to house a computer. Duffy remembered him with real affection.

The warm whiskey arrived and they drank and Colonel Condon warmly belted him in the shoulder. "Patrick Henry Duffy," he said loudly. "Of all the people I never expected to see again! Particularly in a Mayfair pub! How is the light of my adolescent life?"

"Fine," Duffy said nervously, looking around. "Living in Arizona with her cowboy. Three children. I—uh—Rick, if you wouldn't mind—"

"I don't mind."

"I'm traveling incognito."

"What the hell for? You're not a married man."

"My name is Henry Gerry," Duffy said desperately.

Condon gave him a wicked grin. "You aging obscenity," he said, leaning forward. "What'd you do, suck the bank dry?" (Oh my God, Duffy thought.) "Or is it that your depository doesn't approve of their vice-presidents using their real monickers when caught by the local fuzz in the local den of local iniquity? Jesus, but you must run out of names!"

"An important deal in Zurich. Don't want to rouse the competition."

"Can you still rouse anything else? Or are you too ancient for grabs?"

"Not at all," Duffy said proudly. "If you have something in mind."

Condon smiled angelically. "I never have anything else in mind."

"I heard you were stationed in Germany."

"Bonn," said Condon. "Flew in for some R and R. A little booze, a little cooze and back to the mill."

"I heard they'd made you a spy."

"Everybody in the bar is a spy," Condon said. "Except me. Sure, I'm with Air Force Intelligence, but since the cockamamy Air Force isn't very intelligent, that isn't saying much."

They both laughed and went back to whiskey-sipping. Suddenly, Duffy's eyes were caught by a swift vision of the foul face of Henry Lambeth far down at the end of the bar.

"What *the* hell is the matter with you?" Colonel Condon said, startled by Duffy's abrupt croak.

"Wait—wait here." Duffy rose and needled his way hastily through the small tables. When he reached the end of the

bar, by the lobby entrance, there was no Lambeth. Duffy snapped his fingers at the bartender. "That man, the one who was just sitting here—"

"Sir?"

"Who was he?"

"Haven't a clue, Guv'nor."

Shaken, Duffy returned to the banquette. Colonel Condon regarded him curiously. "Sorry," Duffy said. "Thought I knew that man."

"Do you always get this snowed when you see old friends?"

"I need a drink," Duffy said.

They had another whiskey and soda, and later, looking up at the end of the bar again, Duffy discovered a new face staring at him. Oh my God, Duffy thought, an Interpol agent. "Rick," he said throatily, "that man at the end of the bar, the one who keeps waving—"

"At *me,* you silly old bank robber," Colonel Condon said and gestured at the man to join them. Duffy took a short breath and wished Condon would knock off with those grand-larceny jokes. He watched the man approaching.

"This untamed predator," Colonel Condon explained, "is a bandicoot named Charles Ravensmith. Friend of mine. He is known as the wild dingo of the Australian outback, the scourge of the Savoy. More females have enjoyed the fruits of his ardor then ten normal husbands fighting to maintain the Empire's international weekly copulative average."

Duffy found Ravensmith to be quite distinguished. He was handsomely dressed. "Also," Colonel Condon said, "Charlie happens to be threaded with money, incurably rich. We have tried everything to break down this dread disease, but his old man makes it faster than we can spend it. His pater is in sheep and oil in western Australia, and now they just added uranium to the pot, so I guess we'll never be able to go for broke. In other words, Charlie is the world's wealthiest platypussy." Condon was enjoying his liquor. Duffy expanded, feeling his.

Duffy said, "That suit he's wearing—absolutely the last word."

"You too can wear those threads," said Condon with grandiosity. "The Seven Needles on Savile Row. Tell 'em I sent you, and they'll overcharge you for my kickback." By then the Aussie had survived his trip from the far end of the bar and joined them. Condon continued, "Charlie, my chum, lie down here with the lions and let us roar together!"

Ravensmith sat down, and Condon introduced him to Duffy,

who were surprised that Condon remembered the name Henry Gerry correctly. He made room for Ravensmith in the banquette. Up close, Duffy could understand the reasons for the gentleman's prowess with women. Ravensmith was a handsome man, lean and sparse, perhaps with too caddish a mustache and too sharp a nose, but his innocent teal-blue eyes were utterly disarming. They kept looking surprised and naïve, which was hardly the case. Condon explained to the Australian, "This old rakehelly almost became my father-in-law many years ago when I was young and toothsome. But his stupid daughter, my lady love, preferred this millionaire rancher type from Arizona, outchonder in the Injun country. Henry is, among other gamey guises, an incognito banker who has come hence seeking a far-off land named Liechtenstein. He is also seeking to get his apple polished."

Ravensmith smiled. "I was beginning to feel that same fitful fever myself. Why don't both you wayward wallabies be my guest?"

Condon said, "We accept."

It was a nervous night, laced with gins and whiskeys and washed down with pints of mild-and-bitter, sometimes sustained by cognac, often enlivened by bottles of bubbly. Even with care and caution, Duffy could not recall the march of time. He had some thrilling yet appalling visions of himself in a Belgrave flat, wallowing wildly amongst the arms and legs and Venusian mounts of three very beautiful young women; but for the life of him, he could not remember if he had fulfilled his part of the mission.

When he awakened, next morning, turtle-green with hangover, he was back in his hotel room. He begged room service for black coffee and a prairie oyster. He began to feel deathly ill.

Somehow he was not surprised when, instead of his regular room steward, Henry Lambeth arrived wearing the black tails and white tie of the Dorchester service, a white patch tilted over the left eye, the right eye as black and glassy and sterile as it had been that horrid day in Boston. "Good morrow, Mr. Gerry," Lambeth said. "Best be up and to the chase. You have a busy time of it, sir, if you hope to fulfill your responsibilities and yet be on the Brazilian flight this evening."

Duffy looked hopelessly at this creature: the crooked teeth, the all-seeing eye, the pea-soup skin and graying mariner's beard and bushy-wild eyebrows. He tried to generate hatred

for this ogre but found somehow he was relieved to see him. "It's time then?"

"On the very dot of," Lambeth said. "Eleven sharp this ante meridian, at the address on the tray. Bring your Keyhole card. It's electronic, y'see, to let you in. Make your drop in the slot marked 'Deposits.' Quite simple, really, eh? And then be about your own business, which is BOAC 102 outward bound. I shouldn't linger in London, Mr. Gerry. You could catch your death."

Duffy nodded, and then turned and kecked suddenly into the wastebasket at the side of his bed. "I need a doctor."

"First things first." But Lambeth looked deeply concerned. "If you do not arrive with the money at precisely eleven, you will not need a doctor at all."

"Can't you take the cash? It's in the closet. Can't you take it now, for the love of God?"

"We never assume transportation risks," Lambeth said. "After all, Guv, you are the one who stole it. Get along now, Mr. Gerry. Show a lively foot." He departed abruptly.

Duffy kept vomiting as he struggled into his clothes. He finally managed to keep some antacid pills down and fought his way to the rendezvous.

It was a modern glass-walled office building at Oxford Street and Duke. It was called the Tottenham Towers and very high-rise for London. The office number was 722. No one answered. As foretold, his Keyhole card, which he inserted into an electronic slot, instantly opened the door for him. He entered cautiously, expecting an *auto-da-fé,* but found himself alone. The room was devoid of furniture, stark. On the far side there was a window where he could look down on Mayfair and Grosvenor Square with Marble Arch to the west.

On the near wall, there was a large black steel box, affixed solidly, with the word *Deposits* stenciled on its lip in white paint. He pulled open the lid and placed his attaché case into its gape. The case fitted perfectly. He let the lid go and heard the case skid into silence. He pulled the lid down again for a look. The half million dollars had vanished.

He returned gloomily to the Dorchester, anxious now to flee from this dolorous island. He had left the other two hundred and fifty thousand safely vaulted at the Mariposa Hotel in Rio de Janeiro. He had carried with him only five thousand dollars in cash and traveler's checks. He still had to spend five hours before his flight. He was lonely, used up.

Duffy never caught the plane. The sickness he had felt at dawn expanded through his whole being. Dr. MacLeish, the house medico, found his condition frightening. "I must remove you to the hospital immediately. Do you have any relatives or friends in town?"

"As bad as that?" Duffy whispered. "Nobody. Yes, wait—call Colonel Condon, at Grosvenor House."

Dr. MacLeish left a message for the colonel at the front desk of his hotel since the colonel was not available.

"What's wrong with me?" Duffy asked later as the ambulance belled and yodeled through the city.

"I don't know," Dr. MacLeish said. "But if I had just found you unconscious in the alleys of Nagasaki on the ninth of August in '45, I would diagnose your case as one of radiation fallout. Which is absolutely impossible. Nonetheless, there you have it. Massively."

At the hospital, a Geiger counter confirmed a mortal rack of roentgens in the gamma-ray glass. It became plain that during Mr. Duffy's night on London town, barkeeps had been studding his spirits with a rare and deadly isotope. He was not only as good as dead, but damned dangerous alive. When Colonel Condon arrived to hear Duffy's confession, the hospital ordered him to don a lead apron, and security closed around the dying man.

Meanwhile, Boston had alerted New Scotland Yard to Duffy's grand larceny. When Chief Inspector Ewing Hawkins reached the hospital, Duffy had perished. Colonel Condon failed to provide any answers to the Yard's questions.

In the end, Duffy was denied proper burial. He had become an American responsibility. The United States cremated his remains and buried them at sea, confined in a shielded container. It seemed a lonely end for a simple peculator. Colonel Condon hastily traced Duffy to the Oxford Street building, where he visited room number 722. It was empty. The black box on the wall was gone. In its place was a normal office window. Through it, he could see West One of London, from Park Lane to Savile Row.

Duffy had apparently deposited his half million into thin air seven stories above the city.

9

ABOUT two o'clock in the afternoon, Air Force One made touchdown at Nandi International Airport, a modern and bustling air terminal, with all the action of Kai Tak in Hong Kong.

We disembarked at the terminal, where we were met by a borrowed Pan Am Land Rover with its "Follow Me" sign astern. It was a beautiful soft day, as remote from McMurdo as the blue earth can get. The glare almost stopped down my eyes, but not so far that I could not see a female of the species who had left the terminal and was heading our way. Commander Sampson leaped out and joined her. She was accompanied by a Fiji Islander, a handsome big black man with wild frizzy hair, dressed in a spotlessly white linen suit.

McCabe was sitting up front. Naturally, Sampson put the lady on McCabe's broad lap and then climbed back into the stern next to me. Meanwhile, the Fuzzy Wuzzy jumped into the rear and plunked himself down on me. "Regrets, old boy!" he said. He grinned cheerfully and put an arm around my neck with enthusiasm as we careened down the airstrip. It occurred to me, staring at the soft sandy hair of the girl on McCabe's lap, that she was the first live female I had seen in seven months.

Down the tarmac a United States Navy Grumman waited for us. It was a twin-engined amphibian. We pulled up under the starboard wing. Commander Sampson was the first to bail out of the jeep; ergo, he was first to grab the lady's arm and assist her into the aircraft. Then McCabe climbed off. Finally Old Black Joe lifted his bony ass off my crumpled lap, which made me Tail-End Charlie.

Therefore, it was surprising when I entered the passenger compartment to find the seat next to the lady empty. Admiral McCabe was perched to starboard with Commander Sampson just back of him. Fuzzy had sprawled across the double seats abaft the lady. I slid into the seat beside her as the hatch closed and the engines roared us into taxiing. She smiled at me.

"Fasten your seat belt," she said firmly.

I outfumbled her for it. She found it and snapped it sharply across my groin. "Thanks."

"Used to be my job," she said, smiling again.

Oh my God, but she was a lovely thing. It wasn't just my enforced celibacy. She smelled like a fresh cake of Castile soap. There were almost no cosmetics on her face. She had bright, open hazel eyes, flickering from green to yellow-gold, and her pale skin was shining from the highlights of the Fijian sun. Her broad warm mouth was wry. She had a bridge of enormous freckles across her nose to the width of her high cheekbones. I stared at them. "They never turned to tan," she said.

"Just awful," I said. "My name is Sam Carson."

"I know," she said, and then leaned back as the jockey poured the full nine hundred horses to the plane with full pitch and full flaps. All conversation ceased during the ear-wracking takeoff. I passed the time dissecting her. Pore by pore. I began to feel mildly sick with elation. We leveled off at five hundred feet. When the pilot finally eased off the full pitch on his props, some of the shattering sound died away, so a clean shout could get across. I leaned over close to her and said, "My place or your place?"

She laughed and put her hand over my mouth, and got her fingers back before I ate them off. They smelled of gardenias. She told me silently to be quiet and sit still and that if I was a good little Injun, Wakan Tanka would be in his heaven and, later on, I might get lucky. So I sat back and behaved.

After about half an hour of flying this air cushion over the Fiji Sea, I felt a tap on the shoulder and, turning, found Admiral McCabe's frosty eyes close to mine as he handed me a slip of paper. It said, "The Kickapoo behind you is named Sione Movailahia, which means John Bigwater. He is a *ratu* —chief—of the traditionalist sect of the Nangas. Eat this note after reading."

I turned and gave McCabe a dirty look, but he didn't even bless me with a glance. Then I tore up the note, wondering what the devil it was all about, and I shoved it down the ashtray, where my cigarette butts soon charred it black and stank up the cabin.

The lady had very pretty legs, and a nice neat profile, and a strong chin, and full lips, and all the normal things a beautiful lady is supposed to have but never does when you are sitting together, pelvis to pelvis.

At five hundred feet, it became apparent that we were flying around the main island of Veti Levu and were heading straight up the 180-degree meridian for the northern island of

Vanua Levu, which is still quite remote from the perils of civilization. We could not fly over either island at this altitude because, whereas most of the island galaxies of the southwest Pacific are mere atolls grown high, the Fiji Islands are upthrusts and very mountainous. When we approached Vanua Levu, an hour and a half later, her green peaks were a good four thousand feet above our airplane. It was quite a sight, after you'd gotten used to the flattened sporades.

We finally turned west around the Vanua Levu headland, on its northeast point, and burst upon an unusual scene. There below, lying at anchor in deep water, not very far from the green cliffs of the northern face of the island was the U.S.S. *Kitty Hawk,* an aircraft carrier of some eighty thousand tons plus. It seemed like a fruity place to be showing the flag, but when I glanced at McCabe for some explanatory reaction he looked through me and picked his nose.

The splashdown was made in the slick water of the *Kitty Hawk's* southwest lee. The co-pilot took a line from the stern and made it fast, and we drifted there, moored, in the prevailing wind.

Commander Sampson and the pilot, meanwhile, opened the hatch. Instantly, a grotesque, wildly painted tiki god plunged in. It was sitting on the head of a carved huge hornbill, and it appeared so quickly I thought it was alive. It turned out to be the figurehead of a Fiji war canoe, which had moored under the wing.

Admiral McCabe followed Bigwater down the aisle. He beckoned at me to follow. The girl beside me was very flushed and wide-eyed. "Isn't it fantastic?" she said breathlessly. "I've never seen a real war canoe before!"

I looked at her blankly.

"Sam!" she said, twisting my chin around so that she could peer into my eyes. "Haven't they told you anything?"

"No. And you're not helping much either. Don't you at least have a Social Security number?"

"You don't know my name?" she said. "It's Melisande Kincade. The admiral should have told you." She touched my cheek gently. "I'm so glad you're nice. I was really dodgy about the whole thing. Until I saw you."

"Yes," I said, not knowing what the hell she was talking about.

"But it's going to be all right."

"What's going to be all right?"

"Us," she said.

Admiral McCabe called, "On the double, redbelly. Shag it!"

"That kind of talk went out when the NAACP came in," I said sharply.

"Injuns don't have that strong a union," he said and motioned for me to disembark.

10

WE STEPPED out of a nervous present into a frightening past. Moored alongside the Grumman, the war canoe stretched out interminably, over a hundred feet long, hand-carved out of a single tree. It was decorated baroquely with multiple gods, deformed titans, lascivious lokis, benign tikis, all in bright colors. In the war canoe, paddles upraised and dripping, eighty Fijian warriors stood, all loinclothed in scarlet lava-lavas, each black belly emblazoned with the highly intricate cicatrix of a wriggling snake. The men varied in color from ebony to mahogany, glistening with sweat; their Medusian hair was all swept up, high and wide and wild. Not a few had bones pierced through their nasal membranes, a practice that was strictly illicit and very hairy. They were slapping the flat side of the paddles with open hands in a resonant beat, their white teeth gleaming as they grinned. Admiral McCabe and Commander Sampson saluted them smartly; Melisande blew them a kiss as John Bigwater helped her down into the craft.

But when I appeared at the open hatch, they started a booming chant, something like "Sam-*ugh!,* Sam-*ugh!,*" and clattered those paddles deafeningly. The display brought many of the crew of the *Kitty Hawk* to the carrier's stern, where they could watch as I took Bigwater's hand and jumped down into the canoe. "You start greeting all your tourists this way, John, and you'll pull all the trade away from Honolulu."

"This is no tourist aloha, by Jupitah!" Bigwater said crisply. "This is a Nanga welcome to our first white blood brother." He slapped me roughly on the back. "It will forever erase the ghastly taste of the missionaries. Figuratively speaking, of course!"

I took a place beside Melisande. After the duffels were dumped into the craft, Bigwater gave a shout. The Beat-Keeper shoved the black bow off the Grumman's starboard beam and into clear water. The Fijian warriors all stood to

port and starboard of the canoe and bent their paddles deep as the Beat-Keeper hit a big war drum in the bow. The feral grunting and the beat of that resonant drum and the automatic movements of those glistening oarsmen made the spine tingle. We headed the war canoe inshore toward Vanua Levu at whitewater speed.

Half a mile off a rocky and dangerous shore the canoe picked up a long, huge swell and squatted on the peak of it as the eighty warriors stuck their paddles down like centerboards to keep the canoe from yawing off course, or pitchpoling end over end. The ride was liver-cleaning scary.

When we hit the beach and the roaring sea had been sucked back into its mother, fifty feet of that canoe was right up on dry deck. I never felt so alive. I piled out with the rest and hauled the boat clear of the next wave's grab. Melisande fell out into my arms. She was shaking with excitement.

I said to McCabe, "It'll never replace Disneyland. But it's not a bad little ride."

"Save your breath," he said. "You'll need it. We are going up three thousand feet. Straight. Without an airplane. On your spindly worm-eaten legs. Using your tobacco-tarred lungs. Remember, redbelly, you haven't been in good shape since Mommy got you to stop your bedwetting. If it was three thousand and *one* feet, I'd bet my braid you couldn't do it, even if I lost face in front of these barefoot boys."

It was humiliating to prove him right. It took us nearly two hours to make that ascent, through shadowy forests, on the lip of a cliff, sometimes, over a narrow path that shrieked for the services of a Grand Canyon mule. The eighty warriors carrying our luggage, and chanting as they went in their red loincloths, looked like a sinuous scarlet snake. They never stopped, kept moving steadily, easily, and left us tourists slowly behind. Meanwhile the tourists were leaving me behind. McCabe stood up to the gaff ruggedly, and so did Sampson. Even Melisande, though puffing some, had no problem in keeping her place. But I inevitably ebbed into Tail-End Charlie again, with Bigwater patiently watching over me. As the air thinned, so did my strength. "Don't be concerned, my friend," Bigwater said with compassion. "When I have finished with you, you will canter up this escarpment with the agility of old King Thakombau."

I had just thrown up. Dismally, I said, "Who?"

Bigwater looked offended. "Are you sending me up, sah?"

He put an arm around me and helped me back on the trail. "Surely you have heard of King Thakombau?"

"Sure, sure," I said. I made a quick guess. "He was the greatest king of the Fijis there ever was."

Bigwater smiled. "The greatest indeed! It was King Thakombau who killed all our enemies and united our islands and finally agreed to be civilized. It was Thakombau who finally presented his braining-club to the Grandmother, Victoria, Queen of the English. Up to then, it had been the only law in Fiji."

I couldn't help chuckling. "You speak English very well," I said, changing the subject.

"Yours will improve during the tenure of your education."

"What am I going to learn?"

"To be a Nanga."

"That's nice," I said.

"I will be your teacher," said Bigwater. "With us, it is *kere-kere*. Everything I have is yours. Here among the *mantanitu*—the tribe—you are my son, under my protection. Here I am *ratu*—I am the King. That makes you a holy one."

"Whatever you say, Big Daddy."

"You will become much man."

This new member of the cast was as sharp-mouthed as Admiral McCabe. I wasn't in *that* bad a shape, whereas he had been playing the Tarzan game most of his life and hadn't spent seven restricted months in Iceberg Alley. He was splendidly built, with huge shoulders and a wasp waist, but he did have the Melanesian backside.

We finally reached the rim of a plateau, a kind of hidden inner mesa, and at the end of the trail Admiral McCabe was sitting on a mossy rock, leaning against the north side of a mossy tree, and getting his whites green-stained. He said sarcastically, "What took you so long?"

"I was constipated," I said nastily.

He chuckled just as nastily. "Don't worry about that. By the time you leave here, we'll have scared it out of you." He nodded to Bigwater to move on and check the bivouac. We were left alone while I swallowed my breath back. But I didn't get hacked. After all, he had said I would leave this lotus land. I had doubted it.

11

WE WERE on the fringe of a huge open glade, almost completely bumbleshooted by the tops of the tall hardwood trees which tented the area. The glade was in the shape of a huge egg, perhaps a quarter of a mile long and an eighth of a mile at the rounded ends. It was green and soft, and dappled exquisitely by bright golden sundrops which shot down through the latticework of the high treetops. On the bottom of the egg there was a structure, timbered with latticework and thoroughly thatched with pandanus leaves. Near the long hut there was a glistening pool, fed constantly from upper springs by flumes of bamboo. In front of the long hut there was a carving of a huge serpent, and beneath and behind it minor god carvings, myriad figures that looked like exaggerated men. At the top of the egg, over a thousand feet to the west, stood two more shacks, but these looked fresh, newly done.

I could see Commander Sampson and Melisande Kincade being shown the residences by Bigwater, while the natives came to the center of the grove, did some strange obeisance to the huge carved serpent at our end, and then began to council up. Drums made an appearance and began to beat, brightly, happily. It reminded me of a Shoshoni camp up in the Tetons, with the braves gathering around a fire for powwow, just like these Fiji fellows.

McCabe caught my thought. "They call their powwow *meke-meke.*"

"And who is Uncle Python there at the long hut?"

"Number-one god. Ndengai. He is immortal. These lads have a big belief in life after death. He's the only ticket. The other totems are second-rank gods, the great spirits of dead chiefs and heroes. Don't worry too much about taboos. They make for tight security."

"Security! Everything's been so secure, I'm afraid to remember my middle name."

"It's Wyeth, after the old mountain man Nathaniel Wyeth, who during his peripatetics in the Shining Mountains appears to have lingered long enough among the Snake Indians to have become one of your forebears."

He gave me one of his brown cigarillos. "I don't know

whether I can keep it down," I said, but we lighted up anyway and leaned back comfortably. I asked, "Now, about Duffy. Where the hell did anyone get those isotopes? Isotopes are hot jobs. Where were they stolen?"

McCabe shrugged. "Why not a hospital dealing in radiation treatments? We might have a doctor guilty of some malpractice which Keyhole had learned about. Under extortion, he would deliver the goods. There are many possibilities. We expect the answers from you."

I said glumly, "Let's falter on. Who gave Duffy the death doses? It must have been over seven hundred and fifty roentgens; that is the mortal count. I can see the plan: slip him slow death, get him out of England that night and have him die in Rio de Janeiro, a long way from the scene of the crime. He got too much radiation and bilged before they got rid of him."

"Logical."

"Then it was Charles Ravensmith."

"That's a little obvious, isn't it? Keyhole has not played anything obvious yet."

"It wouldn't be so obvious if Duffy had died in South American climes instead of jolly old London."

McCabe flicked his cigarette away. "In any case, no dice. You see, Virginia, there really is a Charlie Ravensmith. He really is from points of Perth, he really is loaded with the loot, and he really is on an eternal spree."

"How deep did you check?" I asked.

"This deep. We hit his old man. Father hasn't seen him in two years, but his checks have the correct signature, and his letters are written in the correct hand. Then to be sure we took some telephotos of the cad, good likenesses, and shipped them on, and Mr. Ravensmith Senior said it was his boy. Now I know that still doesn't clean his shirt, but on the face of it, redbelly, what would he do it for? Kicks? Unlikely. Money? He has enough."

"Maybe *he's* a victim of Keyhole."

"I don't know what they could have on him. He's done everything in the book. Bit of a wild man. But maybe. You can tell us about that after you find it out."

"I'm going to be a busy little son-of-a-spy, aren't I?"

"While you last."

"Okay. Now then. Henry Lambeth. Surely as weird a character as Lambeth—"

"Never been seen again from that last day of Duffy's

to now. In fact, NSA even thought Duffy might have concocted him to cover something else. Again unlikely. But no Lambeth. Either dead or nonexistent."

I said thoughtfully, "Lavinia too?"

"We could never cut her sign."

"Is it possible Duffy concocted her too?" I said.

McCabe sighed. "Sam, Colonel Condon didn't concoct anything. He merely reported. He had a dying statement from a man who knew he was dead. I think and he thinks that Mr. Duffy told the God's truth. Everything he confessed proved true. We believe Lavinia existed—or exists—and the same for Lambeth." He puffed a moment. "Your job will be to resurrect them."

I brushed aside that unpleasant task. "The airplane that dumped your agent, Colonel Condon, out there in the desert. That plane had to go somewhere."

"It didn't." I looked blank. "Let's put it this way. It probably landed at Lagos. But when we checked airport security, Colonel Njojo Ngama, who was security chief at Lagos, swore that it had never landed there. We had to take him at his word. He has since been murdered."

"He was paid off and then silenced," I said.

"More than that. Remember, Dan Gallagher was the last drop. The others had been dumped before. The plane still had to fly somewhere. Presume Lagos. That means that Ngama was a part of Keyhole, on the payroll. It was only when, by accident, that TV clown, Doremus, found the body that the heat came on. Keyhole couldn't take a chance with Ngama. They had to silence him. Their whole point in the desert drops was to put their victims in utter limbo. I guess they've worked out some other plan for their dead weights by now. I wouldn't find out the hard way if I were you."

"Thanks," I said. "That kind of compassion gets me right where I cry."

He said, "All right, Sam, *I'll* ask your questions for you. Next will be the Swedish Chifferbyraenas, no?" I nodded, chagrined. "What happened to the great industrialist Knut Demson? Answer. He was on holiday in Venice. He went up to the top of the Campanile on the Piazza San Marco. There was only one other person up there with him, a French acolyte from the Order of St. Denys, who had come to Rome for one of those religious festivals. Next thing, Knut Demson is meat on the bricks. The good father is horrified. He tells the carabinieri how he begged and prayed for Mr. Demson

not to commit suicide. The police take his name and hotel and barely recall him, a clean-shaven, nice young priest in wide black hat and red robe. The name, Pierre LeCochon. Peter the Pig. And he vanishes into history. All those pasta fuzz could talk about was how many pigeons were killed by the body. But no Peter the Pig to this day."

I didn't like it much and showed so by shivering, although the temperature, even up on the mountain where we were, stood at a good 75 degrees Fahrenheit. I said, "Okay, he was killed because he had had enough and was going to spill. But what could Keyhole have gotten on a man like that, anyhow?"

"He was wanted," McCabe said grimly. "We dug back and found him to be Franz Helber."

I said, awed, "But Helber was supposed to have been burned at the bunker with Hitler—"

"Or escaped to Argentina or Paraguay or someplace. Anyway, it was Helber all right. He'd obliterated fingerprints but he hadn't changed his teeth. He must have been a rich lode for Keyhole until he was executed."

The cigars were finished. "Then the insurance man from Tokyo—I forget his name—"

"Seisue Morikawa," McCabe said instantly.

"Another suicide?"

"You know it."

"Not Pierre LeCochon again," I said dubiously.

"Not even with his peculiarly native sense of humor. No. As a matter of fact, Mr. Morikawa was in a reception room on the fourteenth floor of the United Nations building. There was nothing between him and eternity but a big plate-glass window. He suddenly started flapping his wings, insisted he was a bird—an ostrich no less—and after a cock crow or two—"

"Ostriches don't crow."

"—he dived through the plate-glass window and flew down."

"Ostriches can't fly either."

McCabe shook his head somberly. "Unfortunately, Mr. Morikawa wasn't up on his aerodynamics like you. Or maybe the ergot extraction of C15H15N2COOH had warped his viewpoint."

It took me a few seconds to understand his chemical point of view. "If you are trying to tell me that a top insurance man from Tokyo was an acidhead—"

"Coroner's decision."

"You can't detect LSD in the human body—"

"So Dr. Helpern said. He's the chief medical examiner for New York City. But when you have found the sugar cubes in a man's pocket, and when you have two witnesses to his erratic behavior—"

"Two!" I said, surprised.

McCabe nodded. "Not Father LeCochon. Nor Lavinia. Nor Henry Lambeth. The first was a sedate English lady named Sedonia Widdecomb, of Chutney-on-Thames." I stirred. "Yes, you heard it. The same seat of the illusive Henry Lambeth. She was on sabbatical leave from her teaching at St. Mordred-of-the-Moors, a private boys' school in Bucks. Her passport was in order, she was staying at the Carlton. Age around forty-five, tatty but proud. She was an enormous help to the police. Lied her head off to them. Only thing is, there is no town of Chutney-on-Thames, her passport number does not exist in Her Majesty's files, and there is no such school as St. Mordred's. There *is* a Bucks County. Otherwise, Miss Sedonia Widdecomb vanished before the inquest, and there was nothing to substantiate her tale except for the police notes and the testimony of the second witness."

"Henry Lambeth?"

"Not at all," McCabe replied. "A code clerk attached to the British UN mission. By name Peter Pluxton. A mild, harmless little man, with Blimp mustache, a trifle thick of gut, replete with bowler and bumbleshoot. He was quite shaken by the incident, being a dedicated birdwatcher. He said that Mr. Morikawa's strut was just perfect, that it could have fooled another ostrich, but that his wingspread was just as minor. His credentials were in perfect order—passport, hotel; even Miss Widdecomb vouched for him as one of her star pupils when he attended St. Mordred's and that she was visiting the UN at his invitation."

"Just beautiful."

"Then he vanished too, there being no Pluxton on the code staff, no such passport number, no such person."

I said, "Keyhole sounds like a repertory company. Isn't it possible they have a group of traveling actors hamboning these various roles? A pretty safe procedure if you play it well. One-night stand, and then the role is over, and the fuzz chases a character who is gone forever. And that wicked sense of humor. Satirical and contemptuous. Sounds English."

"Likely," Admiral McCabe said. "The hairy thing is how

those people in Keyhole *know*. It took the CIA three weeks and the Japanese Naikuku Sosashitsu nearly a month to break open the fact that Morikawa was engaged in a vast insurance swindle. I mean, there was two thousand million yen involved, which comes to about half a million American bucks. And remember, yen isn't funny money."

"You think they gave him a flight plan because he was going to sing like a bird?"

"No. I think they turned him off before the Tokyo Kesatzu arrested him. Before he could confess all to the police and disclose the fact that Keyhole had tapped him for most of his larceny. Just like Duffy. They have pretty good timing on how far to milk the cow before switching over to roast beef. Does that bring you up to date?"

"No," I said. "Not half, sir. What about the French agent, the girl Mademoiselle DuFond?"

"Even their Deuxième Bureau doesn't have a clue on that chop. I think they threw an innocent into a complication. She didn't last very long. Less than a month. I think Marat underestimated the problem, thought it was just a private-eye case."

I nodded. "But you didn't make that mistake with Dan Gallagher?"

McCabe gave me a hard look. "You're goddam right I didn't. But he had one weakness. His cover wasn't very good. He posed as a wealthy tourist, and that finally wasn't good enough. When they checked him out, he didn't stand up, and they figured him correctly as an NSA agent and dropped him. But not before he made certain deductions and dug out some interesting data."

"The Seven Needles," I said.

The admiral lit a cigarette to avoid showing me approval in his eyes. "You're beginning to encourage me."

"Thanks. Did he tie them into Keyhole?"

"No. But he still thought the Seven Needles was the hand in the Keyhole glove. I don't know how he dug up this stuff, and maybe that's what cost him his life, but anyway, here it is. The Seven Needles is an international firm. There is one in London on Savile Row. There is one in Paris, Avenue Montaigne. One in Tokyo, the Ginza. One in New York, Fifth Avenue. One in Rome, Via Veneto. One in Hong Kong, Victoria Road. One in Washington, D.C., Georgetown. And the last is in Marrakesh, Avenue Mohammed Five, servicing all Africa. They deal in *haute couture*, very expensive stuff,

for both men and women, but mostly women. It is a private cartel, the stock all owned by the board of directors. They never declare dividends; in fact when they file tax reports in their various countries, they usually show a loss. But they solve this by selling pro-rata shares to the seven board members and stagger on for another year. Meanwhile, they also own a gambling club in London, called the Montebank. It is perfectly legit, pays taxes on the nose to the government. This is a very successful operation. After taxes, they bank the net from all Seven Needle operations in a Swiss numbered account. We have no way into that account, so God knows what really goes in there. As you know, we are working with the Swiss government to break down the secrecy of such dodges, and it may happen, but it hasn't. Therefore, I think Keyhole uses Switzerland for legit money and banks its larceny someplace else.

"Now, redbelly, tell me what you make of this: The board of directors of The Seven Needles all have code names they use in their cables and telegrams and even in ciphony. A dame named Lady Dara Henley is chairman of the board; her code name is Stitch. Gallagher said, incidentally, that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life."

I said, "Something to look forward to."

"Remember, black widows eat their mates after copulation," McCabe said quietly. "And that sort of spoils the fun. Let's go on. Next member, a former New York columnist named Dickerson, friend and fawner of the Beautiful People. He used to write a column called 'Cholly Continental,' loaded with the very rich, the jet set and the phony parasites on the fringes. He retired four years ago—which is a clue on the birth date of Keyhole—and went abroad to live as a foreign resident. His code name is Dart."

"Even a stupid Shoshini like me can see that his secret files on the BPs and the Loaded Lusters would make beautiful cement for a building of blackmail."

McCabe nodded, pleased with me. "Third, a man named Monty Wyndham, about which Gallagher could find no information whatsoever. His code name is Scissor."

"Maybe the executor?"

"Maybe. But somehow this is a ghost of a man. We know he is Canadian by birth, but there is no photographic record of him. He went to England, according to Canadian passport authorities, four years ago. The little man who isn't."

"Uh-huh. Go on."

"Four, a Mustache Pete named Vittorio Tarantella of Naples. Calls himself Vic. No mystery. He's a Sicilian, migrated to America, joined the Brotherhood of the older days, wound up as Lucky Luciano's bodyguard when Luciano was shipped back to Italy. Lived in Naples until Luciano died, then ostensibly retired, only to show up in London, maybe three years ago, as a Seven Needles board member."

"He's the hit man."

"No. He manages the casino in London, the Montebank. His code name is Seam. His connections are obvious, should they be needed."

I'd gotten my breath back after that bone-wracking climb up the cliff, but suddenly I was getting breathless again.

"Any more?"

"Uh-huh," said McCabe. "Five, a designer named Henri Dieu—"

"The French couturier."

"French, my ass. He's plain American. Born in Des Moines. Getting old now and pays for his boys. His present affinity is a closet cock named Francis Bane. The running joke is that Francis is the Bane of God's existence. Dieu means 'God' in French. God's real name is Henry Godwin, but he really is a top designer. His code name is Hem."

"What about this guy Bane?"

"Not a board member. More like a killer. He is always with Dieu, definitely as a lover, also as a bodyguard."

"More?"

"Six," McCabe continued, "is a tricky item, a hybrid Japanese girl named Niji Fukimora. Her mother was the very wealthy daughter of the electronic tycoon Menshi. You know about them; all your transistor radios, your cheap binoculars, your portable TVs, coming in from the Orient, are Menshi items. Anyway, the mother got knocked up by a married GI named Joe Kluger and was disowned by the family. Mother went abroad to Paris, then London, and had this mighty toothsome halfbreed. Gallagher said that she was something to look at, more GI than Menshi, but that the word was out that she was a dyke, hates men, and could be the Eastern control for Keyhole. Her code name is Tuck."

"It makes a sound pattern," I said. "Dickerson, the columnist, to cover the U.S.A. and the American tourist. Henri Dieu to gown the victims, build them a wardrobe that speaks back and feeds blackmail data into the center. Monty

Wyndham, the mystery man, to do the executions. Miss Fukimora to cover the rich bitches of the Occidentalized Orient. But who's in charge of Africa and why?"

"Why I can answer first. Africa is a poor continent right now, except that the tourists who go there, safaris and such, are loaded and are also given to aberrations which would set them up perfectly as pigeons. The 'who' would be number seven, a black woman named Buffy Pristine."

"Buffy Pristine. Not a real name?"

"We don't know. Her story is she's an American who migrated to get away from racism, lives in Paris. But actually, she holds a British passport and was once married to a Beirut hotshot named Ali Hzahd, a very wealthy politician in Lebanon who died mysteriously and suddenly in London three years ago. Heart attack. Or a massive injection of adrenaline. Who knows? We have no record of the woman here at all. MI six is working on it from their passport records, so we may know her background soon. Her code name is Gore."

"Stitch, Dart, Scissor, Seam, Hem, Tuck and Gore. Like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs."

"But not exactly Disney style," McCabe said, stirring. "That's all we got from Dan. Very soon after that, Doremus picked him off the Sahara. Meanwhile, during your transformation, I've got a lookout in London, just keeping a weather eye on the lasses and lads. He is under orders to do no snooping, just keep *au courant*. I want to get him out of there. He's probably much too obvious. Which you won't be, I hope."

I said, "I don't see my roost in this tree at all."

"You're an electronics genius, aren't you?" he said, growling the words, sounding as if he had just crushed a handful of crackerjack in his throat by pure muscular contraction. "*They* are too. Diamond-cut-diamond. Let's hope you're the Kohinoor and they are just chips. Now, button up like a silent redskin and let's go bivouac."

McCabe pointed at the left hut, where John Bigwater, peeled down to a fiery *pareu* and glistening like melting chocolate, stood on the porch. "That's the Station, as the British say. I'm Head-of-Station. This will be our briefing room and general headquarters." He turned and gave me a secret smile and pointed at the other shack on the right. "You're over there. Clean up and change up, go native. That's an order. Climate at this level doesn't drop below seventy. And don't come yawping to me for mosquito

netting. The sandalwoods in the forest are natural punk against them. There are no insects up here and no wild animals, except the one you're going to be. Save something for the briefing." He turned and walked away and entered the Station with Bigwater, both of them smiling at something that had failed to amuse me.

12

THEY HAD dumped my duffel off in front of my staghouse, and when I slung it over my shoulder I was amazed at the quality of my little grass shack in Vanua Levu. Since the carpenters are a hereditary caste in Fiji, I shouldn't have, but in truth this hut was beautifully made. Half its walls were constructed from clean timber, and the aerated topsides were latticed off in new bamboos, under a bright shining green roof of thatched pandanus leaves. Behind the shack there was a spring on the hillside, and I could see the network of bamboo shafts which obviously fed fresh water into the galley and the bathroom. There was a good-luck totem over the door; I saluted him as I entered.

Inside, the pad was utterly pleasant. Hand-made native furniture, all easy and comfortable, with a mat fan by the low sofa, to be pulled by rattan cord if the air got too still. Everything was indigenous except the Coleman lamps for night work, the three-burner butane stove, a chemical head in a private toilet, a long-range high-frequency radio which could pull in signals from anywhere in the world and was now filling the room with soft music from Honolulu, and a stereo cassette battery-operated player. Not to mention a woven bar, on which reposed a welter of booze, including slots for wine and champagne, of which there was more than enough.

The other room was a spacious bedroom with a king-size bed frame with low legs, covered with wild tapa cloth. Two dressing tables, both woven from rattan and built on bamboo, lot of hanging space for clothes, and a bathroom off to one side. I could hear the spring water gurgling in there.

I tossed the duffel to one side, stripped out of my sweaty whites, found a towel and plunged into the shower. When I brushed aside the tapa-cloth curtain and stepped in, I took one long transfixed look and stood there rigidly.

Melisande was in the center of the shower room, directly

under two bamboo flumes which spilled two sparkling streams of crystal-clear water over her. She was as starkly white as Carrara marble and as sweetly naked as Phryne. She did not see me as she luxuriated in the flow. As the waterfalls coursed off her slim body, they left two glittering diamonds clinging to the hard, raised nipples of her stressed breasts. She was so naturally blonde, she seemed nude at the pube, except there were flashes of spring water dancing on the tips of her invisible hairs.

Abruptly, she turned and saw me standing there, so taken I hadn't even thought to curtain myself with the towel. Not a word was spoken. We both just stood looking at each other for many seconds. I said, "I'm sorry, girl, they didn't tell me you were in here. I thought it was my hut." And I turned to leave.

"Sam!" she called.

I turned back. She was still standing there. She raised her arms. "It's not my hut either. It's ours."

I threw the towel aside and plunged under the rushing waters. For a moment, we just stood there, wordless. Then I took her into my arms and under that cold water kissed her hot mouth. She sagged down with me to the drenched rattan floor, and there we made love in a sensuous half-drowned world, a wild and unforgettable feast of feeling which is impossible to remember. We lay there panting and gasping in watery and ecstatic suffocation, bathed in beauty, and then she rose and left me.

I stretched out there on my stomach to keep from drowning and wondered about everything that was happening, but I had no answers, except that she was lovely and she was mine.

Later when I emerged from the shower she had changed into a bright lime sarong, a Western version with a brassiered top.

She had emptied my duffel and hung my clothes. When I took her into my arms, she held my face and whispered, "*That* was supposed to happen sooner or later, but I'm glad it happened sooner, and I'm glad it happened just like that."

I still didn't know what she meant. When I tried to kiss her again, she held me off and handed me a kind of red diaper. "What the hell is this?"

"Your *pareu*," she said. "You're supposed to wear it all the time. It's Nanga."

I tried to figure how to wrap it around me. I said, "A

warrior with low-hanging gonads could damn well be arrested as an exhibitionist in this thing. Isn't there an instruction book on how to get into this without showing everybody that the rabbi skipped me?"

"I'll do it," she said.

"No chance. You try to three-corner me into this toggery, child, and you and I and Adam's stem are going to have one hell of a tussle."

She said, "It's a chance I'll take."

She lost.

Afterward as we lay intertwined on the big bed, she sighed and said, "This is all strangely mad and unbelievable. I told them I would never do it, and I meant it, until I saw you down at Nandi, and somehow, instantly, I knew it would be this way and that it would be all right. I don't understand such things. How could I know you like that? But I did. I knew you and I liked you and I wanted you, and I'm really not much of a girl for games."

I said, "I still don't know what the hell you're talking about. You know something I don't."

"You will."

"Doesn't matter. I don't know you well enough *not* to be in love with you. I love your heat and your breath and those flickering lights in your eyes. I love the taste of your grotto and the suck of your mouth and the silk of your body. I love the sound of you and those wild freckles across your face and that dimple on your backside and that tiny scar under your left eyebrow and that gold cap on your right molar and that little mole on your cheek—"

"My God," she said. "Have I no secrets left?"

"None," I said. "I also saw that thin scar above your hairline from your hysterectomy."

"Oh, my God!" She crawled half under my left side and buried her face under my jaw, pulling my legs between hers and hanging on tightly. "I want to be happy with you. We may not have a lot of time."

"Never enough time."

"I meant the mission."

"Hell with the mission."

"Yes. Scrub the mission," she said gently. "At least for today, let's forget the mission."

I stroked her breasts. "Melisande . . . Melisande . . . where did you get that name? Was your mother hung up on Lancelot and the lads?"

"Ignorant Injun," she said. "There is no Melisande in Mallory. You're thinking of Alisande in Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee.* Dad loved it. Mother didn't read much and when she did it was more likely to be something by Spock, but she adored the movie *Gone with the Wind,* so they compromised Melanie with Alisande. Never mind me, tell me about you, where you were born—"

"A place called Jackass Hole, which used to be between Hardscrabble and Mugfuzzle Flats in Wyoming. And I am *not* putting you on."

"You mean Jackson Hole."

"I mean Jackass Hole. Not on the map anymore. The three towns consolidated into a place called Ophir, east of the Wind River Range."

"Just as well. Jackass Hole would have looked pretty awful on your passport."

"You're so right! There was a time before my time when it was downright embarrassing to be from Jackass Hole. Pa told me about it. Seems the postmaster had a scrummage with a local hardnose named Jack Liston. So he changed the canceling at the post office to Jack Asshole." She burst into laughter. "Didn't change it back to the right way until Jack moved on."

After she had kissed me for a fool, she said, "So you moved to the Wind River reservation when your father became an Agent there."

"How did you know that?"

"The admiral gave me a sketch of you, once you had been chosen for the mission. I was frightened of the whole thing. I felt incapable of playing my part in it."

"What *is* your part in it?"

She averted her eyes. "Admiral McCabe will tell you that."

"You can't?"

"Not in a way you will understand." She put her arms around me tightly.

"I'm not reading you."

"You will all too soon."

She looked sad and stricken, that lovely face shadowed. I held her tightly, smelled her fragrant softness and wet her mouth with mine. I instantly grew a yataghan and was melting into her body when there sounded a discouraging, even if polite, cough.

Bigwater, his head averted, was standing solemnly in the bedroom doorway.

"The Head-of-Station wishes to caucus." He smiled toler-

antly. "Come to the *meke-meke*." He melted into the dusk and was gone.

I was outraged, but when I looked at Melisande she began to giggle. She put her hand over her mouth tremoring with honest laughter. I finally saw how ridiculous the whole thing was and joined her. We both went back into the miraculous shower together, this time to bathe.

Nevertheless, I took the precaution of donning my own lava-lava.

13

WHEN MELISANDE and I walked across the compound into the Station, my eighty snake-scarred fellow Nangas began to thump their wooden gongs for us. They stood in a square around the other hut, with war clubs, spears and gongs; they were packed so tightly, not even an emaciated banshee could have shrieked through the line. Their black skins and scarlet *pareus* against the bright green of the forest and the purpling shadows of the dusk were breath-taking.

Melisande said, "Aren't they stunning!"

"I'm glad you didn't say hungry."

Bigwater met us at the door and ushered us inside. Admiral McCabe and Commander Sampson were seated at a long table, which looked like something borrowed from Surgery. They were speaking with three men, all Fijians, two rather young braves, and a big, obese witch doctor. He was a loathsome sight with a human bone thrust through his septum. His face wore more paint than a hostile Kiowa. They stopped when McCabe saw me. "Come in," McCabe said, as if we were late for Thanksgiving dinner at Grandma Moses'. "Sit down and make yourselves comfortable."

"Tea is up," Bigwater announced from the galley as if he were an English butler. "An excellent lapsang souchong, imported, of course, from the hills of Assam, but wonderfully smokey."

"Stow it," McCabe said. "It'll spoil my bourbon later. Unless Mrs. Kincade would like a cup." Mrs. Kincade did. It smelled good but my stomach was tight, watching McCabe.

"This is your local juju doctor," he said to me. "He doesn't belong to the AMA, but he's got an edge on your stateside quacks. *He* makes house calls."

I said, "With a face like that, it's a cinch his patients fight to stay healthy. And these bone shakers are his assistants for driving away the evil spirits?"

"Precisely," said McCabe. "They will remain on the island to take care of you when I'm gone. Just in case you worsen."

"I'm not even sick."

"You will be." He waved at the medicine men. They left abruptly.

Admiral McCabe leaned back with some smugness. "Well! I understand that you two have gotten to know each other *considerably* better, eh?"

I threw a vicious glance at Bigwater in the galley, but he looked too startled by the remark and made a small negative shake of the head to me. I realized that McCabe had our shack bugged but completely. Melisande said innocently, "It's very pleasant getting to know someone like Sam." She didn't realize that McCabe had heard the action.

Commander Sampson brought over McCabe's attaché case, and the briefing began. He opened it and tossed me a thick folder, on which was printed *Keyhole—President's Eyes Only*. In it was a summation of a man called Simon Kincade.

"Before we begin," McCabe said, "I'd better explain this lady. She was married to the lost Mr. Kincade. From this moment on, he is alive, and Sam Carson is dead. You and she are wedded. You are going to spend two weeks together here as man and wife. You are going to learn to act like a couple who has been married four years. The original plan was to have the relationship utterly real, including the sexual side, but Mrs. Kincade would not go along with that, a fact which imperiled the honesty of the idea. Since, for your own reasons, you have both overcome that issue—" Melisande's eyes opened wide—"let's not play games about it."

I said, "You ruthless—"

"Button up!" he said heavily, "or I'll run this show on rank. What the hell grabs you? I should think you'd be flattered to find out your weird charm had broken down Mrs. Kincade's conscience. She was quite negative about the issue, up to this afternoon."

Melisande shook her head half in shame and half in amusement as she blushed.

McCabe shrugged. "If I'm too blunt, I apologize, Mrs. K., but there's no point in playing house. This is a tough show you kids are on, and the sooner we start at it the better.

What's just happened is a good thing. It is imperative you both act like married people. You've got two weeks to screw your heads off—pardon me—and start getting to the realistic attitude of folks who have been wedded four years. You see, redbelly, married people get used to each other. They aren't leaping into the kip at the drop of a pair of pants. Sometimes one or the other even thinks of smuggling it out. Sometimes they even—heaven forbid—bore each other. You've got two weeks to live out four years."

I said thoughtfully, "There was a Kincade family in Wyoming up around Natrona. They owned Wyo-Titon Oil on the acreage adjoining Teapot Dome reserves."

"Same," said McCabe sharply.

I said, "Then wasn't this the screwball—sorry, Melisande—who organized an expedition for a human head hunt in New Guinea? Didn't he actually go down there to collect human heads for trophies?"

"Like I said."

"But he was lost. His expedition fell apart. He's been missing a long time."

"Two years."

"Hold the horn," I said warily. "All right, I play Kincade. And then suppose, at a crucial moment, this character turns up? Suppose someone rescues him right in the middle of this operation? There goes my paddle."

"He's manure," McCabe said. "The American Explorers' Club expedition brought back his head last year. We checked out his dentistry. Nobody knows it but us. He isn't coming back. But *you* are. You are going to be found down there and rescued with a big brouhaha."

"It'll never work."

"It had better. It's your ass."

"I've been at the South Pole. Do I look like some jungle-bitten explorer who's been in the bush for two years?"

Bigwater smiled. "Ah, sah, but you will."

I didn't like the look of that smile.

Commander Sampson nodded and took over. "Kincade was one of the wealthiest Americans when he went into the bush. He was worth then over five hundred million dollars. That's appreciated in the last two years, in trust, awaiting his return. Keyhole didn't exist when Kincade went headhunting. But when he returns, it's obvious he could become a prime target for them, due to the money—and, more important, his unstable behavior."

"How will they know he's back?"

McCabe groaned. "What do you hear from Madison Avenue, you silly bastard? We'll just have to assume they won't miss the fanfaronade that I blast into every newspaper of the world celebrating his rescue. Walk your pinto, redbelly. Let's check the folder."

I spread it out before me, abashed.

"Anything you don't savvy, make sign."

I nodded and read the report.

SIMON KINCADE

Age: 35. Height: 6'3". Eyes: dark brown. Hair: black. Chest: 44". Waist: 36". Teeth: excellent (check chart for two gold inlays). Vision: 20/20. Scars: appendectomy only.

I said, "Eighty-seven thousand cards through a computer to match anything as simple as this? I'm not the only guy who looks like Kincade, and, what's more, I don't have an appendicitis scar."

"That doesn't matter." McCabe waved magnanimously and damned insincerely. "Keep going."

Hernia: negative. Penis: nanoid, uncircumcised. Subject is right-handed.

"You're losing the match game," I said.

"We can always shorten you surgically," he said, and that took all the funning out of me.

Lungs: tar clouds from smoking. Nose and throat: tar deposits from smoking. Physique: lean, long-muscled, good tone.

McCabe said, "Bigwater will grab five pounds of blubber off your gut during the last two weeks when he's making you a Nanga."

Education: public schools Casper, Wyo., and Sheridan, Wyo., until college. Grades: B plus.

Pretty good. I'd attended public schools in smaller towns like Lander and Riverton, as well as the reservation school at Wind River. Grades; A.

College: Wyoming State University, Bachelor of Arts, cum laude.

Close. I'd gone to Wyo State for three years before I transferred to Massachusetts Institute of Technology on a grant where I graduated B.S. *magna cum laude* and then did postgraduate work for a B.S.E.E. *cum laude*. In other words, Kincade had probably been at Wyo State while I was there. The 7094 had really cut it pretty fine.

Mother: Dorothy Nightstar Splitlog. Absaroka white half-breed, one-sixteenth blood. Died of tuberculosis September 19, 1965.

Kincade's mother had been a Crow. My mother had been a Shoshoni. Each was mixed blood to the one-sixteenth. I never knew my mother; she died bearing me.

Father: Osborn Russell Kincade, age 62, born in Wyoming of Scotch Irish stock from Virginia, but is a mixed blood himself. Had stroke shortly after disappearance of son. The man is unable to locomote or speak but is highly intelligent and completely cogent. Communicates via pen and typewriter.

After Ma died I was raised by my old man and an assortment of Shoshoni squaws. They spoiled me rotten. It is a crime in the Snake Nation to strike a child. It is a death sentence to strike a warrior, because he must kill you to wipe out the offense. Pa married the last of my nurses, a gentle girl named Fawn, and they are happy as Rocky Mountain goats up there in their aerie on Wind River. Pa was born in Wyoming too, of Irish stock from Maryland, but he was a mixed blood, like Kincade Senior. Unlike the latter, Pa was still fit to rassle a gut-shot grizzly bear.

"Pretty tight fit," I said, impressed.

McCabe smiled grimly. He offered Melisande a cigarette, which she accepted. He tossed me a packet of matches, but when I tried to light her cigarette, she shook her head and did it herself. "First lesson. Simon would never do that. Always Simon first. You sachem. Me squaw."

McCabe grunted in satisfaction.

"One thing," I said. "Kincade's mother was a Crow. I'm Shoshoni. The Crows were our bitter enemies."

"Don't be a bigot," McCabe said.

Personal traits: An absolute loner. No friends. Recluse. Only two known photographs of subject exist. Rakehelly with women. Heavy drinker: preference vodka-soda, but will

imbibe anything. Courageous. Good barroom fighter. Black-belt judo. Superb rifle shot. Superb revolver shot. Always clean-shaven. (That old Injun upbringing!) *Hot-head.*

"You qualify in karate," McCabe said.

"I'm a good enough shot, too. I don't know what superb means, but if I can see it, I can hit it." He seemed satisfied.

Hobby: big-game hunting. Subject has hunted in all blocks of world. Has three record heads in Rowland-Ward and killed record polar bear near Kotzebue, Alaska, 1966.

"Me and Old Ephraim have tussled some," I said. "The grizzly is no child to play games with. He's as bad as a polar bear, I'd say." McCabe nodded. "And I damn near shot a world's-record bighorn on a south crag of the Uncompahgre in the dead of December. Lost by an inch. That sheep made the finest dress you ever saw when my wife finished with it."

"What is the Umcompahgre?" Melisande asked.

"It's a mountain peak over fourteen thousand feet high in the coldest, snowiest part of Colorado, not far from Slumgullion Pass. You can get airsick up there without flying."

Commander Sampson said, "I always thought that the Indians used buckskin for their clothes."

"True, but the bighorn has a softer, finer texture for squaw clothes. They whiten them in clay and then dress them up in dyed porcupine quills." McCabe rustled his folder, and we continued.

For the record: Kincade was involved in a dispute with a friend on safari. Fight was over a woman. The friend, Byron Hoskins, was shot to death by a .470 Nitro Express during an elephant charge. Kincade was suspected of murder, but the Board of Inquiry, Nairobi, 1953, rendered a verdict of accidental death.

I said quickly, "Zap! That is *it*. You are going to restage the African thing, only this time Keyhole will blackmail me."

"You get a Navy E."

"How can you wing it?"

"You will be informed."

"But I saw it right away! Don't you think it might be too transparent, sir?"

"Stow the 'sir,'" Admiral McCabe said. "You are now

Kincade. He was not in the Navy. He wouldn't say sir to God Almighty."

"You mean I could call you a sadistic sonofabitch without buying a court-martial?"

"Sure, but you *might* buy a busted coccyx from falling on your ass."

Marriage: Subject married Melisande Daedra Dobbs October 19, 1965. Miss Dobbs was a Western Airlines stewardess at the time. They had been married two years when Kincade vanished. Total term now four years. Mrs. Kincade is a woman of exemplary behavior and character.

I met her candid eyes. I could almost hear her saying *Up to now.*

Languages: Subject speaks Indian sign, Absaroka, Shoshoni, English, some Spanish, some French, limited Swahili.

"I can't speak Swahili."

"You'll pick up enough."

"I can speak Shoshoni, Siuox, a little Cheyenne, which is a tough tongue. I know Indian sign, but Crow is different."

"You won't need it. What other languages? It says in your dossier Spanish and French."

"Oh, just enough to get by on. Admiral, how did Kincade learn Shoshoni if his mother was Crow?"

"Like you, his nursemaids were Shoshoni. Now about this Swahili—"

"Is it difficult?"

"Easiest language in the world. It's really descended from baby talk the old Arab slavers concocted to break through all those tribal tongues."

"I can handle it."

"Good. Then let's have a belt. Big John, make some arid martinis for the young-marrieds. I'll have bourbon and branch water. . . . Paul?"

"Negative, thanks."

McCabe tapped the folder while Bigwater built the booze. "The rest of Kincade is in here to be studied into your blood, Sam. But the real teacher is Mrs. K. She knows things we could never find out. She knows her man, and you are now it. You've got two weeks, Sam. I want you letter perfect when I return."

"You're leaving?"

"There *is* the NSA to run, you know."

In walked Sabu, the witch doctor, and his band-aiders. Sabu pulled the bone off his septum. It was only clipped there, one of those gag pieces from a magic shop. Then he took off the fright wig, as fine an example of ulotrichous Melanesian hair as ever came out of Max's Factory. The sawbones was a blond blue-eyed man and, under the war paint, rather handsome. "Dr. Jason Burnside," he said warmly and shook hands with me. Then, indicating his assistants: "Corpsmen Brown and Gilley, from the *Kitty Hawk*."

"We'll start surgery when you're ready," Commander Sampson informed my local quack, who instantly applied albolene to his chocolate makeup. The corpsmen did likewise.

"Surgery," I said in a dead voice.

"Don't sweat your lava-lava," McCabe said. "For your own safety. We're installing a body tag on the mastoid bone behind your left ear."

If he expected me to ululate like a Touareg widow, he drew a dull day. "I understand. What nomenclature?"

"Secret experimental. You wouldn't know."

"X-UCS," I said, smiling. "Triggered transceiver. Estimated life, one year." His eyebrows rose. "You forget, hoss. That's *my* bag. I worked on that item in the Research and Developments Lab, Schenectady, before the pursuit of happiness drove me to Antarctica."

"What is it?" Melisande asked, worried. She touched my arm tensely. "They're not going to hurt you, darling?"

"Have you got it here, sir?" I asked.

He pulled out a small plastic box from his case and laid it on the table. "No touch. Sterilized. And deep-six that 'sir'!"

It was a platinum button about the size of the stemwinder of an ultra-fine wrist watch, slightly larger than the head of a pin, and from it sprouted two hairlike antennae about three-quarters of an inch in length. Melisande peered at it as if it were the ovum of a black-widow spider.

"They'll plant that in my head over the mastoid bone behind my left ear. Don't look scared. It's a local operation with a local anesthetic. When it's in, you'll never see it, just a tiny bump like a benign lymphatic tumor."

"But what on earth does it do?"

"It'll keep track of me. The admiral can follow and locate his wandering pigeon. He can trigger this thing. Meanwhile he takes a bearing on me and knows where I am. The signal

will be my unique own. The range is three miles. If the bad guys nail me, the good guys can find me. What is my number, Admiral?"

"We gave you an ordinal," he said. *"Nth."*

"Nth. Dah dit. Dah. Ditditditdit."

"That's scary," Melisande said.

"That's not all." I explained to her how my outgoing signal would vibrate electrically so that I might hear or rather *feel* any emission signal against the mastoid bone. She couldn't believe that such machinery could be contained in so small a parcel. The fact, which I could not tell her, is that we already have more intricate devices in a size less than the head of a pin, due to the existing microminiaturized components which have evolved from the space program.

"But where could you get a battery to fit in that and how long would it last?"

"That was the hangup. We have batteries, but they have a three-month life expectancy at most and usually less. They would fail just when you needed them most. I imagine that this little dogtag is powered by something like the solar space panels. My own body heat will generate electricity in them, so unless they had a physical breakdown—"

"Or unless you did," said McCabe.

"—they would last as long as I did."

McCabe said thoughtfully, "We'll also have to etch you with an invisible magnetic tattoo for permanent identification. Just in case we lose." He coughed gloomily.

"Where away?"

"On your red rump. If they catch you and dump you, they'll cut off your head to prevent a dental match and your hands to prevent a print match. They always keep the best parts for themselves."

Melisande looked stricken. "I wish you'd stop making these horrible jokes! It's simply not very funny."

McCabe looked startled. "Sorry, madam."

My thoughts turned back to the little grass shack, where, first, I would destroy McCabe's nosy little bugs and, second, I would bury myself in her clean scent, her interminable softness, her sweet candor and her velvet esctasies.

McCabe handed me an eight-by-ten glossy photograph and said, "By the by, here's a mug shot of Kincade."

Kincade and I looked enough alike to be twin brothers.

Except: I had a nose like an angry eagle.

Kincade had a nose like a Greek god.

"Like hell you will!" I roared, and nearly wrecked that table pounding a clenched fist into it.

McCabe twitched. Melisande looked frightened.

Commander Sampson rose along with Bigwater to try to restrain me in case I flipped, but they couldn't have handled it. I was that mad. Melisande reached for me in awe. "Sam?"

"You're goddam right it's Sam!" I said. I pointed a finger at McCabe and wished it was a curare dart on the blow. "It's Sam Carson, hear me? Sam Carson, Irish-Indian! I was born with this beak and I'll die with this beak! I said I'd do your dirty little derring, but by God and by Jesus, I'll do it with my nose or not at all!"

McCabe sighed. He glanced at Sampson. "How long?"

"Now," Sampson said.

His watch must have been off a second because I still heard him.

14

MELISANDE'S face was close to mine. She seemed misty, but I could sense sharp worry and alarm in her eyes. What was there to be afraid of? This was our world, our own Eden. I reached for her to embrace her and make love.

Somebody stuck a sawtooth bayonet through my right groin.

"God almighty!" I gasped and tried to sit up. I was impaled. Deep pain began to stab in other places. There was a grinding ache behind my left ear, a sharp tautness from the knockout pill in the back of my head, and a peculiarly expansive spread of agony all over my face, the kind of stiffened pain you get when you lose a barroom brawl and get your aquiline beak mashed into a platyrrhinian proboscis, which is *nouveau riche* for steamrolled nose.

"For the love of God, don't move, lie still, darling," Melisande whispered gently. She tried to hold my shoulders down.

I felt my face. It was completely bandaged, with just an eye slit, like a hooded snow mask. Through the slit the view was white and dazzling, which made the mistiness. My whole face hurt everywhere, no specific spot. I raised my head in anger.

"McCabe!" I yelled at the top of my voice.

"Sam, darling, don't move, please don't move. You'll start it bleeding, you'll pull the stiches—"

"McCabe!" I bellowed in rage.

"Don't you understand? You've had an appendectomy to match Simon's and you've had your nose changed and you've had—"

By then, so they tell me, John Bigwater and Dr. Burnside had reached my side, followed by a pale-faced Commander Sampson. My own fury whitened the world so that I could not see them, and even Melisande's eyes were lost in the snowy whirl.

"McCabe!"

He never answered me. I struggled up against Melisande's and Bigwater's restraints, as Dr. Burnside jabbed me sharply in the left muscle with a sedative. Before it could deter me, I spat out my venom. "McCabe, you luetic dungdrop! You lard-assed xanthic yakplop!"

"Oh my God, Sam!" Melisande cried.

"McCabe's gone!" Commander Sampson said. "There's no use in calling him! He's flown out."

When I came around again, the Coleman lamps were hissing noisily. My anger was gone. Melisande was sitting on the bedside, watching me carefully. Her face seemed frightened and tired. I thought how long I had looked for that face. "I'm all right," I said in a whisper.

She started to speak. I motioned her not to, beckoned her to lean close. "Don't say anything. This place is completely bugged. Sit still and pretend I'm still out."

I widened the bandage slits and took a look around the shack. The light wasn't too good, and I knew we'd never find the minimikes in the dark corners, including the one which was undoubtedly nested in the rattan of our bed. But I did notice that the base of the walls, where they met the flooring, had been painted with a dull thin matte of veneer, an unlikely mode of decor for a Fijian abode. I whispered for her to get a knife, which she did, and then I told her to scrape a clean break in the line of the veneer, which she did. She regarded me with some some caution still, as if I was not quite out of the delirium.

"It's a metallic paint," I said. "They've tied the bugs into the veneer. It serves as power line, but we have just gapped it. You can speak normal now. What time is it?"

"Midnight."

"Buss me."

She gave me that insatiable mouth, and she held me as tightly as I could stand the pain. "Sam. You were *awful.*"

"I tried."

"If Admiral McCabe ever heard the things you called down on him—"

"He will. It was taped through the buggery."

She snuggled her nose down into the crook of my neck. "You were like a wild Indian!"

"Never be afraid of me." I kissed her deeply, sucking her sweet tongue. "I love you."

"I love you."

"*That's* what it's all about," I said. "That's the only contract with life we'll ever get."

She covered my mouth abruptly and stared into my slits. Her eyes looked mossy green in the darkness. "I don't see why you're so angry. You know the mission. You knew certain things would have to be done to protect your life. It's something Admiral McCabe couldn't take a chance with. Actually, he's *very, very* fond of you."

I shuddered at her frailty. "Screw him!" I said. "Look at what he's done to us! There goes the honeymoon."

"Darling," she said softly, "without a doubt, you are the most petulant, undisciplined small boy that I have ever met, and I love every one of your miserable qualities. If you want a wife, I will be spouse, seamstress and cook. If you want a mistress, I will deluge you with obscene sensations. But I will not be the yokefellow of a man who has a total lack of imagination."

"Pause, please," I said, piqued. "I've got just as much imagination as the next clown. But if you think I can make love to you with these stitches in my groin, then you'd better expect to find this bed an abattoir when day is done."

"No imagination whatsoever," she said sadly.

But it did not matter because hers was beautiful.

15

ON THE SEVENTH day, Dr. Burnside unwrapped my mummified bandages and took a look at my new nose. He clucked like a leghorn and gave me a small mirror. I was a mess—a brace of angry black eyes and a scarlet mass of healing

scar tissue. Then he rewrapped me. Melisande's eyes darkened in sadness when she saw the transformation.

After that, our relationship changed too. Although Sampson, who was now SOP, had suggested it, it happened anyway. We lived together. We slept together. But we no longer made love. Kincade's face had done something to both of us.

I ate his dossier alive. The major flaw in his psyche was a vast emptiness which I could not solve and time was running out.

Melisande and I were lying abed, the white glare of the Colemans making everything stark. She was reading a novel. I was hunched over the damned file, probing, burrowing and feeling frustrated.

"Mel."

"Yes, darling?"

"Don't say *darling* warmly. Say it as a forced word."

"Sorry," she said quietly.

"I know this is hell but I can't change that."

"Don't apologize."

"I'm not apologizing," I said coldly.

She closed her book with a startled snap. "My God! You sound like him. You look like him. Can *you* ever come back?"

I was beginning to wonder myself, but the game had to be played, and I didn't want to lose ground. "Tell me about him."

"I can't."

"How you met.'"

"Too simple. On an airplane. He was sick. I was the stewardess."

"Why did he marry you?"

"He said I reminded him of his mother," she said unhappily and leaned back on her pillow.

I felt a spark. Momism? Wylie's urinating etcher of glass? It was a clue, but I decided to fall back and ease her into the possibility.

"Tell me about you," I said. "Nothing personal—just statistics. Where and why and how and that sort of stuff."

She had come off the pillow to look at me. But then a warm relaxation pervaded her eyes. She put the novel aside and leaned back, her eyes on the thatched pandanus above us where a green lizard blinked at the cruel glare of the Colemans and then squiggled back into the damp darkness of the overlays.

"I was one of nine children. The eldest."

"Didn't they do anything else in your home town?"

"No," she said flatly. "Particularly when they were in love, like Mother and Dad." She turned and stared through me, and you could tell that she couldn't see Sam Carson, only Simon Kincade. "But you wouldn't know that."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I'm sorry. For a moment—"

"Never mind the sorries, goddam it! Keep with it!"

She recoiled. "Bemidji, Minnesota . . . The only town in Minnesota that fights to break the record held by the town of Pokegama Dam, established in 1903."

"What record?"

"Coldest spot in the United States."

I said, "So much for Bemidji. And when you moved—"

"We never moved. The family is still there. Still in the same old house. Still poor as pack rats. Oh, incidentally, Jane Russell was born in Bemidji."

"Is that important?"

"Very. Because eveybody thought that becoming a movie star was a Bemidji inheritance, and when I reached the state of nubility, it was the idea of Jane Russell that sent me down to the stewardess school for Western Airlines in Minneapolis. Which is how I became a stewardess, which is how I met the Man, and which is, ultimately, why I am here in this bed."

"Go ahead."

"Ahead where?"

"Hollywood. The movies."

"I never even saw a studio. I loved flying, I loved my job, and I loved a pilot who just happened to be one of those unhappy benedicts who are eternally on the brink of divorce but manage to go home nights and moonlight with their wives."

"Then you weren't a virgin when you married Kincade?"

"Is that important?"

"No," I said. "I thought it might have been the rarity that brought the marriage about, because this chest-beating weirdo should not have married ever."

"I was deflowered by a Flexible Flyer sled in Bemidji when I was eleven years old," Melisande said ruefully. "And that pung was agony. Anyway, in this pilot affair—I once thought I'd been careless and become pregnant, and when I checked with the doctor he found that I had fibroid tumors

of the uterus, which accounts for my hysterectomy at such an early age."

"How old were you?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Awfully young for a full plumbing job."

She folded her hands. "I'm the eldest of nine. Two are dead. Two others, brother and sister, he fourteen, she twelve, are retarded. My youngest sister—she's five—was born very prematurely, six months, sixteen days, weighed three pounds seven ounces, barely made it. Mother had the fibroids too, but since most of the babies were delivered at home by a local G.P., she never knew that they were constricting her uterus and damaging the children. Thank God I can never do that to some innocent."

"Shauri ya Mungu," I said, which is Swahili for "the will of God."

"Not good enough!" she said with feeling. "That kind of God's will can damn well be prevented."

"Hey."

"Will it bother you not to have children?"

"Not a bit. I've been exposed to so many ray emissions in my racket that the medicos tell me I'm fresh out of the right germs. Besides, we'll be doing our bit to save the world from overpopulation. Besides, I'm a hedonist. I believe in all play and no work like most of the planet's dissidents."

She twined a foot in mine under the sheet, and she gave me a hand to squeeze. There were glistening tears running down her cheeks. "You're probably lying."

"Get to Kincade."

She dabbed her emotion away. "I was on a milk run, LAX to St. Paul. Simon was booked for Cheyenne, arriving near midnight. He came on blind drunk and he gave us a lot of trouble. We didn't give alcohol to passengers who stone out, but he had his own little brown jug. He had everyone frightened, bragging about his name and fame, said he'd buy the damned airplane. Typical spoiled brat. And then he suddenly collapsed."

She thought for a moment and shuddered. "I thought he was going to die. We took him off in Vegas, and I got off with him, to protect the company. I got him to a hospital, and I stayed with him. His gall bladder was in rotten condition, and I guess his liver was dry as dust. The doctors said he had been living on booze since his mother's death."

"So."

"Anyway, he began to recover, and when I tried to go back to my job, I found that he had bought my presence from the airline. So I stayed nursing him. I was trained for that, you know. And he turned out to be, without the vodka, one of the sweetest children you ever saw. Gentle, thoughtful, kind. Everytime I bawled him out for some idiosyncrasy, he would say that I reminded him of his mother. I stayed with him for a full month in Vegas, even after he left the hospital and moved to a private ranch outside of town. It was not unpleasant. He never made a pass at me. I refused all the gifts he offered, and he said it was the first time he had ever met anyone who wasn't after his money. I told him that was a lie and only reflected the fact he didn't believe in himself. I was tough on him. But instead of sending me back to LAX, he asked me to marry him. Well, we *were* getting along, and I guess I was sort of in love with him. But I had to tell him about my hysterectomy. No children. I thought that such an egotist would curl up and depart. But just the opposite. He was delighted. That confession sealed the bargain."

"Why?" I asked.

"He thought sex was filth," she said quietly. "That's the way Mama raised him. From what *I* gathered, his mother had been heavily Jesused, and his father had been a rough sort of plainsman. I'm guessing now, from things that he said. He was an only child. His mother might have found sex sinful, maybe even brutal."

"Got anything more to go on then your own instinct?"

"Yes. The honeymoon. He didn't get around to the main business for some time, nearly a week. And when he did, he kept apologizing to me, asking my forgiveness."

"It went all right?"

"It went fine. No problems. Except afterwards, when he would grovel. I can't describe it. He acted as if he had done something loathsome. It didn't matter what I said, and I didn't say too much because it was plain that he had a real trauma here."

I said, "You hadn't been married very long when he kicked the traces and went atavistic."

Melisande said ruefully, "He hadn't touched me in some time. I guess I just got raunchy like any growing girl. I made advances. That did it. He was horrified. He must have transferred Mother into me, and great was the fall thereof. He called me a whore, a Jezebel, all the fallen-woman clichés of the Late Late Show. And that was the end of it. Of me. Of

love. Of the marriage. Only then did I begin to see that I was imprisoned."

"Not literally."

"I can't see much difference. I was confined to the ranch most of the time. Do you know the Teapot Dome area?"

"Uh-huh. Still pretty wild country."

Melisande shuddered. "Pure nowhere. Of course, if Simon wanted me to squaw-heel with him, there was no problem. I could go, under his eagle eye. But he usually made his trips alone. That kept me home and under surveillance. If I wanted to drive down into town for a hair-do, or a movie, or just plain shiftless shopping, Joe Turkey-Foot went right along."

"Who?"

"Mixed-blood northern Cheyenne. Ozzie—Simon's father—adopted him about the time Simon was growing up. Not legally, just compassionately. They grew up together. Turkey-Foot was Simon's bodyguard and a real rotten—oh, well—*bastard*. He had his orders from Simon about me, and he didn't mind being mean and rough about keeping me in line. He wasn't exactly homo, but he didn't like the idea that Simon had married me. He could be frightening. If that isn't a kind of prison—"

"This is no good," I said. "Does McCabe know this? If your Turkey-Foot takes a look at me—"

"He's dead. He was killed in a barroom brawl over in Casper. Got too big for his britches with a couple of Big Horn Basin wranglers. Of course, after Simon disappeared, I was free, but it was too late then."

"For you?"

"For my mother. She had died meanwhile." Her fists were clenched tightly so that her knuckles gleamed white.

"I'm sorry. You would have thought that with all that boodle of his, some treatment might have been found."

"It could have been."

"He didn't help her?"

She shook her head painfully. "So now you see why I'm here."

"Not just for the money, Mel."

"*Yes*. Just for the money. Simon has been missing for two years. I can't prove he's dead. That means a wait of five more years before the Enoch Arden takes effect. But Admiral McCabe can prove Simon is dead. He can save five years of pain and misery and heartbreak. He can open those coffers and

pour out millions of dollars for medicine and research and clinics to aid or prevent such horrors as cerebral palsy and mental retardations and useless deaths like my mother's! That's why I agreed to this mission!"

She started to cry. I wrapped my arms around her and tucked her in close to me, feeling her tears falling on the back of my left hand. "I'm all right. I'm a big girl," she said.

"The hell you are," I said.

"I'm sorry, Sam. This isn't fair. This is making it difficult for you to be Simon—"

"The hell with Simon!" I said flatly. "You're Melisande and I'm Sam, and Simon Kincade is just a faded flower in the garden of bad memories."

I turned to her and we made sweet love until the smoky sun climbed out of the Hawaiian Islands.

16

FROM THEN ON, life got granite-hard. Commander Sampson wore frost in his eyes and whipped the education into me. They hypnotized me with an odd little chrome spinner and then poured Kincade's concrete into my foundation. I knew the difference in myself after these sessions. Melisande reacted sharply. I could see in her face that I was changing. She became a stranger to me, even though we were together. It didn't hurt, because we had made the pact ourselves, during that last wondrous night. But sometimes the shock of similarity between Kincade and me showed openly in her awed and often sad eyes. It was all nerve-wracking.

My own physical condition came along nicely. The appendectomy healed quickly. Dr. Burnside still kept my face bandaged against possible infection; it was still very sore. But the cosmetology had been so successful, it made me morose. I was really a dead ringer for Kincade. The gnawing question was whether or not I'd ever be able to get back to myself once the thing was over.

That's what Melisande feared.

One morning, instead of the usual grueling schedule of lessons, imitative handwriting, subliminals and hypnotics, John Bigwater arrived to take me out on my first venture into the cult of the Nanga. I was delighted to interrupt the interminable Kincade routine, which set me up—that day—as the

pigeon of the world. Luckily, I tucked a pack of cigarettes and a clip of matches into my lava-lava, but that was all. Barefoot and weaponless, I followed him into the high forest.

In the whispering glades beyond the compound, Big John Bigwater began my survival education. He showed me edible berries, warned me to watch the birds eat and do the same as they. He showed me how to construct a pandanus shelter; he pointed out the marshy fens to be avoided. "The aëdes mosquito abounds there. It will kill you with a yellow fever or dengue. There is also the mosquito which gives filariasis, which will cause elephantiasis of the scrotum, which is a shameful plaint. I have seen the afflicted, down in the Solomons, walking their testicles before them in a barrow."

"You scare real good."

"Always camp on high ground. If you cannot, smear your body with mud and cover it with coconut-palm cloth or the pandanus. Never touch those berries that are gray-green or white. They are deadly." He pointed out the Blind-Your-Eye white mangrove and the Pangi, whose seeds contain prussic acid, the Physic Nut, which will cause instant enterocolitis. He warned me to look for flukes and leeches in fresh water but never in salt. He told me that punkies and no-see-ums and eye-gnats were to be avoided by leaf-covering, as they transmitted syphilitic diseases. I was to avoid any confrontation with militant ants. But in case of dissident bee stings, the juice of the climbing hemp weed was a good antidote.

All of this did not strike me with any more impact than if I had been a trooper bucking for eagle badge under the aegis of a great scoutmaster. I half remembered what he was saying because, what the hey, I had a perfectly good shack up on the mountain, with a real live girl, and running water, and the larder and medicine provided by the United States Navy, through the command of the NSA.

Slowly during the day we had worked our way down the mountain to the sea through rugged virgin forest, but much farther west then the spot where we had originally landed. Here, in the crystal tide ponds and behind a rock jut that created a windless swimming pool, Bigwater disclosed some other perils: the venomous stonefish, the scorpion fish and the stingrays that lie in warm shallow water.

"What about sharks?"

"You are Nanga. They will not touch you."

"Who told them?"

"Ndengai."

It is a fact that the shark family does not seem to attack the natives down there in Fiji and the other islands. I hoped the little Shoshoni in my blood would work the same spell.

Suddenly the day was trembling on that edge where the sudden twilight of the tropics falls. So we walked along the shore, sometimes swimming around huge rock peninsulas until we finally reached the patch of black sand where we had originally beached the war canoe.

The same war canoe, laden with Fijians, beating their way to the east, was vanishing around a far headland. Simultaneously, the old Grumman Goose in which we had arrived also beat the sea white in a roaring takeoff.

"The *Kitty Hawk* is gone too," I said to Bigwater. "What the hell is going on?"

When he didn't answer me, I realized I was alone.

So I was being tested. Greenhorn red man must cut sign and find trail back to teepee. I sat down instead and enjoyed a cigarette. Far out at sea, the rising moon threw diamonds on the moving waters. But where my cigarette glowed in the night, it was blacker than hot tar.

The moon was rising behind that eastern headland, and since I happened to sit in its shadow, I decided to hang in there until the terminator came over the hill and shared some of that 7 percent albedo with me. I wasn't going to fumble my way up that mountain for three thousand gaspy feet in total darkness.

By the time the moon came over the mountain, I was thirsty, ravenous and immensely tired. But now there was plenty of light, the moon being in a fat gibbous phase. I heaved up my backside, sucked in a breath and took off. It wasn't as bad a climb as the first time; I was in much better shape. But I could have eaten rattlesnake alive by the time I reached the great silver-speckled atrium. As I found out, even sidewinder wasn't on the menu. In fact, there *was* no menu.

Ndengai was there at his appointed place in front of the long house. But that was all.

No Nangan warriors squatted before a council fire. No sound of wood gongs, nor reeds nor flutes nor chanting. No Bigwater for gin rummy. No headquarters shack. It had vanished, every stick, rattan and green leaf of it. I was afraid to look at the honeymoon hut, and I was right.

It was gone too. And so was Melisande.

17

ON THE THIRTEENTH day I found a cleft stick thrust in the sand in front of my lodge. In the cleft there was a letter.

The letter had been airmailed from Fort Washakie, Wyoming, which is two sleeps southeast of Yellowstone Park. It was from Black Buffalo Woman, who is a Shoshoni of seventy-seven winters, the niece of Chief Washakie and grandmother of my wife. (My wife and her mother are both dead.) Actually, since Black Buffalo Woman can neither read nor write, the note had been handled for her by my brother-in-law, Willy Littlesky, one heap smart redskin.

Littlesky, a graduate of UCLA, speaks English with the yahoo flatness of a native Californian. A long time back, after his stint in Vietnam, he saw no future at the Wind River Agency. He migrated to Hollywood and enlisted in Central Casting, finally winding up as a stunt man. He's built like a Shoshoni Tarzan.

The fact that the letter (sent to an APO in San Francisco, since mail is not dispatched directly to Antarctica) reached me on a volcanic upheave in one of the three hundred and sixty-five isles and islets of the Fiji group meant that Admiral McCabe had intercepted it and forwarded it on to me. Which was awfully nice of him, in a rotten sort of way.

Also, the fact that it had reached the cleft stick in front of my wickiup meant that I was not alone. I had a nanny somewhere in the offing.

"Dear Bear Paw," Littlesky had written during a visit back to Fort Washakie, "I have just returned from a powwow with all them wild red men up at the reservation, so hear me, you fork-tongue two-heart. Mama Buffalo keeps asking, 'What's a nice White-Eye like Bear Paw doing in a hunting ground like a South Pole?' And since she doesn't even know what a South Pole is, and still thinks the earth is as flat as your head, how's about touching the paper and slipping her the happy word before she crosses over the Big Range? She ain't getting any younger, Samuel, and she worries about you, instead of being ashamed to be related to such a backshooter. Get with it, dude, or people will be saying, 'What's a funky half-breed like Chicken Heart doing back at the Little Big Horn without any dirt on his body?' As for me, I'm having a ball in Holly-

wood, lifting many merkins. (Scalps are against the law.) Everybody is so racially self-conscious in this porky town that all the pretty starlets want a little Indian in them, so am obliging as best I can. Anyway, great warrior, drop Mama the word, and couch it (if you'll pardon the expression) in the old style so that one of the young braves at the Agency can make sign of it for her. Glad to hear they don't have any squaws down on your reservation. That way, the only thing you'll pick up is a cold. Your ever-loving blood brother, Littlesky."

I was delighted to hear from him. Willy was really a hell of a guy. I wished fervently that he could be with me here in Vanua Levu, so that we could hunt and fish again, as we did in the days when I was courting his sister, Jenny Starlight. I was suddenly really alone.

To fill the evening I thought of what I would say to Mama Buffalo when I got a chance to write. Everything would have to be translated into sign. I would make the South Pole the bottom of her black kettle. I would keep from falling off it because the Big Holy had invented gravity, which was like cooked pony hoof. I was working on radar, which was like sticking a Green River knife in the earth and listening to it with one ear to hear approaching horsemen. I would tell her it was a land where the trees always snapped, which to her would mean winter. And then I gave up the imagery gloomily, because it occurred to me that I could not write to her at all. Bear Paw was no more. He would make no more sign, write no more letters. He was a dybbuk wearing another man's soul.

Somewhere up above me on the dark rise somebody stepped on a dead stick. It cracked like a pistol. I sat awhile as if I had not heard the footfall, then threw sand on my dying fire. The beach went silvery under the moonlight. I looked south-southeast and found the Southern Cross, brightly bold against the Coal Sack in the Milky Way. I laid my home-made spear out as a bearing on Acrux, the star at the cross's tip. Then I climbed into my homemade wickiup, set my mental alarm clock and corked off.

I snoozed longer than I had planned. When I startled myself awake and took a look at the sky, Acrux had moved a good six hours from the last sighting, which would have made it 3:00 A.M. It was a soft night, still studded with the southern constellations, when I took a coil of home-made rattan, laboriously woven together, and started up the mountain. By

the time I reached the trail top, it was almost daybreak. I located some lithe saplings on the trail near the atrium. I noosed my rattan lariat over the tip and levered the tree down, tying it off. From the tip, I spread a loop on the trail and covered it with dead leaves and dusty twigs.

Dawn splashed luridly when my Orwellian man Friday came loping up the trail after me, head down, cutting my sign. He was moving too fast, so that even when he saw my trap at the last second, he had committed his foot into it, as I slashed the trigger with my home-made obsidian dagger.

A marvelous snapping sound and the rush of leaves and a restrained grunt from him. Then a hushed silence as he hung there, upside down, spinning slightly, his head three feet off the ground.

When I emerged from the bush, he folded his arms across his chest in a dignified manner. He was Bigwater, of course.

I couldn't break his dignity. He just hung there like a sleeping bat. I cut him down. He dropped to his hands and was on his feet instantly, smiling. "You have done well," he said. "For a white man."

"But I am a Nanga!"

"Not yet," he said. "Not until tonight and the great Feast of Tuka."

"The Feast of Tuka!" My stomach growled cheerfully at the thought. "I hope Tuka brings some chicken mornay and maybe a couple of New York cuts, not forgetting some baked Idaho spuds, fresh celery and lettuce, and some Wil Wright's ice cream. I'm pretty weary of eels and snapper, and I'd like something boozier to drink than coconut milk."

"Tuka is not a god," said Bigwater. "Tuka means the day of eternity, when Ndengai overthrows all the whites in quake and flame and us immortals are given a can of sockeye salmon and a life in high heaven."

"Sounds pretty bigoted," I said. "And just how does the sockeye salmon get into the immortality action?"

Bigwater gave me his kinky wicked smile. "Well, you see, sah, many years ago there were backsliders who did not wish to return to the old ways. Sockeye salmon being a great luxury in the islands, we found it easier to bribe them with it rather than cut off their heads."

"You can bribe me with it too," I said. "Break out a can."

"Impossible, my acolyte brother. You must not touch food until tonight when you become a Nanga."

"And what do I do all day—count ribs?"

"Today we roam the forests and you will show me that you have learned everything I taught you."

He was not just joshing. Eight hours later, when we finally arrived back at my pashalik of black sand, I felt as if I had a knife in my belly. But there were some surprises waiting which assuaged the hunger.

My wickiup was gone. So were all my fish fykes. All signs of my primitive survival gear had vanished.

Off the beach in the salmon haze the U.S.S. *Kitty Hawk* swung once more serenely on her hook. Behind her in the lee, the huge black conning tower of a nuclear submarine turned with the tide.

To my look of astonishment, Bigwater said, "The submarine *Amberjack*. She is atomic-powered and carries sixteen ICBMs."

"Are you with American Express or Cook's?" I asked. "You make a damn fine guide. What's she doing here?"

"Waiting for you," he said. "Come, brother, it is time to go to the temple of Ndengai."

"By God," I said wearily, "before I make that climb again, I'll eat you."

But to do that, I had to catch him first.

18

COMMANDER PAUL SAMPSON was strolling briskly across the glade, in the company of an obese alien with exaggerated Prussian bearing. As Bigwater and I reached the trail top, dusk died with usual abruptness. The muck-thick darkness was broken only by the pale-yellow fire of the Nanga warriors, squatting about it and banging on their wooden gongs as if they had never been away. They were very happy.

As I stepped into the fire's reflection, Sampson passed me, nodding politely to the guttural statements of the arrogant visitor. Sampson glanced at me briefly. The sweat on my lean body had the consistency of glair. My home-made bandage codpiece had long ago been plucked by forest fingers, leaving me stark polished bronze. Sampson looked away and strode on, then suddenly paused and stiffened.

He returned and peered at me. His shoulders shook as if he had thrown off a centipede. I looked pretty wild, my black

beard in disarray, my hair as frazzled as Big John's. "My God!" he said.

"Where is she?"

"My God! My God! Is that really you?"

"It ain't Bomba the Jungle Boy. Where is Melisande?"

"Keep your voice down," he said, glancing off at the stranger. "You'd better see the admiral immediately." He rejoined the stranger.

I ran to the Station and rushed in. McCabe was pacing the floor, muttering to Dr. Burnside and looking deeply troubled. "I don't like it, not one goddam fleck of it, and it'll take a lifetime to soap it off. The things you have to do . . ."

He saw me and stopped. I said flatly, "Where is Melisande?"

Dr. Burnside nearly leaped out of his skin. McCabe just stared at me carefully.

There was a deep moment of silence. McCabe blinked for a long time. Dr. Burnside gaped like a fool. But the admiral was mighty fast on his feet. "How, redbelly," he said quietly. "I got your messages on the tape."

"Where is she?"

"Back at the ranch in Natrona, Wyoming, waiting for some eccentric French explorer like Jacques D'Usseau to rescue her husband and return the imbecile to her ever-loving arms. And if I may make a suggestion, I'd advise you to locate a peter-heater and tog up your worm. You seem just a shade flagrant that bald."

"When will I see her?"

"Two weeks, maybe less."

While Burnside looked me over very carefully, Admiral McCabe procured another lava-lava for me. Dr. Burnside found me in excellent shape. The face had welded beautifully. The appendectomy was completely healed. My body was mottled with the sting of nettles and the scratch of sharp branches and stabbing thorns, but scabbing well. The ear scar was fine, out of sight under my long hair. He jabbed me with a shot of antibiotic against general infections, another serum to make sure that the Chinese squat was knocked out, a paratyphoid booster shot, and finally a walloping vitamin B-complex stinger to amplify my jungle diet. (He'd given me all the other stuff, yellow fever, typhoid and cholera, during the operations two weeks before.)

While the butcher was jabbing, McCabe checked out my transmitter. He called my body-tag number *nth* from the master across the room. The tag responded perfectly and

tingly enough for me to spasm and nearly break a hypodermic needle that was entering a buttock at the time. Then he checked my invisible magnetic tattoo ident. Everything was go.

After that I took a shower and wrapped into my new lava-lava. But I tied on my *kris* once more. That home-made obsidian stabber had become a part of me. We didn't talk much. Once he said, "Kid, if we were on the Niobrara of a dark night, I'd sure hate to run into you riding a wild cayuse and wearing paint."

"Ugh."

About then, Commander Sampson came back with the fat German, so McCabe hastily moved me into the back bedroom. I was ravenous. "You'll get a bellyful soon enough," he said absently. He was troubled. "Otherwise, how do you feel?"

"I'm ripe."

McCabe nodded. "Want a splash?"

"*If* you'll have the knockout drops switched. The last batch gave me a hell of a hangover."

"No drops. This is your night to howl, redbelly."

He had a bourbon and I had a vodka-and-tonic. It made me heady instantly. I hadn't eaten in over twenty-four hours. He kept glancing nervously at his watch.

"Something wrong?"

He nodded. "We've been hit again."

I drained my drink. "Happy day. Who?"

"I told you someone was watching the scene in London."

"You told him to look, not touch."

"That part was all right." McCabe gloomily sipped his bourbon. "He was recognized. Knew too many people in London."

"What'd they do to him?"

"Apparently nothing. He went down to the Salisbury Plain, spread-eagled himself on the Slaughter Stone at Stonehenge, left a phony suicide note and shot himself through the head. Said he was a Druid at heart and was making a personal sacrifice on the altar."

I said, "Stonehenge? Druids?" I shoved my glass at him. "That takes another drink. Keyhole does come up with hairy little propositions, don't they? But there aren't such things as Druids anymore."

"Yes, there are. Here's how that stick floats. Stonehenge was built about 1900 B.C., hundreds of years before Troy fell

and a thousand years after the Pyramids were built. At that time, the Most Ancient Order of the Druids wasn't even a sparkle in a fringe religionist's eye. But in modern times there is such an order—far-out stuff—which is recognized by Her Majesty's Government. They're allowed to practice their ties on the day of the summer solstice. They camp out wearing white togas, playing a hip harp, bleating 'Arise, oh sun,' and then go back to the smack-out."

"I'm hungry."

"The morning they found Keenan—my agent—was the morning of the spring moonset over Sarsen Stone number three. But there was a big Druid sit-in there all night, and nobody heard gunfire. Which means the kid was hit away from the scene and planted, right through the assembly of frantic fruits, in the dark."

It didn't sit well. "Any clues?"

"He was wearing a suit from The Seven Needles on Savile Row."

I said, "Take those threads apart. I have a hunch that suit of clothes is a walking transmitter. My staff at the lab in Schenectady worked on a gadget like that. Inner lining of pliable copper, like nylon. First button was the mike and amplifier. Second button was the r.f. station. Third button was the power pack. Whole suit was a radiator, plus a high-capacity antenna in the piping of lapels and collar. Damn long-range, depending on what kilohertz or megahertz you worked."

"You're right, redbelly. It was a walking-talkie. So were all the others. But that's not my problem right now. You are."

"How?"

"Your dossier says you were once in England for three days. I'm worried about someone recognizing you, like they did Keenan. You've changed, of course, but it depends on how well—"

I shook my head. "No chance. Never even got to London. Nobody over there knows me." I thought for a second. "Except, maybe—nah. I don't think so."

His face jowled in discouragement. "Tell me. In every single detail. Everything hangs on it."

19

SOME YEARS before, while on duty with the United States Navy, I had visited a garden spot called Da Nang in Vietnam and erected a jammer network to slitch the radar-directed a.a. systems which Grandpa Mao had donated to Uncle Ho; and when I departed that unhappy land on the heavy cruiser *Nome,* we sailed home the long way, around the Cape of Good Hope (which is sadly lacking in same) to England. We laid up into the Severn at Bristol, with Wales just across the river.

All my life I had wanted to visit a little town in Wales with the longest name in my gazetteer. Against the day, with the aid of a Celtic friend, I'd memorized the pronunciation of the town in the Welsh tongue, which is worse than Cheyenne. (And that is pretty bad. In fact, it was the Sioux who named the Turkey-Feathers originally, dubbing them *sha-hy-yay-na,* which means, "I don't dig your argot, man.")

Here, I finally had my chance. Instead of spending three days of Rest and Recreation in Bristol pubs and Bristol pubes, I borrowed a battered MG for thirty quid and crossed the river. The first thing to greet me was a sign which read:

CYFARCHION O GYMRU
Gwlad Y Gan

It means, "Welcome to Wales, the land of song."

By the time I reached my destination, I was barely able to hirple into town, the car hacking and spitting. In a gloomy drizzle, I saw a public house shooting yellow planks of cheerful light into the street. I pulled up to make inquiries. The shingle over the entrance proclaimed the pub to be The Druid's Cave and it showed a gory priestess shaking a gory dagger.

As I got out of the car, a lovely girl left the pub and stood under the doorlight. She glanced at me and smiled warmly at the sight of my uniform, then took out a cigarette and fumbled for a match to invite my aid. I lighted her cigarette and said, "Lieutenant Commander Sam Carson."

"Dulcy Quinn," she said.

I said, "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place

like Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwrndobwllllantysilogogogoch?" (It's pronounced Chlan-vyra-pooch-gwin-geoch-go-geruh-ich-wern-drobo-chlan-is-eeleo-go-go-gochk. It means St. Mary's-in-the-hollow-by-the-white-hazel-tree-near-the-rapid-whirlpool-in-front-of-Our-Saint's-Cave.)

Dulcy, it turned out, was a fourth-generation native Californian, visiting Wales on an archaeological dig for the School of American Research. She was then bucking for her Master's. She was a beautiful girl, tall and full, dark and luminous. No fragile flower, she was still utterly feminine, with a delicate small mouth, huge soft brown eyes and raven hair. Since weather had darkened her skin, she looked like the best of Indian hybrids, full-breasted, small-waisted, long-armed. She wanted to be an ace archaeologist. She was in Wales on a dig in the Prescelly Mountains where the Stone Age people probably got the rocks for the Bluestone Circle at Stonehenge and sea-shipped them to Bristol before the haul overland to the Salisbury Plain.

She was delighted with my Shoshoni background and told me how she had excavated in the Southwest, at Canyon de Chelly and in the Luchachuca Mountains.

By the time we had to leave each other, we were a little bit in love and very sad that we would probably never see each other again. She promised to look me up at Wind River one day, and I promised to visit her in Pasadena one day, but the day had never come.

McCabe was silent. He sipped his drink. "Dulcy Quinn. Pasadena."

"She was a very nice girl."

"This would be around sixty-six, I take it."

"Affirmative."

"At least, she's an American," he said, but he was disturbed.

I said, "Admiral, face it. Women being changeable, she probably met the right man and gave up archaeology and settled down in Pasadena, where the old folks go to visit their grandparents."

"Maybe *you* were the right man."

"Flattery."

"Realism. I'll have to put the fingers out for her. Once I locate her, I'll breathe a lot easier if I know that she's not going to cross your path during this mission."

"She'd never recognize me."

"She'd remember that bullet wound in your shoulder, un-

less you just played tiddleywinks. And maybe that mole on your groin, unless you just played jackstraws. Think how much of her you can remember." (He was right.) "I've got to pinpoint her. Meanwhile we'll just take the chance."

"I'm hardly going to any archaeological sites," I said. "That's where she'd be."

"True. We'll give it a whirl. But that's all there was? Just Miss Quinn?"

"Affirmative."

We had another drink. He said reluctantly, "Tonight you leave on the *Amberjack*. Paul and the medico will accompany you. Won't be much of a sightseeing trip. You'll run submerged all the way."

"How do you get me aboard secretly?"

"In a duffel."

"Doesn't my contract guarantee first-class?"

"First-class duffel."

"And how," I asked, "do I get off secretly?"

"Through a torpedo tube, for Christ's sake!" he said irascibly and untruly. "Listen, redbelly, I'm beginning to smell hero on you. Knock it off. Your mission is pigeon, for Keyhole to buy you as rich jerk and put the ball-busters on you. You are *not* Batman, savvy?"

"Heap."

"Everything else you have to know is in your brief. Any more questions? We're at the wire."

"None."

He shoved out a big hard hand. I took it and let him break my bones. "You've been a good little Injun. If I don't see you back alive, I'll pee on your grave."

"Thanks."

McCabe rose, still unhappy. "We've got some unpleasantry to go through. Want you to meet our guest."

"Who is that kraut?" I asked.

"Nothing to do with your mission. Just play him straight." He paused for a moment thoughtfully. "This man is a blown agent. I think he's the best espionage operative alive. Unfortunately, he is not ours. I am going to show him to you as a hard case you are not to forget."

We went into the headquarters room.

The German was laughing snottily at one of Bigwater's pedantic remarks when McCabe introduced me. "Colonel, I'd like you to meet Mr. Lo." This was a play on the Pope poem *"An Essay on Man,"* which goes "Lo, the poor Indian,

whose untutor'd mind sees God in clouds or hears him on the wind." Custer and the lads used to use the epithet considerably. "Sam Lo," McCabe added lamely. "Sam, this is Colonel Fritz Peyser."

Colonel Peyser adjusted his spectacles and stared at me with utter contempt. He had very pale-blue eyes, quite chilling. *"Guten abend, Herr Lo. Wie geht's?"* His obesity was more size than fat, hard and firm. His knuckles were large and flattened, as if they had been broken by hitting things. He brought the hairs up on my neck.

I replied, *"Danke, sehr gut. Und Ihnen?"*

He said, astonished, *"Danke, gut."*

Even McCabe looked askance but the fact was, with that statement, I was fresh out of German. All I had left was *"Ja"* and *"Nein"* and *"Schweinhundt"* from the old war movies.

Colonel Peyser shook his head. *"Viel gluck,* McCabe," he said with mock sorrow. His accent was not too bad; he hissed his s's and veed his w's but otherwise it was pretty crisp. "Is the United States scraping the bottom of the barrel that you have to use now literate savages for your lick-spittles?"

"I am not a savage," I said petulantly. "I am a high-class clean-cut aborigine."

McCabe's eyes warned me off. Colonel Peyser instantly viewed me with cold interest. "So. A white man?"

"A coat of many colors," I said, and again McCabe shot me a sharp glance.

"May I offer you another libation, Colonel, sah?" Bigwater interrupted.

Peyser bloomed. *"Danke, ja, schwarz."* He remarked that the island was very *schön* and would be more *schön* if some *schön frauleins* were around, open-bloused and open-handed. Even though he was faintly tipsy, his mind was sharp. He looked at me again and licked his lips. *"Sehr interessant.* Tell me, McCabe, when is the exchange to be made?"

"No comment."

Peyser chuckled. "You will shoot me into Peking on an ICBM, *nicht wahr?* And they will shoot back *six* of your Yankee blunderers, eh? That is only fair." I covered some surprise at his Peking mention, but McCabe saw it.

He explained, "Colonel Peyser is presently a Red Chinese agent. But like yourself, Mr. Lo, he is a coat of many colors.

He also has spied for East Germany, the Soviets, in fact any country which is anti-American."

"That must keep him busy."

Peyser's eyes flashed. He grinned harshly. "True, true, Mr. Lo. I cannot wait to get to *you*."

McCabe was watching my eyes narrow. "You see, Mr. Lo, the good colonel's family in Stuttgart was wiped out by our bombers during World War Two."

"There were millions of other families around the world wiped out too," I said, heating up.

Peyser stirred slowly. "Oh, Mr. Lo," he said, through his teeth, "I hope we meet again. I shall *pray* that we meet again. *Verstehn Sie?*"

"Sure, I understand. Why not now?" I pulled my obsidian snee from the scabbard and waved at Bigwater. "Big John, give him something that slices."

"*Belay*," McCabe said. "Paul, take the colonel for a walk. A long walk. Sione—you go along." Sampson and Bigwater jostled Colonel Peyser on both sides and hustled him out, but he never took those glittering eyes off me.

When he had gone, Admiral McCabe glanced at me without expression. "Well?"

"A piece of filth."

"The name of the game is sharkskin," he said. "I wanted you to see how bad it can be. This gentleman would as soon cut off your genitals and have you eat them, just for starters, and then give you a blood transfusion to keep you alive so that he could play with you a bit more before turning you off."

"You didn't bring him here just for me."

"No. He expects to be swapped."

"But he won't be."

McCabe shrugged. "We can't exchange or turn him loose. That sonofabitch actually stole the master code of NSA, but we busted him before he could make the drop. You realize what an entire code change entails? We're doing it now."

"But if he didn't drop it—"

"Can't take a chance. And even though we waste him, we've got to give Peking the illusion he's alive and captive so that they won't broil *our* gaggle of captured geese before we break them out. We gain time. Vanua Levu makes a good prison. The Peking lads can't peek in here. Short of war, *nobody* can—including the United States or the High Com-

missioner of the Western Pacific—without the consent of the Nangas. You can't drop paratroopers in under those bowers. You can't come up the cliff if Bigwater dynamites the edge of it off. Pretty impenetrable, unless there are secret paths on the western side."

"No paths," I said. "But lots of Malayan tiger pits, deadfalls and whipstakes."

McCabe sighed. "That's it, then. You've got about an hour for sack time before the Nangas initiate you and throw their testimonial banquet. After that, you're shipping out."

"Which bounding main?"

"The Gulf of Papua. Flyspeck called Kenema. It's all in your brief. Lousy country, home of the cassowary, dugong and the bird of paradise. You won't be there long enough to get in trouble unless you step in a crocodile's jaw going ashore. So long, hoss. I won't see you again. Sampson and I are taboo at the feast."

"That seems friendly."

"And I forgot to tell you, when you get back to Wyoming, you'll find that Simon Kincade has a permanent bodyguard who'll stick with you all through the mission and will function as majority whip."

"Who?"

"A wild Indian named Willy Littlesky."

I was astonished. "My brother-in-law?"

"Don't tell me *your* troubles," McCabe said, eyes glinting.

I said, pleased, "How the hell did you ever—"

"Hobble it. And remember, any message you or he sends to me is straight *President's Eyes Only.*"

"You sound as if you don't trust the hired help in your own establishment."

"I *don't,*" he said and was gone.

20

BY THE TIME the moon rose and Bigwater came to awaken me, the mouth-watering smells of the barbecued meats were making me ravenous. They wafted through the hut with the texture of gourmet fog. "Come, brother!" Bigwater said, his white teeth glowing from the reflected fires. "Let us silence these blatant bellies forever!"

The atrium was a wild scene of baroque profusion. Torches

burned everywhere, thrust in a great circle around the cookfires. There were ten blazes shooting hot sparks into the bowers above, the trees bouncing back the flickering of the flames. On each of the ten cookfires a pair of ten-pound suckling pigs were turning slowly as they roasted. In the center was a huge blaze, the ceremonial fire, and here a huge whole pig revolved over the flames, each haunch from ham to hock spitting fat down into a huge container in which boiled the hearts and livers of the sucklings. The scent was maddening. Since the Nangas did not imbibe booze, Admiral McCabe had insincerely gifted me with a small keg of lovely Danish Pilsen beer, spigoted and ready for sudsing.

Wild screams of pleasure greeted my appearance, as my blood brothers pounded gongs, blew nose flutes, piped flutes and beat the big war drums. They were all chanting traditional songs. After a while, they made me sing one, and I couldn't think of anything appropriate except an old Shoshoni death song, but when I rocked it a little, it didn't sound too doleful.

Finally, before one morsel of the pig could be dispensed, I was solemnly escorted to the *mbure* of Ndengai, the long house, and carried inside in their arms.

There were few torches inside; the place was gloomy and terrifying. After some grunted prayers, they stretched me on a table and gathered around like surgeons, two torches held high so that Bigwater could see what he was doing. He pulled a long glistening Arkansas pigsticker. Its steel seemed to quiver as the torches reflected on it. For an instant, I was not a happy warrior. I thought the son-of-darkness was going to hack out my heart as a sacrifice to Ndengai, but by then he had cut into my diaphragm, just above the stomach, carving the shape of that same wriggly snake which all the Nangas wore. It was the cult totem, and I recalled with some irony that, after all, I was somewhat of a Snake Indian anyhow, back in Wyoming.

A splatter of blood appeared on my belly, but this was wiped away, and a mixture of pine resin and mud was slapped onto me. It clung there. Some more wild chanting, and then we went back to the fire, and this time the feast began.

I ate pig like a pig. Along with at least fifty other things. The spread would have delighted a glutton's heart. They had mango sauces, and delicacies of roasted fish and lime juice, and fried bananas floating in liquified *kava,* which is one of

their drugs. Fried grubworms (like shrimp) in raisin sauce. There was roasted corn, yams washed in honey and limes, beans and taro and breadfruits, and always the layers of fresh pineapple over everything, sometimes roasted.

When I felt the gorge rising, I would heave up and swig down a pokal of beer and make room in the gourd for more vittles.

But finally we had all had it. The drum beats began slowly. They took up a somber note. Bigwater handed me my last stein of Danish. "This is farewell, my brother, until we see you again after your long journey." I drained the flagon solemnly and then followed my marakishi back to the temple. There was no sound now but the mournful drums.

It was still dark in the temple. We knelt on the grass rugs as if to pray. Then the torchbearers came in and began to fill the *mbure* with yellow light. As the room lost its obfuscation, I could see an altar down at the far end of the long house. There was another totem of Ndengai down there, a huge hand-carved piece of bright yellow, with gaping red jaws, and a long bifurcated snake tongue lashing out. Then, in the center of the altar, I saw something else.

The dancing torches finally disclosed the head of Colonel Fritz Peyser impaled upon the long blade of a great spear.

At first, I thought I was seeing things, visions of the pop-skull Pilsen.

Then I knew it was true. And I didn't need two guesses to realize who had come to dinner.

I went quite mad. A scarlet fog dropped over my eyes. I jerked my obsidian Bowie and started screaming and raced to the *mbure's* gateway. If I could have reached McCabe, I would certainly have filleted and frazed him into a slag heap of blowfly hash.

The admiral had taken no chances. Bigwater had laced that farewell Pilsen with putaway pills and as I hit the open air, under the bamboo gate, they hit me solidly. I didn't even get a chance to vomit out Colonel Peyser before my body digested him. I hit the grassy atrium floor full weight, like a triggered deadfall, and mercifully the whole filthy scene was erased from my mind.

BOOK TWO

Simon Kincade

And death chooses: the wise from the silly, the pointed from the pointless, the fiery from the faint. Death is a leopard that sees in the dark.

—*Robert Ardrey*
AFRICAN GENESIS

1

THERE WAS a dead leopard on the main runway at Embakasi Airport. The flamboyant carcass was in plain sight, yet nobody had spotted the *chui* until the South African flight arrived. The laddybucks in the control tower had celebrated the chief dispatcher's birthday the night before at all of the waterholes of Nairobi; they were whacked out.

The big jet from Capetown came whistling in just after 9:00 A.M. and touched down beautifully in the thin, frosty Nairobi altitude. Then the pilot spotted the corpse ahead. He had enough speed to raise the nose wheel over the carcass, after which *chui* passed safely between the wheels of the main undercarriage. Naturally, the South African pilot was a bit cheesed off. He jolly well informed the control-tower chaps by radio that they could bloody jolly well take their bloody jolly fucking leopard and shove it sideways up their buggered bleeding assholes. He was later cited for wireless invective.

Still, a dead leopard on a live runway didn't make sense. A pair of Kyuke lads in Trans-African uniforms soon popped into a *gharri* and roared down the runway, where they collected the cat and slung him into the stern of the Land Rover.

When the London flight was finally cleared, it peeled out of stack and made a heavy touchdown, erupting bursts of blue smoke from its rubber. This was the flight which carried Kincade, his wife and a bodyguard. Kincade emerged, the blinding white glare of the magnificent field compelling him to don a pair of oversized polaroid sunshades. The odor of Africa instantly tantalized his nostrils, a heavy profusion of greenhouse fragrances, like the syrupy scent of newly mown hay, but sharper, more varied. He stood tall, inhaled deeply, and stared around arrogantly, ignoring his pretty wife, who stayed timidly at his heel. Behind her, the bodyguard, a dark and handsome young American Indian, shifted cameras and Mrs. Kincade's bottle bag and wished the boss would shake the lead out.

Kincade seemed unaware that he had become as much a cynosure as the scenery. The fellow travelers on the plane had had their dose of him, but now the residents of Nairobi

were getting theirs. Kincade was wearing a stark white buckskin jacket, soft as velvet with beautifully worked-in design. It was studded with a vast beaded panoply of Absaroka birds and laced horizontally with garish dyed porcupine quills. The fringe which hung from the back, arms and shoulders was over twelve inches long. The jacket had been made laboriously by Crow squaws back on the Montana reservation. On his head, Kincade wore a weathered cavalry hat which had enough character to have been a relic of the Little Big Horn battlefield. Its front brim was frozen in a back curl of wind and time and was sweatily stained and fingered. He had trimmed it with a band of Western diamondback rattlesnake skin. From the rear of the band, hanging down stiffly toward his left shoulder, there was a large eagle feather, to denote a coup. His trousers were nondescript khaki twill. His full-ankle Navajo moccasins were the color of hot cinnamon, each with a huge tie-off button of handwrought silver and a blossom of turquoise.

Like all peahens, Mrs. Kincade was anonymous in a simple gray suit. She looked hurried and harassed.

The bodyguard, however, was no such shrinking violet. Willy Littlesky, a full-blooded Shoshoni, looked to be the ultimate American tourist. His bright and saucy sport jacket was off a nail at Sy Devore's thread shop at Hollywood and Vine; so were his yellow tattersall slacks. His black-and-white sport shoes had been purchased, expensively, at the London Shop in Beverly Hills. He wore a Countess Mara tie, blatant and bold, under the collar of a Don Loper hand-customed shirt. He was twenty-nine years old, and right now he wasn't seeing much of Africa; he was seeing all the unattached squaws. He had already made half a date with a stewardess, the little blond *ndege,* who had attended to *almost* all of his wants en route.

There was no problem at the passport bureau. The dignified black-bearded East Indian controller reacted to the blatant buckskin with admirable restraint, merely muttering, *"Mah-dahd!"* in Hindi, which was the same as saying, "Yipe!" Then he politely added, *"Salaam,* sahib. Ah yes, sah. Mr. Fitz-Owens asked us to look for your arrival this morning. I trust you had a fine flight."

"Rough as a cob," Kincade said. "Say, pard, where *is* this white hunter of mine?"

"I have not seen him, sah," the *babu* said, stamping the passports and returning them. He gravely indicated the cus-

toms area beyond the transit building and turned aside as Kincade and party swept by.

A tall, thin man stepped up to them in the customs area. He wore a customs pass on his tan corduroy lapel. He was lean, thin-nosed but good-looking, with a double-brimmed *terai* floppy hat on his head, ringed with a band of leopard skin. He smiled gently, showing even white teeth, and extended his hand. "You'd be Kincade. Sorry I'm late." Kincade shook, surprised to find the thin man had such a solid grip. "Your weapons arrived via Railway Express and Seaway two weeks ago, and the serial numbers have already been checked out and the customs deposit made on them. Since you won't be hunting in Kenya, they have been shipped down to Tanzania to await you. I don't fancy you have anything else to declare, have you now?"

"Case of cigarettes," Kincade said.

"A carton, you mean?"

"A case I mean. A whole case."

"That will cost you a quid or three," the thin man said, smiling.

"No sweat, pardner."

"I meant, the tax is really prohibitive."

"I've got the spondulicks," Kincade said.

The thin man looked bland. "Spondulicks?"

"The wampum. The loot." Kincade pulled out a sizable packet of sizable bills, some of them pounds sterling, most of them dollars. The thin man stared at the wad warily and then shot a glance at the black Kykuyu customs officer, whose eyes were popping at the obesity of the bankroll.

"I say," the thin man said nervously, "I shouldn't fly that much flag, old man. The British don't run the country anymore, you realize, and it's still a vast have-not. That sort of color might induce bloodletting. Best put it away. Besides, I'm empowered to handle your custom fees for the moment. You can repay the sum back to Fitz-Owens later on when you see him."

Kincade stowed the money. "You're not the Great White Hunter then?"

"Hardly!" the thin man said. "No, Kincade. Just another bwana-wa-safari like yourself, come down from London for a whistle at Rowland-Ward's Hall of Fame."

"Where is he? Fitz-Owens, I mean."

"You didn't hear about the leopard?"

"One of the stewardesses said they found a cat on the runway."

The thin man nodded as he pulled out his own wallet and paid Kincade's custom fees to the officer.

"Bloody leopard wound up *kufa* on the main runway this morning. Damned well jostled the Cape Town johnnies. Every airport chap thought it was some dire plot. Nonsense! It happens that your white hunter *pigaed* the beast out here in the suburbs last eve. It must have crawled out on the runway to perish there in the dark of the moon. *Shauri ya Mungu,* nothing more. But it damned well taloned Fitz before it left him."

"You're not making sense, Mr.—"

"All happened suddenly, y'see. Last night, your white hunter, Gary Fitz-Owens, and myself were at the Equator Club when the Game Control bloke called and asked Bwana One-Eye to help them out."

"What is this Bwana One-Eye bit?"

"Oh! Didn't you know? Fitz lost his left eye last year. *Anyway,* it seems this careless leopard had come in off the reserve. It's all reserve outside Nairobi, y'understand. And there was old *chui* having a royal banquet on all the chickens in the outskirts. I declined to call off my sheila stalk, so Bwana One-Eye came out here with his number one, ugly big brute, answers to Balshakkar. Fitz found the cat easily enough but made the mistake of shooting from the only exit in the chicken house. He put a bullet in *chui's* neck but *chui* made a break and clawed him in passing. Bullet probably cut an artery instead of breaking bone, and the cat bled to death out there on the strip."

Kincade was instantly appalled. "Fitz-Owens is out of action?"

"Not at all!" the thin man said. "The claws didn't cut too deeply. What with all these new antibiotics, he shouldn't have trouble with infection. The doctor stitched up the slash rather nicely and doused poor Fitz with external disinfectant, and then I took him in hand and doused him thoroughly with internal disinfectant. I shouldn't wonder if he's not waiting for you in the upstairs lounge at the hotel, pouring Pimm's Cups over his wounds." He received the receipt from the customs man. "There we are, old man, that should do it. They'll send your clagger on to the hotel by van. So shall we toddle on in? I've got Fitz's lorry."

Kincade squinted openly at the thin man. "You're not English."

"How do you know?"

"Pommies don't use expressions like 'sheilas.' That's straight out of Waltzing Matilda country."

"Very keen of you, chum." The thin man smiled. "You sound a shade Aussie yourself, you know. Yanks don't use words like pommie. That's an Anzac epithet for the visiting limey."

"Didn't Fitz-Owens tell you? I spent some time down under. In fact, I just got back six weeks ago. The D'Usseau expedition flew me down to Sydney after they rescued me in New Guinea."

The thin man sighed. "I *am* a ruddy clot. Of course I remember. Read something about it. You must clue me in on everything that happened when we have a chance. Meanwhile—" He looked over at Melisande politely.

"Oh!" Kincade waved a ham of a hand into her face. "The ball and chain."

"How do you do, Mrs. Kincade," the thin man said, noting her shudder at Kincade's rudeness. She nodded miserably.

"This refugee from Hollywood," Kincade continued with witless wit, "is called Littlesky. He's a genuine dyed-in-the-flesh Snake Indian, which is about the only thing I can say about the spavined spiv."

The thin man asked seriously, "Can he speak English?"

"Like a native," Littlesky said, grinning with all the charm of his photograph in the yearbook of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. "Didn't get *your* name, pard."

"Terribly sorry, mates," the thin man said ruefully. "Awfully rude. My abjects. It's Ravensmith. Charles Ravensmith." He peered at them innocently for reactions. None was forthcoming. Kincade nodded cheerfully, Littlesky politely, with a fixed social smile. Ravensmith seemed to relax. "Call me Charles, eh? Shall we bung off for the beer and tickles?"

Melisande took the seat beside Ravensmith in the lorry as he slid his fatless frame under the wheel on the right side. Kincade and the Indian fumbled into the stern seat with their clutter. They peeled out of the parking space and soon hit the freeway from Mombasa, heading west into Nairobi proper. It had once been called the Queen's Highway, but it had now been retitled Uhuru Road.

"Forgive the catlike curiosity, old man," Ravensmith called back to Kincade on the slipstream, "but exactly how much

lolly were you carrying in that packet you waved earlier?"

"Twenty-two bills and breakage."

"Twenty-two *thousand* dollars?" Ravensmith shook his head. "Don't you think that's a bit too much?"

"Hell, pard," Kincade said, "when you're on the scout, you pack fresh pemmican. I've got traveler's checks too but there is nothing like cold wampumpeag to get the job done."

"I'm not arguing the efficacy of the good green," Ravensmith said, "but aren't you afraid somebody might steal it from you?"

"I wish somebody'd try," Kincade said. "I haven't had a man for breakfast in a long time."

When the lorry reached Kenyatta Road, Ravensmith turned into town and glanced at Melisande with some concern. "My dear lady, was it that bad?" She looked nonplussed. "My driving. You're a bit ashen. And you haven't uttered a word since we left Embakasi."

"It was really a very rough flight over the Sudan," Melisande said, lowering her eyes. "I'm just getting my land legs back."

"Keep 'em crossed," Kincade called ahead vulgarly and laughed at his own joke.

Ignoring him, Ravensmith said, "We'll soon cure that, memsaab." He turned the lorry into Hardinge Street, where the New Stanley Hotel raised its ramparts. "A beaker of cold *beer-i* and a platter of cold buffet, and you'll be right as riches."

"Thank you." (But Melisande was thinking: Where is that little boy I met and loved in the high forests of Fiji, and what have we all done to one another?)

2

UNDER THE SIDEWALK canopy of the New Stanley, in an al-fresco establishment called the Thorn Tree, Bwana Gary Fitz-Owens was pitching a mild do to celebrate his leopard clawing. Actually, the encounter had not been all that bad. The cat had not attacked him; it had used his left arm as a launch pad of an escaping leap, resulting in the hind talons digging savagely into the flesh. Fitz-Owens had gathered together a group of white hunters—hung up on their own canceled safaris, due to the assassination of Tom Mboya—to

raise a cup to his ill health. Through the traffic and the spirits, Fitz-Owens saw his *gharri* arrive at the New Stanley's unloading island by the zebra-striped crosswalk. When Kincade and his party emerged, Fitz sprang from his cheerful perch to extend his good right hand.

"I take it you're the Kincades," Fitz-Owens said ebulliently, his white teeth flashing ingenuously. "I *say*, old darling, that *is* a magnificent jacket! You must send me one from the States if you ever get back alive and if we are still speaking, which is damned unlikely."

When Kincade shook hands and looked Fitz over, he felt deformed.

Bwana One-Eye stood six feet four inches tall, a mighty tree, topped with a full outcrop of lemony hair, burned bright by the fiery sun of the Northern Frontier District. His ponderous bones hung free and easy, yet he moved with the brittle intensity of a nervous sable. *Mungu* had been parsimonious with body flesh when he birthed Fitz-Owens. He had spread skin over those big bones as tightly as a desiccated drumhead; there would be little marbled meat left for his predators to poke at, whether they turned out to be *siafu*, the safari ant, *fisi*, the hyena, or Funknell, the local mortician.

But it wasn't just size that made Bwana One-Eye a dangerous lodestar. It was that miraculous violet-colored eye, set against his sun-dyed Kaffir-colored skin, and his straight blunt nose. It was a wild eye, quite in contrast with his adolescent mouth, and it was abetted by the tan eyepatch over the left socket. Someone had painted a half-closed leering and licentious caricature of an eye on the patch, which lent Fitz the attitude of immortal obscenity.

"I *say!*" he said and took a deep breath. "Welcome to Nairobi, mem, my love!" The wicked eyepatch looked her up and down and roundabout. "Why, you are as pretty as a newborn dik-dik! If I may speak the truth, which is something I seldom do, you are the most beautiful *wmanamouki* I have ever seen on my preserve."

Kincade noted sharply that Melisande's dull eyes had suddenly regained their brightness. She said, "I'll bet you say that to all your she-things."

"You speak Swahili!" Fitz said, smiling.

"*Kidogo,*" she said. "And you speak with forked tongue, Mr. Fitz-Owens."

"Of course I do." He laughed. "But this is not one of those

times. And please call me Fitz, dear mem, and that's a love, because we are rigidly bound to know each other on a first-name basis or I shall lose my professional standing. And I say right now that this will be a lovely trek, a very lovely trek, indeed." He flicked the orchid eye at Ravensmith, who had given the *gharri* to a doorman and joined the group. "Any bumpf, Charles?"

"We slipped through the necessaries like silent snakes," said Ravensmith.

"Very kind of you to assist, Charlie. *Asante sana.*" Bwana One-Eye turned to Willy Littlesky. "Here now, did I miss you? *H'jambo!*"

"*Washte,*" Littlesky said in the old form.

"This is Littlesky, my bodyguard," Kincade said.

"I shouldn't think you'd need one, old darling," Fitz said wryly. "Not with that splatter of brain and brawn. And certainly out in the m.m.b.a., that is supposed to be my job, you know." He smiled at Littlesky. "So you'll have a bit of free time, chum. Are you really an aborigine?"

"I'll show you my SAG card," Littlesky said.

"You're . . . seriously the first American Indian I've ever met. Have they really got you chaps in hand?"

"To say the *least.*"

"Redbelly," Kincade said heavily. "Take care of the gear, and register. Stow the crud upstairs. Then go get yourself some chow. Wait till you hear from me. On second thought, take some of that cowrie I gave you and go over to an rtw called the Ahmed Brothers and get yourself some bush jackets and pants, savvy? And then go to the African Boot Shop and pick up some birdshooters and mosquito boots."

Littlesky said, "Heap savvy."

Fitz-Owens looked askance at Kincade. "You seem to have the gen down pat, old darling, but we'll all be going over there later to outfit you and the mem."

"Hell we will." Kincade grinned at his own practicality. "Me and the wife have everything we need."

"Quite so." As Littlesky vanished into the hotel, Fitz-Owens gestured at his friends who had stood patiently through all the chatter. "Sidle over here, mem, my love, and you too, old darling, and meet these dank creatures who are getting piss-snockered—in celebration of my wound. They are all hunters like myself, but obviously not half, since none of them has the cheese even to face a defanged tse-tse. This is Stan Lawrence-Brown, Big John Thompson,

Harry Selby, Hughey Fitzsimmons, Mike Fitzpatrick and Paul Fitz-Collins. Gentlemen, the Kincades, Bwana M'Cowboy and the mem!"

"Howdy," Kincade said uneasily, shaking hands around while Melisande donated a beautiful smile. The hunters had all been chewing cucumbers from spent Pimm's Cups. They were quite cheerful. They all openly approved of the memsaab and exchanged glances with Fitz-Owens' cyclopean eye, which he accepted smugly. (Damned lovely trek indeed, and the lesser kudus wouldn't be the only laddybucks wearing horns.) Kincade, feeling this, said protectively, "Fitzpatrick, Fitzsimmons, Fitz-Collins, Fitz-Owens—how did you bastards all get to mount a Fitz in front of your saddlehorns?"

"But that's *it,* old darling," Fitz-Owens replied with enthusiasm. "We *are* all bastards, you see. That's exactly what Fitz means. Left side of the blanket." He waved at his friends. "You *fisis* carry on, eh? Harry, sign my noble name to the chit—"

"My shout," one of the Fitzes said. "It's worth it seeing the unwoundable great Bwana One-Eye buy the packet like the rest of us. *Kwaheri,* memsaab! *Kwaheri,* Bwana M'Cowboy!"

Fitz-Owens took Melisande's arm firmly and let Kincade and Ravensmith follow along. They went into the dark coolness of the hotel.

"Here's the gen for the day," Bwana One-Eye said as he led them into the Upper Lounge of the New Stanley and planted them at a table in the quiet taproom. "First, I thought we might raise a few to get your lungs used to the altitude and your legs used to the native gin—which is all imported, of course. And then we might all chuff off into the Grill for some *chakula.*"

"Good show," Kincade said and called, "Boy!" loudly to a passing black waiter in red jacket and red fez. The waiter threw him an unfriendly glance and passed on without dignifying the shout.

"Shouldn't do that," Fitz-Owens said thoughtfully. "The name of the state is Kenya."

"The sonofabitch is a waiter, isn't he?"

"Exactly, but he is not a *boy.* We are all equal men before the law in this state, and, quite honestly, Kincade, as a phased-out white bwana, I should be the first to complain, shouldn't I? This state is working. Jomo Kenyatta is running a damned good *shauri*—"

"But wasn't he chief of the Mau-Mau—"

"In another time. Now he is the Doumi whose word is bond. Actually, I hate to admit it, he is the white man's strength."

"And where in this glorious dominion are you white-eyes?"

"Oh, we're mere tuft-hunters in the turgid social scale. We shall probably wind up teaching conservation to the indigenes instead of exterminating the game with the rich Yankees."

Kincade smiled. "There's the black booger. Exactly what do I say to him?"

"I'll handle it unless you insist."

"I insist on two things," Kincade said flatly.

"Peel off, it's your *shauri*."

"One, it's my check. Two, knock it off with that 'old darling' crap." Kincade was curling his lip.

The violet-eye brightened. "As you say, old cock. But as for the chit, it's traditional that I shout out the first day."

"Balls!"

"*As* you say, old cock." Fitz-Owens was delighted that the new appellation sat badly. "However, I must insist on tonight's damage when I waft you through the lusty lairs of nefarious Nairobi."

Annoyed, Kincade pulled out his bankroll ostentatiously and peeled off a green bill with the benevolent face of Benjamin Franklin adorning it. He waved it rudely. The proud *jamaa* instantly groveled to their table, accepted the bribe in delight, and thereafter hustled *ginnis* to the table with knavish servility, ecstatic when Bwana M'Cowboy told him to keep the change. Kincade bloomed at his proof of corruption and, when the gins expanded him, went into an hour-long boast of his tremendous wealth, until even Charles Ravensmith (who was compelled to admit he was worth only forty million Australian dollars) felt poverty-stricken.

Four gee-and-tees deep, Kincade reached for his roll once more, to wave a second hundred-dollar bill, but this time Fitz-Owens said gravely, "No more of that, Kincade. That will be quite enough."

"Don't mind the 'old darling,' " Melisande said with sweet bitterness. "Bwana Warbucks is just getting started. He's out to debase the world."

"I dare say he's sufficiently debased this part of it for the nonce," Fitz-Owens said, "and I'm not just twittering, chum."

Kincade stared at his wife. "You weren't so goddam sensitive about it before you hooked me."

As she withered under his cold stare, Fitz-Owens added, "Trouble is, you see, word gets around. Next thing, we'll have every Nairobi spiv on the trail of our safari, plus the Congo bandits and the Somali *shiftas.*"

"Hick towns!" Kincade said, grinning. "They're all the same."

"You are speaking, sir," Fitz-Owens was trying to lighten the tension, "of the Rome of Tsavo, the light of East Africa."

"Well, for crissake," Kincade said, watching Bwana One-Eye inadvertently place his hand over Melisande's. "Nairobi isn't exactly the center of the universe!"

Fitz-Owens sipped his drink. "But it *is,* you see. It is the womb of the world. Where have you primates been? Instead of lolling in this gin-soaked *donga,* you should be tantivying forth to the Coryndon Museum. There you would learn—through the indefatigible efforts of Dr. Leakey and his wife Mary—that you were all born in Africa, not two hundred thirty miles from here in a wadi known as the Olduvai Gorge."

"Of course!" Ravensmith said. "The archaeological dig. Where they found *australopithecus erectus,* a chap nearly two million years old."

"Which proves the point," Fitz-Owens said. "Your very own ancestors were born and bred in old Tanganyika. All races, colors and breeds. Which is what *tanganya* means: all mixed up." He quaffed his gin-and-tonic solidly. "So, you see, we are all getting piss-tippled right here in the first pram of the earth."

Kincade had gone cold for a moment. An archaeological dig in Africa was something he and McCabe had not planned on. Visions of Dulcy Quinn flashed. He said sourly, "Maybe we ought to pop by and pay our respects to the old folks."

"We are going to do just that," Fitz-Owens said.

Kincade stared. "How come, pard?"

"The team of students and professors down there working on the dig are having a nasty spot of trouble with *simba.* Dr. Leakey asked me if I wouldn't wallop the old *doumi* for them before he climbs into a cot and tries to mate with some lady zoologist or other."

"A rogue?" Ravensmith asked, watching Kincade's face and wondering what the Cowboy had against archaeology.

Fitz said, "Lions don't go rogue. They go creaky and an-

cient. No pride to run with, no lioness to knock down his evening zebra, full of ague, rheumatiz, the blowflies and the vultures cocking an eye at him. Blunders into the camp for food, splatters all sorts of cheese about. We'll be doing him and them a favor actually. Won't be on license. Arusha Game Control has pegged him a nuisance."

"Hell with it," Kincade said flatly. "I'm not going out of the way—"

"But it's very much on the way," Fitz said sharply. "We'd pass the gorge in any case, just a stone's snap northwest of Ngorongoro Crater. Besides, I've given my word."

His violet eye declined any further argument. Kincade shrugged. "Don't get so hard-nosed. After all, it's my safari." But he let it pass, feeling Ravensmith's teal eyes on his cheek. He hoped to God that Dulcy Quinn was washing soiled diapers in a laundromat back in Pasadena.

Fitz said, "We'd best batter our way into the Grill before the *chakula* runs out. The tourist herds must have thinned by now. Any questions?"

Kincade said, "What happened to your eye?"

"The bloody eye!"

"I'd rather hear how that artwork got on the patch," Melisande said archly. "It looks like the work of a very ladylike hand."

Fitz laughed. "You like the evil thing?"

"Evil it is."

"I've four more. All naughty. The gel was naughty too."

Melisande said, "What's her name? I'm jealous."

"How sweet of you. Inga. From Stockholm. Quite a beautiful *wmanimouki.* A photographer for one of those pornographic Swedish magazines. Came down with her assistant, young queer, to photograph love in the wilds. Birds do it. Anteaters do it. Swedes do it. Tried to pose me with herself in the Real Raw, while her masturbating assistant recorded us. I declined, locked myself in a bottle of Booth's. Next sunrise, I found she had painted all of my patches."

Melisande said, "Weren't you shirking your professional responsibility? Aren't you supposed to keep safari ladies happy? Doesn't Mama bag some kind of game, even if she's a poor shot?"

(Ravensmith thought she was being foolish, not seeing the glare in Kincade's eyes.)

"Rather," Fitz said. "But I didn't much care for the

prospect of appearing bare-arsed in some Swedish sex manual illustrating the Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana!"

Kincade growled, "What about the eye, Fitz?"

"The eye." Fitz-Owens sighed, glanced at Ravensmith. "Bwana Charlie was on that safari. Let him tell you."

"Not me." Ravensmith raised a hand. "It was your *shauri*, not mine."

Fitz persisted. "You recall, Charles? Last year? You and that mad Welsh actor—no, *not* Burton, the other one. Gerald Hywel. And his wife, Gloria?"

"Yes," Ravensmith said quietly.

"What happened?" Kincade asked.

"It was a very bad do," Ravensmith said.

Fitz was thoughtful. "Very, *very* sticky. We didn't know it at the time, but Hywel and his wife were on drugs. A bit nasty. Perhaps you recall her, an American actress before her marriage, Gloria Alford."

"Of course!" Melisande said. "I remember. She killed herself, didn't she? In Paris?"

"Rather. Leaped from her hotel window into Avenue Montaigne. Rotten scandal. Just after they returned from the safari. You remember, Charles?"

"Very sticky," Ravensmith said very quietly.

"The eye?" Kincade said.

"The *bloody* eye!" Fitz sighed patiently. But the real one was angrily livid. He was thinking: What has this Yank got up his tube about me? Is he jealous of the girl? I'm *supposed* to make passes at her. Granted, she is a lovely thing, but dammit, they're not really married. He is an agent, and she is an agent, and I am—God save the Queen and Jomo too—an agent. And for all I know Charlie is an agent. There's no license on the lady, and she's a free shot. Unless I have lost my sense of track, she seems to prefer me.

"Mrs. Hywel—Gloria—had this perfect backside."

"And you're an expert," Kincade said.

"Oh, shut up, Simon!" Melisande said angrily.

"I actually *am*," Fitz said. "I'm a complete fetishist about derrières. Hers was exquisite. Perfectly formed, perfectly rounded, like two satin baby pillows."

"That how she poked your eye out?" Kincade said.

"Not at all, old cock." Fitz smiled through his gritting teeth. "We were going into the bush after a wounded lion. My number one in front, then Gloria, then me, following her on hands and knees with that lovely arse and eye-feast

in front of me. A two-eye feast then. Sometimes when she abruptly halted, I'd even cheek into her. Marvelous. Trouble is, I didn't see the thornbush snap back as she passed. Caught me cleanly. But I've no complaints. It was worth it."

They went up to the Grill for lunch and had oysters and prawn-stuffed kingfish from the Indian Ocean, flown up from Mombasa, except for Kincade, who settled for cold lesser bustard.

Fitz-Owens said in revenge, mouthing his creamed fish, "That flap up in the N.F.D. in fifty-seven when you collected that friend of yours—Hoskins, was it?"

"Byron Hoskins," Kincade replied without batting an eye, although Ravensmith paled at Bwana One-Eye's audacity.

"What actually happened? Did you want his headskin for your trophy room?"

There was a heavy silence. Ravensmith was embarrassed deeply. He noted Melisande Kincade did not look exactly happy. Kincade chewed on his bustard and, after a massive swallow, said quite calmly, "It was elephant. Hoskins had fired both barrels. *Tembo* charged him. I was behind and way back. I had to lead the elephant for a shot to give Hoskins a chance to reload as he ran. Got the picture?" Fitz nodded. "I had to aim at Hoskins to lead the elephant. Hoskins was running. But when I fired, he stopped dead, so the slug hit him instead of *tembo*. Next shot I dropped the tusker. What the hell. If I hadn't killed Hoskins, the elephant would have."

"That's comforting."

"I wasn't as good a shot then as I am now."

"That *is* comforting," Fitz said.

The coffee and brandy had arrived. The tension at the table eased. "And now, chums," said Bwana One-Eye, "the drill for the day. Old cock, you're sure you don't need to visit the Ahmed Brothers for hunting clagger?"

"Not me, pard. I'll be damned if I'm going to strut around the lobby in a bullet-hung bush jacket like some California yahoo who never shot off anything but his mouth. I'm plain tuckered. I'm going to spread my bedroll."

Melisande raised a plaintive "I wanted to go shopping and see the town and visit the museums!"

Fitz patted her hand. "Dear mem, my love, we'll let Papa *taka* ziz and be on our merry way. Who knows what lovely things can happen?" He gave Ravensmith a baleful violet eye. "And you, Charles, are *not* invited."

"Thanks just the same," Ravensmith said wisely.

Ravensmith took the lift upstairs with Kincade. They were staying on the same floor, which seemed a bit much on the plate. At Kincade's door Ravensmith said, "Might I have a private word with you, chum?"

"Sure. Come on in. Make yourself a splash."

"Thanks no." He was hangdog. "Oh, the devil! I merely wanted to totter along on safari with you. I came down on pure speculation and ran into a bad patch. I'm after rhino. I want a thirty-incher."

"Hah!"

"I know. That's why Tanzania only lets out five licenses a year. And you happen to have one of the five."

"I see what you mean, pard," Kincade said. He slapped Ravensmith on the back. "Be my guest, Bwana Charlie. I'd be right pleased to have you along."

"I *say!*" Ravensmith was touched. "That is really damned decent of you, Simon."

"Hell, pard, I *like* you." Kincade made a sour face. "Which is more than I can say for the Great White Hunter."

"Don't be too hard on him. He's been rather assy today, but Fitz is a decent chap. I can't tell you how grateful I am, Simon—"

"Forget it. We hit the trail in the morning, but I reckon you'll be on the scout with us tonight?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

After Ravensmith left, Kincade closed the blinds of the suite and then, very methodically, began to check all the rooms for the hidden microphones he knew would be there. He had known that Ravensmith would wind up on the same safari; it had only been a question of how. Since the story of Patrick Henry Duffy's death, Charles Ravensmith had been a black doubt in Kincade's mind. It was hardly within the realm of possibility that an Australian who had been present during Mr. Duffy's last night on earth should now arrive fortuitously in Nairobi for a Simon Kincade safari.

His presence meant that Simon Kincade had been nominated as the next pigeon of a club called Keyhole.

3

JUST AFTER midnight, Willy Littlesky heard the click of the key in the lock and breathed a relieved sigh that they were back safe. He tossed aside the *East African Standard* which he had been reading and rose to greet them.

But it was Melisande, alone and wearily distrait.

Littlesky said, frowning, "Where's Pappy?"

"The hell with him," Melisande said, sagging. "Probably scalping the night porter. Or beating up the elevator boy. He beat up everybody else tonight." Her voice fractured shrilly. "I don't think I can take any more of this!"

"Hey, Mrs. K., easy." She sounded so sincere, he hastily made sign to remind her of all the bugs in the suite. She nodded cognition. But still Littlesky was puzzled. Was she on the level, or was she acting for the microphones? Or had Kincade really been a gold-plated *chinche?* (Chickenheart played his role so damned well, it was sometimes hard to tell.) "You want a nightcap?"

"No. I'm going to change." Melisande went into her bedroom, dragging her coat on the floor tiredly.

Littlesky shook his head. He wondered if she was going to make it. The whole mission. Holy Great Spirit, but this was only the beginning. It had to get rougher. Maybe she was too much girl for it. Maybe she was too much in love with Sam Carson for it. Maybe the transmogrification was heap too much traffic for her to bear. Kincade *had* become a difficult porcupine to swallow.

If she breaks, he thought, there'll be hell's own geyser touched off, and a lot of lost scalps, including mine.

Littlesky looked at himself in the hall mirror. What a waste it would be if he got wasted! Because he was the most beautiful American Indian since Jeff Chandler played Cochise in *Broken Arrow*. He was six feet tall, black-haired, black-eyed, broad-cheeked, long-jawed, and built like a ten-coup warrior. True, they had civilized him. When he wore his war paint now, instead of carrying tomahawk and scalp knife, he took the portnoy behind his fly, but oh, what lovely havoc he could create on his forays among the settlements along Sunset Boulevard.

Melisande returned from the bedroom in her nightgown

and negligee and sat down on the big sofa and closed her eyes.

"Perhaps you'd better check the police. He may have—"

"Not the boss," Littlesky said. "Why not pad it, Mrs. K? I'll leave a lamp in the window. No telling when he'll hike in." (Was that a key in the lock? Yeah, man. Here is Uncle Loudmouth at last.)

"The robe is spread, the pipe is lit," Littlesky said in the old form as Kincade stalked in and slammed the door.

"Knock off the aboriginal jokes, redbelly," he said and made sharp signs for the Indian to describe the microphone setup. Littlesky went to work: one in the chandelier overhead; a universal tone-instigated pea FM unit in the telephone; a spike-mike in the wall, ostensibly a picture hook for the print of a Buffet matador; a matchhead acoustical microphone on one of the window panes, glass being an excellent reverberator of voice frequencies.

Kincade made sign—What about the bedrooms?—and lighted a cigarette to cover the lack of conversation.

Three, Littlesky indicated. One matchhead brass stud on each bed; another FM pea in the telephone extension.

Kincade looked irked. "I'm going to the head," he said aloud and beckoned Littlesky along with him. Kincade flipped on the light switch and urinated for the bugs, but meanwhile, with the water flush as cover, pointed out the light bulb over the washbasin and whispered, "Mike built inside. Only works when light is on."

When they returned to the living room, the Indian was shaken. He had nearly blown it. True, he had only a crash course in surveillance machinery at the NSA, but he had been a sharp student. That kind of goof could get them all a ticket to the Happy Hunting Grounds.

"Get me a drink," Kincade said gruffly. "Straight Scotch on the mountain." It was a translation of *mauri,* which the native bartenders used instead of "rocks."

Littlesky went to the bar. As he made the drink, he looked at Kincade's dinner jacket. It was a unique bit of toggery, bone-white woven wool from the looms of the Navajos near Shiprock, New Mexico, restyled, of course, by a custom tailor in Cheyenne. On the back was the reproduction of a Navajo sand painting, a true rarity, since the Indians usually destroyed the exquisite paintings after the conclusion of the ceremony which involved them. As usual, money had broken the taboo. The painting showed a curving elongated Rainbow

Goddess circling around the Modigliani goddesses of corn, tobacco, beans and squash. The colors splashed in yellow, black, turquoise and scarlet, with many totems snaking through the weave. On the front of the coat, the lapels were dead-white satin, and over the breast pocket there was woven the Navajo swastika with its X-design center button.

In Cheyenne and Laramie, it was a splendid jacket. In frontier cities like Los Angeles, it was spectacular. In small towns like New York, it was entertaining enough to rate a squib in *Women's Wear Daily*. In Nairobi, it had been like gut-shooting a Cape buffalo.

Littlesky gave Kincade the whiskey. "You've got blood on your jacket."

"At least it's not mine." Kincade looked at the thin browning smear on the lower front flap. "It'll come off." He looked at his knuckles. They were unbroken but stained. "Guess I smeared my hand on it without knowing. After I broke that motherfucker's nose."

Littlesky whistled. "Bad as that?"

Kincade glanced at Melisande, who was watching him leadenly. "Even my ever-loving wife will admit the bastard had it coming. Didn't he, dear?"

"He was abominable," she replied quietly. "And you were worse. We could have avoided him. We could have left, the way Fitz suggested."

"I never walked away from a fight in my life. I don't intend to start here in Nairobi." He was writing, meanwhile, on a small pad which he showed to Littlesky: *Did you trace bugs?* Littlesky nodded. Kincade wrote: *Ravensmith?* Littlesky made sign for *No.*

Kincade looked puzzled. Littlesky said, to cover the silence, "Tell me the sad story, boss. Which guy? Who? What, where? I dig the war-paint bit." He wrote on the pad: *#255 Miss Buffy Pristine.*

Kincade was unhappy with that information. He sipped his drink and leaned back. "Well, Fitz-Owens took us over to this new club after dinner, a shambles called the Boma. To hear this sensational spade singer named Bluetop. Was she something! American rocker with a shape—I swear they painted the gown on her. Anyway, this hotshot from Joburg, a South African diamond man, wearing great big red handlebars on his lip, is dancing with a local bint and makes a crack about the jacket. You know, what circus am I with, what rodeo am I a refugee from. That crap. I let it ride."

"Damn white of you, if you'll pardon the racism."

"Then this clown starts poking at me and calling me a Nazi, on account of the Navajo swastika here."

"And you belted him."

"I did not."

"How'd he finally win you, Chief?"

Kincade glanced again at Melisande as if for confirmation. She looked away. "The squaw lady there had prevailed the Great White Hunter to wheel her around the floor—"

"I did no such thing," Melisande said sharply. "He happens to be a gentleman, and he happened to ask me—"

"No matter. So I'm sitting with Ravensmith when the Joburg jester comes by and makes a bet with Fitz that the boys in the safari will be calling me Bwana Wawa before the first day's hunt is over, even if we're only after dik-dik. You know what a dik-dik is? Little deer, about twelve inches high."

Littlesky said, "Sure. But what's a Bwana Wawa?"

"That's what I asked Charlie after the South African took his trollop back to the dance floor. Wawa, it seems, stands for Wild Africa Wins Again. Which means a rabid case of uncontrollable diarrhea induced by cowardice."

"So, finally," Littlesky said, "you clobbered him."

Kincade said modestly, "I let him jab me with a left first, so that I could always say he started it, and then I cut him with an open karate chop right across the bridge of his nose. Pardner, you should have seen him bleed! That white linen jacket of his looked like the Muscat national flag, eh, Mel?"

"You nearly killed him," she said in disgust.

"What about the local sheriff?" Littlesky asked.

"No sweat, no heat. Too many witnesses. *He* started it. So what the hell, *I* didn't press charges. Bwana One-Eye fixed everything. Spondulicks." He winked. Melisande sighed and turned away. He continued, "Hey, by the way, reason I was late. Stopped off downstairs in the Thorn Tree for a glug with your lover boy—"

"Simon," she said warily, "you're not going to—"

"The Great One-Eyed White Hunter is who I'm talking about," Kincade said. "And don't tell me you haven't got the hots for him."

"I will not listen to this!" Melisande cried.

"Ah come on, don't give *me* that crap, lady! You know damn well your boobs have been stiff for him ever since

you met him. He never left your side. You wriggled damn near every dance with him. Face it, you can't wait—"

Melisande was white. "God damn you, Simon, I will not take this poison from you!" She rose heavily. "He was a complete gentleman, he was courteous and he was kind—"

"Courteous!" Kincade said, insidiously cool. "Sure, he was *very* courteous with his good hand halfway up your crotch all night!"

Melisande's face went scarlet. "Simon, I have *had* it!"

"Keep your voice down," he said, hardening.

"I'd better split," Littlesky said nervously.

"Freeze, redbelly," Kincade growled.

Melisande sighed. "Simon," she said wearily, "let me go home. Let me get a divorce. *Please.*"

"No."

"I'll sign a quit-claim on everything—"

"You talk like a wife. You're not a wife. You're a piece of property. Like redbelly here. I buy and sell people like you. Knock it off, Mel. You're going on safari, and that's the way it's going to be or somebody might get obsolete before her time. And keep away from Nature Boy, lady, or Africa might lose one of its Great White Hunters."

"Oh God . . ." she moaned softly and plunged toward the bedroom, where he stopped her.

"We leave for Arusha at eight A.M. My friend Ravensmith has joined the caravan. So mind your manners."

He released her. She went into the bedroom and shut the door gently. She did not dare lock it.

Littlesky still stood frozen. Cut and print, he was thinking, but oh my oh me, it was just a little too real for reel. All of a sudden, he felt empty. He melted his posture. "See you in the sunup, boss."

"Okay, Injun," said Kincade moodily and waved him off.

Littlesky stared up at the chandelier briefly, where all the action had played under the central microphone, and he thought what a rotten world it would be if there was a National Credit Association that collected you like live game, and a Census Taker who asked you deeply personal questions for a Federal Data Computer, and a Postal Department that opened your private mail just in case you had been a naughty boy, and a club called Keyhole which recorded everything from your fart to your burp to your psyche for the promulgation of wealth and power. As he went gloomily to his bedroom, he wished he had brought something to read,

to keep him awake, like the Grimmer fairy tales. Anything to keep him from talking in his sleep, because he was, after all, merely switching himself from one mike to another.

4

KINCADE POURED himself another drink to get the bad taste of the scene with Melisande out of his mouth. It had not touched him deeply, because he had been trained thoroughly enough to know it was false, but his deeper self was disturbed remotely. The whiskey wiped out the minor sense of guilt.

He concerned himself more sharply with the fact that Keyhole had made definite contact. The source of the bugs was Miss Buffy Pristine, code name Gore, a member of the board of directors of the Seven Needles who also happened to be a singer named Bluetop at the Boma. Littlesky would have to relay the fact on the morrow, when it was safe. But the first part of the mission had been accomplished. The deception had worked. Keyhole had made contact. He should have been elated. Instead, he felt a ballooning sense of dread. From here on, he would have to consider himself under eternal visual, audible and directional surveillance. Nothing he said or did would be private again. It was going to be one hell of a situation.

He pondered on the events of the Boma. Not the fracas with the loudmouthed Joburg gent; that had actually transpired and he had used it only to promulgate his short-fused temper. But the clod-poll had really had it coming. He pondered on Bluetop, knowing now why she had so obviously found him fair.

At that moment, in Room 255, Bluetop arrived home. It was a fact that she was Miss Buffy Pristine, an obvious *nom-de-guerre*. She had paused at the Long Bar downstairs for a tot of blackberry brandy, becuase the change of water and altitude from London to Nairobi had upset her stomach.

She hung up her seven-thousand-dollar leopard coat, glad that she had brought it along. She had forgotten that Nairobi was six thousand feet high and that the nights could get colder than a witch's dug. Considering the brevity of her gown, the coat had become a necessity, no longer the affecta-

tion she had planned for it to be. She thought ironically how the skins had come home. The coat had been constructed from Kenyan leopards.

Buffy Pristine checked herself in the mirror, in the habit of truly chic women, to make certain she still looked perfect, before she dismantled that perfection. The gown was no more than a breath-taking intensity of aquamarine satin over a devastating chocolate figure which gleamed like smoky topaz. It barely covered her lovely firm breasts, sloped like a ski run, with congealed nipples at the end of each slope. She wore no body stocking, nothing underneath. She maintained her pubescence void of hair so that its considerable Venusian mount could pick up the satin cling and create highlights.

Satisfied with her appearance, she slid the single diamond shoulder strap off her left shoulder and peeled easily out of the gown. She was even more beautiful nude, except for an unusual phenomenon at her vulva.

Buffy Pristine was a mixed breed, the act of miscegenation having occurred thirty-one years earlier. As often happens, she had derived the best features of both races. Her white mother had donated a slender, sensitive nose, along with the slimness of her Caucasian body. Her black father had given her his startling jasper eyes, huge and domed, along with his full sexual mouth. Her aura was musky and nubbly. She seemed to be a closet of secret obscene possibilities.

She slipped into a warm robe and then stepped into her golden mules. Then she checked on her surveillance gear.

Outside the window on Hardinge Street, to the left where guests could not spot it, there was a micro-FM antenna, its beam aimed up at the suites above. From it, an opaline coaxial line fed into the apartment, down to the rug, where it tucked inconspicuously under the edge and ran to a large all-band FM-AM radio set. Actually, if you tried to operate it as a radio, you would receive nothing. She unlatched the false front and revealed a solid-state tape player and recorder behind the veneer. It was a superb instrument, highly sensitive to the human vocal range, and with a "white snow" filter to cycle out heavy water sounds. Many people used running water to hide conversation when under surveillance. The convenient feature of the instrument was that tape cassettes did not have to run constantly. The machine was triggered into action by the human voice, by a valve so sensitive that it could easily record the micro-second burp which

had turned it on. This made any vigil simple and obviated the needlessly interminable running of tapes.

Miss Pristine checked the footage of the cassette presently on the recording deck and noticed that it had had heavy use. She rewound it and played it back to herself, lighting a cigarette to pass the time as she listened. Soon, she ground out the cigarette, her eyes glowing into a muddy yellow delight at what she had heard. This is too easy, she thought; these gadflies are spidered without even getting into the web.

"Operator?" she said after raising the receiver. "I want to call long distance. London. Grosvenor eight eight one seven seven, extension seven. . . . I'll wait for your call."

The telephone soon rang. "This is London, Department Seven," a voice said. "August fifteenth. Time is ten P.M." A brief pause, then a tone beep and a click, "Scrambling. Ready for your relay. Go."

Buffy said, "This is Nairobi, August sixteenth, twelve ten A.M. Gore to Stitch on high speed." She clicked a high-speed switch and the cassette in the recorder bleated its intelligence in a brief torrent of Mickey Mouse squeals. Presently:

"Received. Are you QRT?"

"Negative. Question: Gore to Stitch: Is this too easy? Message ends. QRT."

She hung up and turned out the lights and climbed into bed. At her villa in Marrakesh, her bedroom was a ceiling, floor and wall of mirrors so that she could always see herself and her lovers. She always slept nude. She had a very high sexual threshold and had found that passionate fantasy could create orgasm in her. Buffy stirred, rubbed her breasts and sighed. She liked oddities. Kincade was an oddity. Maybe she was attracted because he too was a breed. Maybe she liked his ferality. It would be a shame to spend so much man. But it was inevitable that he would be spent, sooner or later. No other way. She wondered what he would be like, and after some frenzied concentration she found out.

Unaware of his astral affair with the blue-topped Buffy, Kincade took a shower to swab away the sloke of the day. Melisande was still awake, the whites of her frightened eyes shining starkly in the darkness. He touched her gently to reassure her. She retracted into her shell like a sensitive snail. She was being used up fast.

He scuffed back into the living room and made himself a final therapeutic Scotch-on-the-Mountain, then stood by the

windows and stared down into the chilled and quiet city. It had been quite a day. And *quite* a cast of characters.

Kincade stirred uneasily, aware in his divine soul that he was deeply jealous of Fitz-Owens. He knew he would have to control it sharply, as time went on. He stared down into Kenyatta Road and watched a black giant striding along, wrapped in a red blanket. Without warning, the body tag abaft his left ear tingled sharply, then triggered into *"Dah-dit . . . Dah . . . Dit-dit-dit-dit."* It repeated. Then silence.

Kincade was astonished. There was only one man in Nairobi who had the equipment to trigger that tag—Littlesky. And Willy was sound asleep in the next room.

Then who?

He finished the Scotch, waited a few more minutes, but there was no further communication. He went to the desk and scribbled an order for Littlesky to dispatch a message to GWIFA (which was McCabe's code name, Great White Father) under the classification *President's Eyes Only*. "Urgent you locate Dulcy Quinn instantly. Bear Paw sends." He appended a memo to Littlesky to get the intelligence off before they reached Arusha, and then, the high altitude having sapped him, he fell on the sofa and dreamed niggardly nightmares.

5

KINCADE MAY not have wanted to look like a California yahoo in the lobby of the New Stanley by striding around with express solids hanging romantically in the bullet loops of a bush jacket; nevertheless, he created more than a stir when he departed the premises. He wore his rattlesnake campaign hat as usual, but the jacket was one Fitz-Owens and Ravensmith had not seen before, and it awed them. It was of piebald pony skin, beautifully mottled black and white with an inner lining of pale-lemon sheepskin against the morning bite, and on the broad back of the jacket there was woven a spectacular wide-open scarlet hand. It was the sign of a famous Sioux war chieftain, Ta-sanke Witke, known to Americana students as Crazy Horse.

But that wasn't Kincade's only surprise. He had the legs of his worn Levis stuffed down into a pair of knee-high Apache boots. They were bright tan, soft in the foot part, with raw-

hide soles, and the legging section had been etched with a hot iron into replicas of burning suns, of waning moons and of bright stars. In the boots Kincade walked tensely on the outside rim of his feet, Indian-style.

The thing that alarmed Bwana One-Eye considerably, however, was the soft buckskin holster on Kincade's right side, not belted on but stitched into the material of the Levis. The front face of the holster was open, with two chrome bands rounding the holster itself to keep a weapon from spilling out. They were sprung, which meant that any weapon in the holster need not be drawn, just pushed forward through the springs and the gap, to be on target at least one-fifth of a second faster than if you had had to jerk it from the skin and then aim it.

People in the lobby, fortunately few, almost snickered at the costume, but neither Fitz-Owens nor Ravensmith found it amusing for different reasons. For in the black integral holster, a .44-caliber Magnum S&W revolver was squatting nastily, tipped forward slightly right at Kincade's swinging big hand, the solid turquoise stock gleaming ominously.

Behind Kincade, Melisande and Littlesky trailed in the herd dust, she in a Levi skirt and Levi jacket, with sheepskin gloves, and the Indian in the normal bush jacket and khaki trousers, delighted with his floppy brimmed *terai* which he had had trimmed in zebra.

Fitz scurried to Kincade's gun side and crowded him tightly. "You bloody silly *nugu!*" he said angrily.

"What's in your craw?" Kincade asked, surprised.

"That bloody sidearm!" Fitz said. "Are you trying to get a permanent suite at Kenyatta's jail? You can't wear a revolver openly in Nairobi! What's more, that weapon wasn't in the armament you sent me!"

"It was in my luggage."

"Will you, for the sake of my reputation, hide the damned thing until we're clear out of here?" Fitz was red-faced and tooth-grinding angry. "That's an undeclared, unregistered weapon, smuggled into this country and now being worn illegally, and if you're caught, Sweet Jesus will walk across the waters of Lake Manyara before you breathe the open air of *uhuru* again!"

"Balls," Kincade said, grunting, but he pulled the gun and buried it under his pony-skin coat, stuck into the waistband of his Levis. Fitz breathed more easily and looked around.

"Quite all right," Ravensmith said. "Mostly Americans on

one of those Hallet-Sabena tours. They don't see anything except that scarlet hand, thank God."

"Shauri ya Mungu," Fitz sighed in relief. He shot angry eyes at Kincade. "Do me no more surprises like that one, chum." Kincade shrugged.

There were two Land Rovers waiting at the curb on Hardinge Street, along with a small lorry for the baggage. "I sent the big lorries on to the Olduvai." Fitz explained. "They'll have the camp all tickety-boo for us when we arrive. Simon, you and Charles will nip off in the other *gharri.* I'll take Mama and Littlesky with me. Sorry to do it to you chaps, but the Athi Plains are a bit dusty and we don't want the mem cheesed off when we get to Amboseli. The boy in my Rover is called Njogu. He's my number two. He'll be my gunbearer when we start the hunt. I'm giving you my number one; he's in the other *gharri.* Name's Balshakkar and he's a damned good man. Rendille tribesman, from the Northern Frontier, educated a bit and speaks some English. Not as sensitive as the Kyukes, even though he's an arrogant clot and very *wa-Benzi."*

"What the hell is *wa-Benzi?"* Kincade asked.

"New Swahili slang. Literally, to the Mercedes-Benz. Actually means *nouveau riche,* Nairobi-style."

They stowed Melisande in the first jeep, with Njogu behind her showing his filed teeth brightly as he said, *"Jambo,* Mama." She smiled back at him as Littlesky slid in beside him and said, "How!" with a grin almost as large as the Kamba's.

In the second Rover, Balshakkar sat proudly at the wheel. It was obvious from the height his knees poked up that he was tall. His color was blue-black. He was ugly, and he wore a kaross of kongoni over his other clothes to keep warm. He removed his scrubby garbardine flop hat to disclose his shining naked pate momentarily, and then slapped the *terai* back on against the frosty cold. He had intelligent eyes, albeit a trifle derisive. He had a hefty sixteen-transistor radio in his lap (according to the specs on the chrome band). The antenna was dangerously extended, and the audio gain was annoyingly high as the set blared Beatle.

"The brave new world," Fitz-Owens said. "Silly beggar once bought a flick projector before he ever bought a camera. Ah, it's a fine madness. Balshakkar, this is Bwana Kincade. This is Bwana Ravensmith. They will drive with you."

"Ndio, Bwana," said Balshakkar, staring at Kincade's

jacket and boots. His eyes shined. *"Jambo,* Bwana M'Cowboy!"

"Seems as if you're hung with that epithet," Fitz-Owens said, smiling faintly.

"Better than Bwana One-Eye."

"You're so right," Fitz said. (Bastard!) "Now, if either one of you Protectors of the Poor wishes to drive—"

"Not me," Kincade said. "I'm not used to this idiotic English left-hand driving." He glanced at Ravensmith.

"Don't really mind," Ravensmith said. "Unless this *shenzi* intends to take out his psychotic jollies at the helm—"

"I drive," Balshakkar announced firmly, sparing Ravensmith a look of open contempt. "I am bloody damn fine driver!"

Fitz chuckled.

"Cheeky bloke, isn't he?" Ravensmith said.

"Snotty as a drunken Cheyenne," Kincade said heavily. He did not like this black man at all. And he did not like the ear-splitting radio. "We have to listen to that din?"

"Simama wireless," Fitz ordered.

"Ndio, Bwana." Balshakkar silenced the set. The silence was almost noisy in itself as the sounds of street traffic returned. Balshakkar pointed his big lips at Kincade. "Bwana M'Cowboy. *Kuja hapa!"* He pointed to the seat beside himself.

Kincade curled a lip. *"Ndio,* Bwana *Nyati."*

Balshakkar grinned, even at being called Bwana Baboon. Kincade slipped into the front seat. Ravensmith got into the rear. Fitz waved and started for the first Rover, then paused. "And, old cock, you will keep that bloody bazooka out of sight until we're over the border, or I'll not be accountable for your safety."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Kincade said and slunk down deep in the pony-skin jacket to keep warm.

Fitz-Owens slid under the right-hand wheel of the first Rover, with Melisande beside him and Littlesky and Njogu in the rear, turned over the engine and roared away. Balshakkar shifted and followed expertly, sparing both Ravensmith and Kincade a contemptuous smile as they headed south out of the city.

6

BY HIGH NOON, the caravan was deep in the southern edge of the Masai-Amboseli Game Reserve, where they spent an anxious fifteen minutes idling engines while a young stubborn elephant angrily refused to give right-of-way.

It was the first big game they had encountered up close, protected on the reserve, of course. He had very good ivory, roughly seventy pounds, with a marvelous right-hand tusk that curved like a Saladinese scimitar, and he had curled a whole yard of his trunk around the pointed end of the tusk. Kincade saw Fitz-Owens wave back at them to be patient. "Keep the *gharri* ticking over and chuff off fast if he charges us," Bwana One-Eye said in a moderate tone, meanwhile accepting his big .470 rifle from Njogu in the rear seat.

Kincade jerked out the S&W .44 from its holster. Balshakkar looked at him with great terrified eyes. *"Hapana! Hapana bundouki kidogo!* No, Bwana, no poppygun! *Tia! Tia!"*

"He means stow it," Ravensmith said hollowly. "I rather agree with him, Simon. Not enough weapon. Not half."

Kincade holstered the revolver. He shrugged at them in amusement. "This poppygun is loaded with special Norma steel-jacketed solids. At 1,450-foot seconds, I think I could bust into his brain pan."

"Let's not essay, old boy. Wonder what's wrong with the young spiv? Fancy he's got an ache on that tooth?"

"Kind of young for toothaches, isn't he?"

"Bonkers, then."

"More likely a bellyache. Why doesn't Fitz blast the bastard?" Kincade shifted impatiently. "We can't sit here all day."

Ravensmith said nervously, "The Game Department *babus* would raise flaming fits. We don't have any licenses for Kenya, y'know, and this is a reserve."

Fitz rose from the first Rover and yelled back at Balshakkar to *lette upesi* the wireless. Balshakkar extended the antenna to his radio set and turned up the volume of sound, pointing the speakers toward *tembo*. He turned out to be an elephant of good taste. The keening of modern rock sent him off to the east, lumbering slowly and trumpeting once with

his now detached trunk to show his displeasure. Fitz grinned back, returned the .470 to Njogu and waved them on as he continued across the Amboseli. Kincade shook his head as Balshakkar went into gear. "Through darkest Africa with blat and blare," he grunted. "Christ, isn't that something! You're safer with Simon and Garfunkel than you are with a Mag .44!"

At 2:00 P.M. the caravan halted at the Namanga River Hotel for a spot of lunch. Fitz-Owens had also brought some food in a pair of chop boxes in the *gharris,* just in case; but it would have been a hardship to push on without using the clean facilities of the Namanga haven to dust off the Athi patina and freshen up. As Fitz said, "We'll lay by tonight at the New Arusha Hotel. I mean, chums, we are on holiday, not in a mad keen race, eh? By the time we reach Arusha, Mama will be a shade fatigued, and since there's no telling how long the Game Commission blokes will delay us to register the weapons and issue the licenses I've requested, we'll take a pause and drink clouts of Tanzanian grog before it's all snaffled. Tomorrow, we'll have a nice fresh start. My boys will have us a *campi m'zuri* set up at the Olduvai Reserve, not a patch off Dr. Leakey's main tent. Besides, it might be your last chance to use a W.C. with real true-life flushing water and a bath without something live swimming in the depths." He stroked Melisande's hand gently. "Does that appeal to you, memsaab, m'love?"

She smiled warmly and said, without withdrawing her hand, "It appeals to the livid bruises on my sit-me-down."

Ravensmith, who had watched the handholding with some hidden anxiety, emitted a chuckle, more to divert Kincade than anything else. He knew the American had a short fuse. He didn't want Fitz tossing the cat amongst the pigeons.

After *chakula,* they all settled back in the Rovers, Balshakkar and Njogu having dined from the chop boxes. Littlesky (who had stayed behind for one last urination) finally came trotting out and climbed into Fitz-Owen's *gharri,* pausing just long enough to make Indian sign to Kincade in the second jeep.

Ravensmith asked narrowly, "What did *that* mean?"

"Something about his molars drowning," Kincade lied and leaned back in his bucket. Littlesky had really said that he had sent the Dulcy Quinn message on to a relay station for transmission to Admiral McCabe.

The caravan took off southward toward the borders of

Tanzania, where in an ancient Y-shaped declivity some three hundred feet in depth the Garden of Eden was located, unhoed, unweeded and unattended for nearly two million years.

7

THE BAR in the New Arusha Hotel was heavily trafficked. "Damned good thing I wired ahead for reservations," Fitz-Owens said, "or we'd have our frigid bums on the highway tonight with no place to lay by."

They had grabbed one of the few remaining tables in the noisy taproom, heavily peopled with dolorous Portuguese, loud and parsimonious Greeks, a few Arabs in their *khafiyeh* turbans, the local pukka sahibs, and, inevitably, the shrill American visitors. The din was nerve-wracking, and only the belated arrival of their sundowners—heavy dollops of gin and Angostura bitters—made the cacophony bearable. Littlesky had gone to the suite to unpack. Melisande was taking a *bafu* and freshening for dinner.

Ravensmith and Kincade and Bwana One-Eye laced into the pinkers with gusto, and after the gin had soothed their lava-stained bodies they leaned back and ordered another round, Ravensmith shouting for the chit. They watched the crowd at the bar, convoluting like a huge ball of unwinding worms. Out of the blue, Ravensmith said, "I say, Simon, you never have told us about your New Guinea headhunt."

"What?" Kincade said above the noise.

"New Guinea!" Ravensmith was adamant. "The New Guinea flap! Must have been quite a giggle!"

Kincade shrugged. "It's a long story."

"We have time to spend," Ravensmith said adamantly, "unless it was just a lark."

Kincade stared at him. "Just a publicity stunt, you mean?" He was angry.

Bwana One-Eye placated. "Well, as a matter of bloody truth, old cock, I never could understand just what the devil you were trying to prove. I mean, was it to show that headhunting isn't obsolete? That it still exists?"

"Of course it still exists!" Kincade said, tipping gin into his mouth. "Are you kidding?"

"Not a mote, old cock."

"Headhunting is one of the world's favorite pastimes,

even today, for Christ's sake! And you don't have to shag your patoot all the way down to Papua for a shot at it. Don't you bastards know anything? In New Guinea, it isn't just practiced by the Massims or the Tugeris. The Motus also. They use bamboo knives for cutting off the headskin because iron would affect the soul of the dead man. They not only take the headskin, but they have a little barbecue in celebration of the dead, and they do a little chomping on the victim too."

"Did you ever?" Ravensmith asked.

Kincade frowned at him. "Ever what?"

"Chomp?"

"I lose more friends that way, Charlie."

Fitz-Owens, lifting his towering frame from the table after draining off the last of his double gin, said, "I will leave you two perverts to the dubious ecstasies of headskins and rack-of-man, and I will use the time, I think, to take a lash at the Game Department and get the registration of weapons through and pick up the licenses. No, neither of you need come along; it can be managed with my unique charm. I'll crack back in plenty of time to greet the mem when she has thoroughly *dhobi-ed* the m.m.b.a. off her fair form."

Kincade frowned. "What the hell is this m.m.b.a. you keep mentioning?"

"Miles and miles of bloody Africa," Fitz-Owens said and whizzed off.

Ravensmith was still curious, so Kincade told him the cover story for New Guinea, a fable created by NSA to cover the bullet wound in Sam Carson's right shoulder, how Simon Kincade had been deserted by his bearers, two weeks deep into the northwest jungle, left nothing but a Bowie knife, how he had been attacked with bow-and-dart by a Motu headhunter, how he slew the Motu with the Bowie, rattaned onto a home-made spear, how he took the headskin himself and was thus befriended by the Massims, who were deadly enemies of the Motu; how he received the totem snake scar of the Massims (he showed it to the Aussie right at the table, which created some consternation).

"Left a nasty hole," Ravensmith said, feeling the old bullet wound. "I suppose arrows do do that."

"It was poisoned," Kincade said. "Laid me up for quite a while."

By then Ravensmith was no longer dubious nor querulous. The charade had worked well.

Back in his bedroom, Kincade took an Alka-Seltzer and

pressed his hot head against the icy window pane as dusk came down. He noted the bright moon, already high in the chilled sky beyond the crater of Kibo Peak, atop Mount Kilimanjaro to the northeast. The vista was eerie, a reddish scud hanging just under the mountain's crown. How different the great mound of Kilimanjaro was from the ragged upthrusts of the Grand Tetons back home. Kincade suddenly felt sadly nostalgic as his eyes grew melancholy, watching the high snows. He thought how wonderful it was for a man to be let alone and how empty it was for a man to be left alone.

Well, for one thing, Ravensmith may have penetrated him, but he had damned well penetrated Ravensmith too. I hope not too deeply, he thought, or things might get unpleasant. The vast lava-dusted prehistoric lake bottom now called the Serengeti was a superb place to commit "accidental" murder, as Kincade would shortly prove.

He did not want it proven back.

8

THEY LEFT Arusha early next day with Melisande driving the number-one Rover, since Bwana One-Eye felt rotten. He had developed a nasty fever from the leopard-clawing and swallowed a patch of penicillin tablets to knock out the infection. He sat beside Melisande with Littlesky and Njogu in the rear.

Kincade followed them through the heavily trafficked western road with Charles Ravensmith at his side and Balshakkar cocooned in his kongoni kaross against the morning's bitter chill. They threaded through Sikhs, Masai and 'Drobos, through cattle and carts and the lorries of returning safaris, bearing dusty patches and weary wounds.

Fifty miles later, en route to Lake Manyara, the traffic thinned, and as the air heated they shed their heavy stuff. When they reached the ascent to the Rift escarpment, Melisande waved Kincade alongside for Fitz-Owens' shout. "We're going straight on to the crater!" he bellowed, his face scarlet with fever. His wicked eye was weary. "Too damned many *shiftas* at Manyara! We'll snap a bite at the top of the pass!"

Manyara had been green wet country, very *tanganya,* with every species of human animal from lion-tressed Ikomas

to bare-breasted Kamba women. Here the swamps were laden with *dudus* (which the natives called their tse-tse and mosquito) and cluttered with huge fantastic butterflies. But now they left the sugarcane stalks and bunches of bananas and began the serpentine trek up to the crest of the Ngorongoro Crater as the air began to chill again.

"Why didn't Fitz stop?" Ravensmith asked.

"Too many Coffee-coolers and Loaf-a-lots," Kincade said. "Like the old days at Fort Laramie. Redskins who didn't have the balls for war would hang around the gate scrounging sugar and coffee. You had to watch your tack, or they'd lightfinger it. Too many gents without visible means of support."

Soon it became frosty. Kincade crawled back into his pony-skin jacket and put on his beaded Navajo gloves with the lacy fringes.

Several aircraft, all small, roared past them overhead, not too far above them, since they were gaining altitude all the time. Most bore the legend SAFARI AIRWAYS LTD. "There sure is a hell of a lot of action out here in Darkest Africa," Kincade said with rancor. "That's the fourth bird since we left Arusha."

Ravensmith explained, "Weekend safaris."

"You're putting me on."

"Not at all." Ravensmith was dead serious. "Fitz was telling me. Odd thing happens in Nairobi on weekends. The black gentlemen, who are taking over the white posts in civil service and in the foreign businesses, come Friday, return to their villages and life in their mud-and-wattle huts, happily disrobing themselves of the urban accouterments.

Kincade snorted. "Like the old whore said, it's the amateurs who are ruining the 'pay as you come' business. (Jesus, but it's getting colder than a Comanche's heart!) Listen, Charlie, they can't all be safari planes. What about that little DeHaviland that went over earlier?"

"Well, it might be headed for the Serengeti Research Institute out at Seronera in the reserve. Blacks are being taught animal handling, conservation and such from all the white hunters. Even Fitz puts in time at the school as an honorary ranger. Or it might be carrying some of Dr. Leakey's personnel from the Coryndon Museum or the Center of Prehistory and Paleontology in Nairobi. The young diggers come down to the Olduvai for the weekend to help search the Olduvai beds with the Leakeys. It's hardly a

wilderness in these here parts, chum. The Olduvai Gorge had over eight thousand visitors last year. Not safari people. *Visitors.*"

"Is there no place left where a man can be let alone?"

"None, I fear."

The rooster tails of dust from the Rover ahead had changed from dark red to a deathly gray, the lava silt of the Ngorongoro crater, gritty between the teeth. Soon the Crater lodge and the Kimba lodge loomed ahead at some eighty-five hundred feet of altitude. Melisande, obviously under Fitz's direction, turned her jeep off into the entrance of the Kimba lodge. Kincade followed, noting the barrenness of the area and the spindly, starving thorn trees that ranged haggardly over the terrain. He pulled up alongside the first *gharri,* and they all got out. Littlesky entered the lodge, which was perched on the edge of a deep scar where the northern lip of the great cone rose. There was still gray talcum in the air from their movement, and when it finally settled the reach of the Ngorongoro lay before him.

The breath-taking natural cauldron was at Kincade's beck, a verdant lush meadow thousands of feet below, walled by ragged cliffs which dropped in violent sheer so that it seemed impossible for anything but the eagle and the vulture ever to have roosted down there. Perhaps, once, this had been true. But now Kincade's hard eyes noted the serpentine game trails which threaded down along the precipitous walls. It was hard to believe the abundance of game which descended these perilous paths during the Serengeti migrations. He could see the herds now, far below, like colonies of grubs moving together around the rain lake. More difficult to believe was the fact that there was an auto road descending to the floor. While he watched, a Pierre Hallet tour of lorries and tourists took off with their Instamatics for a day amidst the wild game. He was suddenly aware of Ravensmith beside him as they watched the animals, small as safari ants. He controlled his awe so as not to betray the fact that he was seeing Ngorongoro for the first time. "Always reminds me of the Meteor Crater south of Winslow."

"Where?" Ravensmith said, puzzled.

"Arizona. You never saw it? Helluva thing. Big meteor hit there maybe fifty thousand years ago. Carved out a hole half a mile wide and six hundred feet deep. Of course, the Ubehebe Crater in Death Valley is better than that, eight hundred feet deep."

"My dear Simon," Ravensmith said patiently, "the Ngorongoro used to be a *volcano*. You are looking down its throat, which happens to be twelve miles wide and over two thousand feet deep."

"Grand Canyon is even deeper," Kincade said insufferably.

Annoyed, Ravensmith stalked off into the lodge as Littlesky returned from it making urgent Indian signs, after which he pointed northeast with a trembling hand.

Kincade sighed.

"Bad news?" Fitz said, curious at the signs.

"The worst," Kincade said.

Miss Dulcy Quinn was not washing diapers in Pasadena. Nor was she prospecting for shards in the Luchachuca Mountains of New Mexico, nor foraging in the Prescelly Hills of Wales. In a manner of speaking, she was just around the corner, digging in the Pleistocene beds of the Olduvai Gorge, for Adam and his brethren.

9

WHEN THEY left the Kimba lodge, Bwana One-Eye still had the fevery shakes, so Littlesky drove the first jeep. Fitz warned them all that it might be dodgy atop the pass. The Great Rift was invisible beneath a vast long cloud; the sun had vanished behind the escarpment, dropping into the Serengeti beyond.

The caravan threaded eerily through the silent sleety cotton, very touch-and-go on the snaky curves with nothing on the outer side but sheer space. They crossed the peak in dank obscurity and did not see anything until they had dropped down to eight thousand feet on the western side. Here, the flatland of the Serengeti was suddenly bathed in the sun's waning brilliance, the lovely hue of an arid old orange. Fitz stirred in the jeep ahead to wave to the northwest, where, on the dry lake floor far off, a black swath of trees detonated in three directions.

Kincade waved acknowledgment. "He must mean the Olduvai," he said. "Just a stone's throw."

It turned out to be a long stone's throw. He, Balshakkar and Ravensmith ate the gray dust of the filthy coxcomb which engulfed them from the first Rover for one solid hour before Littlesky pulled up in front of a sign. It read:

Reserved Area
OLDUVAI GORGE
Visitors to the Gorge Must Go with an Official Guide to the Camp 4½ Miles

Kincade stared at the sign in flat dread.

They hit the gorge at its center, where all three legs of the Y slither into confluence. The whole rim of the hole was covered with thorn trees, scrub and rock. As they paused on the top of the track which deeped down three hundred feet, Kincade was surprised to find the declivity more of an Arizona canyon than a proper chasm. Gorge seemed a more awesome description than called for. They paused by the Visitors' Center, where Bwana One-Eye made proper identification for the party.

Kincade followed the first *motocar* down into the canyon. As they sank toward its bottom, the heat got thick and airless, like the sinkholes of Arizona where it can be degrees hotter and oppressively more lacking in oxygen than up on the rim. It was all rocky and barren, with sparse trees studded on the striated layers of the gorge walls that showed the ancient level of the evaporating lake of which Olduvai had once been the main bowel. In the sink, they passed by two of the three dams which Dr. Leakey had erected as a sop to the Masai to keep their ruinous cattle from obliterating relics of the past.

Then they climbed up three hundred feet to the other side of the gorge where the main camp of the archaeologists was located. Beyond it, nicely situated high at the end of a long draw, was Fitz-Owens' camp, the tents pitched, the *gharris* parked, the laddybucks working and singing under the aegis of Salehe, who was the ancient black pasha of the *campi,* a Muslim; he had been with Fitz-Owens' string longer than any of the others. He was the *mzee* of all except the gunbearers.

Salehe was tall and thin, built like a creaking ladder, with his long ribs the rungs. He said he was one hundred and twenty-four years old, which, since the *mzee* counted age by two seasons, made him a white-haired sixty-two.

When he saw the caravan arrive, he instantly called to the *cho*-boy. *"Jo-jo, sikia! Bafu nne! Haraka! Mama kwanza! Pse-pse! Maji bloody moto!"*

Bwana One-Eye grinned wearily. "That would be four baths coming up, and you, Mama, will be the first to share

the joy. Salehe likes to butter up the mem. He disapproves of us hard-core types." Kincade watched as the boys filled the debbie tins with water and put them on the fire to heat. He looked at the tent city. The main station was the mess tent, of course. Then there were two double-fly tents, one for the bwana-and-memsaab-wa-safari and one more for Littlesky (which Ravensmith would now share). There was Fitz-Owens' single tent, and finally two small sanitary tents off to one side. Everything was neat, efficient and ready for occupancy.

Fitz turned to Melisande, who was openly stretching to shake the impacts of the road from her body. "Ah, Mama, m'love. That's your lair, over yon, the big one. The lads are heating your water now."

"Asante sana!" she said gratefully.

Kincade said, "Redbelly, get all of her crap into the tent."

"I'm doing, I'm doing," Littlesky grunted, heaving the *sundukis* under his arms so that he could tote the smaller cases and the cameras.

As they both moved away, Salehe approached Fitz and hurriedly whispered to him in Swahili. "I say," Bwana One-Eye replied. "That's a bit of luck." Salehe hurried to get the binoculars from the Rover.

"What's cooking?" Kincade asked.

"Salehe's been keeping an eye on the gorge," Fitz said. "Interesting. *Kwenda . . .*"

He walked to the edge of the hill overlooking the canyon below as Kincade and Ravensmith dogged along, both followed by Salehe. From where they stood, the dropping sun had already cast distorted puce shadows behind the outcrops. Salehe squatted on the rim of the canyon and then squinted.

"Kuja hapa, Bwana. Iko simba," he said softly, as if the lion might overhear him.

Fitz stepped into the same spot, knelt and raised the binoculars. "I'm bloody well damned," he said gently. "A piece of cake. Old boy is nicely ruling his roost, thank you, from his own little hidey hole. Have a stare, Simon darling."

Kincade took the glasses and peered. Fitz said, "It's tricky. The bugger has a ten-foot hole in the clay of the bluff, with two thorn trees out in front of it to hide him from anyone below or across. Also, he's married the clay with his own color."

Kincade adjusted the seven-x-fifty binocs individually on each eyepiece until every pebble in the outthrust became sharp and clean; then he slowly knelt beside Fitz. "Bingo,"

he said. He estimated the distance. "Figure four hundred yards. We could take him from here with a good scope."

"We'll have none of that," Fitz said. "All you have to do is miss the old boy, and he'll pack his kit, and we'll have the devil's own time finding him again. This is a bit of luck, that's all. Luck and old Salehe."

Salehe smiled. *"Piga simba?"*

"No," Fitz said. "Light's going. Too late. We'll *piga* the old boy *keshu*. Tomorrow. Back to the mem and the camp with you, O tracker of lions!"

Salehe nodded, delighted, and returned to the settlement while Kincade watched the lion. He was quite a lion, a very big male, and if he hadn't been so old and mangy he would have made a wonderful trophy. There was a ledge that jutted out of the headland under a lip above so that he could not be seen from topside. He could be seen, in fact, *only* from the side angle where they knelt. He was lazing luxuriously in the last rays of sun, warming his aching bones and easing his ague, one paw crossed over the other, his huge head comfortably banked against the wall behind him.

"Ndefu nyeupe," Fitz said. "White whiskers."

"Yeah," Kincade said. "He's been around the track."

"Here's the gen for tomorrow," Fitz said. "I'll let you two predators wallop him from the gorge basin. It's your *shauri,* Simon, so it's your lion."

"Hell, I don't give a damn. You take him, Charlie. I'll go along with you."

"Would you mind?" Ravensmith said excitedly. His blue eyes suddenly shone. Kincade thought, This bloodthirsty bandicoot enjoys killing. Look at him. "Fact is, I'm awfully anxious to shoot this new rifle of mine."

"What is it?"

"A Mannlicher-Schoenauer Magnum, caliber three-seven-five."

Fitz nodded. "That should serve. It's also legal."

The swift night was falling as they gathered around the roaring blaze which Salehe had built up, and the pink gins sat comfortably in the craw. Littlesky had already had his *baṭu,* and soon Melisande showed, freshed into heavy pajamas, robe and mosquito boots, and sipped on her first martini. The dark dropped instantly, and the chill enveloped them. Fitz-Owens still had a fever, but the thermometer showed it to be only 100.2 and abating. When Melisande helped him reban-dage the leopard clawing, the wound looked much better.

"I'll be in shape soon enough for you, Mama," he said after Kincade had gone to the tub. But she indicated Willy Littlesky. "Remember, Fitz, he's my bodyguard too."

"What the hey." Littlesky grinned. "Live and let live, I always say when I always say what I always say. Like, is this too much? Regard those heavenly twinklers! They're even closer to earth here than up in Wind River! And take a gander at the moon. It's on the wrong side of the tracks!" The brittle stars had snapped on abruptly, crackling and blue in the frosty sky, and so low as to seem touchable.

Fitz liked his boyishness. "Have you never been below the equator before, Willy?"

"Only when I was playing run sheep run."

"Where was that?"

"Vietnam." Littlesky grinned.

"Why, you wicked scalp hunter!" Fitz said, chuckling. "You've been sending me up! Make yourself a treacherous libation, laddybuck, and if it's true that you aborigines can't hold your whiskey, do me the favor of passing out but utterly when I'm collecting Mama."

"Sure," Littlesky said. "Besides, Papa is a much better shot."

10

KINCADE HAD heard another lorry arrive while he was abluting in the canvas tub, so he knew they had guests. A sudden lump formed in his stomach at the prospect of meeting Dulcy Quinn. He was braced to overplay his new identity to the hilt, but he knew that Dulcy was too bright to buy it, and that meant the mission would be finished.

He parted the double-fly and left the hissing glare of the Coleman lamps in his tent for the spectacular fire in the compound, large enough to burn whole trees at this point, and shooting sparks and flame high as the Fourth of July. He could see Fitz-Owens chatting with a pair of strangers, a wispy, obese professorial gentleman and a gaunt horse-faced lady of some fifty winters. He sighed in relief. Ravensmith and Littlesky were listening to the conversation politely. Melisande was fascinated. He could hear her asking, "You mean then, Dr. Elliott, that the first find, the *Zinjanthropus,* ended in a cul-de-sac, that he really wasn't an ancestor?"

"Definitely an ancestor," Dr. Elliott replied crisply, "but one that went nowhere. The same with *Homo erectus*. Dr. Leakey feels that it is *Homo hablis,* which we found close to the *Zinjanthropus* site. *Hablis* was the true forerunner of the human race, plainly the chap from whom we evolved."

"Fantastic," Melisande said breathlessly. "I mean, to be sitting here on the hallowed ground where it all began, all of us, all colors, all races, all humanity. There's something grand about it."

"A touch awesome," Dr. Elliott admitted. "Even for us who dig dinotherium molars and such."

By then, Kincade had reached the backflare of the fire, where Fitz saw him. *"Hituka,* Simon, come closer. What in the bloody hell is that strange kaross you're hung up in?"

"Buffler robe," Kincade said.

The horse-faced woman rose abruptly and strode to him. She felt the fur and then looked him straight in the eyes. Hers were candidly gray. "Impossible," she said. She shoved out a hard hand. She was tall, lean and direct, with her dark hair gray at the ears and climbing grayer. "I'm Tess Maddox."

"Simon Kincade. Howdy. American?"

"You bet your wickiup," Tess Maddox said flatly. She smiled. She had nice teeth. In fact, for a homely woman, she had a lot of sex appeal, a taut freshness. "That thing is a fake."

"No," he said. "It's a real buffler robe."

"I'll bet you my sagging C-cup that that fur is phony, Mr. Kincade."

Dr. Elliott smiled. "Watch out, old man. She's a bit of a stickler on Americana. Mrs. Maddox is a curator of the American Museum of Natural History, research section. So have a care."

"Thanks." Kincade smiled.

Fitz said, "This is Dr. Cortney Elliott, Simon. He's the senior officer present, so to speak, since the Leakeys are quite sensibly back in Nairobi at the National Center."

"Louis needs new boots. The hyenas keep eating them," Dr. Elliott said crisply as he shook hands. "My pleasure, Mr. Kincade. Glad you hunters have arrived. It's been a bit too much on the plate with this blasted *simba* stalking us nightly."

"About the robe," Tess Maddox said. "Are you trying to sell me that you have the pelt of an albino buffalo? I say that's

impossible unless you fell into a millions-to-one shot that calved up in the Flathead reserve in Montana."

Kincade grinned. "If you ain't a catamount."

"Don't understand," Fitz said. "You are saying there is no such thing as an albino buffalo?"

"I'm saying," she replied firmly, "that they are impossibly rare. They used to be sacred with the American Indian. Long time ago, maybe twenty million buffalo roamed the plains, what was called then the Great American Desert. Some estimations have gone as high as sixty million. A lot of bison. You know about the slaughter. Both the Indian and the white man killed all but a handful. But we have one statistic. Out of the southern herd, some five million buffalo, there was only *one albino* ever taken. It was shot by a hunter named Prairie-Dog Dave Morrow, and he sold it for a thousand dollars." She was very sincere.

Fitz fixed Kincade with his violet eye, now dubious. "Well, chum."

"The lady is right," Kincade said, smiling. "The robe is genuine buffler, but the color is genuine dye. I couldn't hang around waiting for a white calf."

Tess grinned. "By God, an honest man! All right, Mr. Kincade. Now you can have a drink. And you can freshen mine. Scotch and water and don't drown the poor child."

"Simon is the handle."

"Tess."

He made the drinks on the small collapsible table which had been set up as the bar by Salehe, who was standing by in his red *tarbouch,* watching the bwanas with courteous care. Somewhere off in the gorge, not too far, there was a horrid cough, followed by a rasping throat-clearing. Kincade heard Salehe mutter, *"Ngruma."*

"That's the chap," Dr. Elliott said. "He's just down below us in the wash, making his nightly. He can really be terrifying. In fact, the other eve, he larked into one of the tents. We have some American students visiting for the month, and he damned near supped on one, a girl named Dulcy Quinn."

Kincade looked disinterested, but Littlesky, like any courteous stranger, asked, "Hurt badly?"

"Not really. Beggar knocked down a tent pole which coshed her."

"We flew her into Nairobi for treatment," Tess Maddox said quietly, staring at Kincade.

11

NEXT MORNING, Fitz-Owens was rattling his teeth with chills and fever. "This crushing frost gets into me somehow," Fitz said, "but no matter. Here's the gen. Charlie, you and Simon and Njogu and Balshakkar and I will nip off and sight in the guns. I'm certain this *simba* has heard gunfire before, so we shan't scare him off. We'll run up to the rim of the gorge, just above where Dr. Leakey found the Stone Circle, three miles or whatever." Salehe came trotting in. "Yes, Salehe, *nini?*"

"Simba nataka lala," Salehe said.

"Jolly good." Fitz burned his lips on the hot *chai.* "The clapped-out old gent is basking nicely in his hidey-hole awaiting us, so down your tea and let's tantivy."

"Got to see redbelly," Kincade said.

"He's still hogging it," Ravensmith said.

"So I'll rout his ass out." Kincade strode to the other double-fly tent while Fitz and Ravensmith climbed into the jeeps.

Littlesky was wide-eyed awake. He sprang from his cot. "Safe to talk," he said in a low voice, watching through the flaps. "I've cleaned out his tent. I hope I don't chat in my sleep with this mother. Boss, watch yourself in the clinches."

"Meaning?"

"I got it on the radio last night. No chance to tell you before this. McCabe has finally identified that fourth skeleton in the Sahara. From the bullet in the back rib. It was a Chinese slug."

Kincade nodded, just listening.

"Korean War," Littlesky said. "No doubt of it. The fourth skeleton is the real Charles Ravensmith."

Kincade sighed heavily.

"Are you reading me, Pappy? In other words, this daring dingo is as phony a Charles Ravensmith as you are a Simon Kincade."

"Simon!" Fitz-Owens called from outside.

Kincade opened the flap and waved briefly, yelling, "Yeah, yeah, already!" Then he closed the flap. "Only thing is, the sonofabitch is casting me long sideways ones. I wish

we had some positive way of shaking him up and throwing him off the spoor."

"I've already handled that," Littlesky said grimly. "You'd better get on the bus."

Kincade nodded absently. "Look out for Mama." Then he left the tent and trotted to his Rover and squeezed up in front on the left side. Ravensmith was at the wheel, and he gave Kincade a long dubious look, then kicked the wheels over into a dust thrust. Fitz followed with the boys.

The gorge track above the canyon actually ran four and a half miles before it began its descent down into the deepest floor of the Olduvai. They turned off the track and parked amidst the scraggly trees on top. In the gorge's fetid bottom, heating quickly as the sun rose, they could see the shelter which housed the site of the Stone Circle. This find was a radii of rocks, some piled on each other, which might have supported branches for a primitive hut. It was one of the oldest finds in the Olduvai, perhaps two million years, and still telling its tale.

They sighted in at two hundred yards.

Ravensmith's .375 Mannlicher was a beauty; the telescopic sight on it looked like a bazooka. He settled down and started shooting. The sharp crack of his first cartridge quieted all the soft-singing barbets in the arroyo. Nine shots later, he had the weapon dead on target, as Balshakkar showed by raising a single hand, which meant the last five bullets had hit the blaze close enough to be covered with one palm. He ran up to see it for himself.

Ravensmith was delighted. "That does me, mates," he said excitedly. "I'm mustard."

"Good shooting," Fitz said. "Shouldn't have any trouble tagging the tabby. You're next, Simon darling. The Weatherby."

The Weatherby .375 Magnum had already been sighted in, back home, and it appeared the voyage to Kenya had not disturbed the telescopic settings. Simon made two windage adjustments to zero, the air being dead calm, and proceeded to lay five slugs within a four-inch circle.

"Wizard!" Fitz said. "That'll take the mickey out of poor old *simba.*"

Kincade grumbled. "It's Charlie's lion. I figured to use the shotty gun and maybe pick up some of those—what do you call guinea hens?"

"*Kanga.*"

"Yeah, well, I spotted some birds yesterday, and since Charlie is strictly gung-ho with that cannon, why double up? I'll pick up some fresh dinner after we count coup on the *doumi*."

Fitz was troubled. "Let's whiz." They all climbed back into the Rovers and returned over the upper track to the camp, where they paused. "Here is the problem," Fitz said, looking suddenly zestless. "I'm really *not* enjoying the best of health, and so I'd planned to send you two trembling spivs down into the gorge without me, while I stayed up on the rim and did the beat. You'll have Balshakkar, of course, and I'll keep Njogu."

Kincade frowned. "What do you mean, beat?"

"The lion has got to be buggered out of his box up there on the cliffside. You can't pot him from below."

"You can't shoot him from above," Ravensmith said.

"True. But I can ricochet some double-ought buckshot into the lip above him, and perhaps sting him with stones or a lucky ricochet. He must be put to some nuisance to leave the ledge or he'll be snoring away the day there. I will drive him down to you. Take him as he presents himself. He won't be charging, just moving. Not dicey really, except that I don't like to leave clients on their own that way."

"What the hell." Kincade shrugged. "You've got a .470 up on the cliff. The range won't be more than a hundred yards, shooting down. You can mother-hen us from above. Besides, Charlie's a damn good shot. Strictly Bwana *Simba*."

"I fancy it's safe," Fitz said. "But don't count on that shotty gun to turn a lion. Leopard, yes. But *simba* has a hard point of view once you've tickled him."

"I've got the poppygun too," Kincade said, shoving out the revolver in a flashing draw.

Bwana One-Eye shuddered. "For Christ's sake, Simon, stow that bloody handgun and promise me never to use it on anything but yourself! Balshakkar, *nataka shotty gun!*"

Balshakkar ran to the armory in Fitz-Owens' tent and procured Simon's Franchi over-and-under twelve-gauge shotgun, an excellent weapon with twenty-six-inch chrome-lined barrels. (Kincade purchased it originally as a slug gun for Wyoming deer.)

Then, Kincade driving the Rover, the hunters took off down into the gorge while Fitz and the others drove back along the rim to a spot above *simba's* hidey-hole.

At the first dam in the depths of the gorge, Kincade

parked the Rover off the main track. He, Ravensmith and Balshakkar dropped out. The big black had persistently tried to carry Ravensmith's rifle and been refused. Bwana Charlie would let no one touch it now. The begging became so annoying that Kincade had had to say, *"Simama,* you goddam baboon! Knock it off. Let's go wallop this pussycat!"

" 'Shakkar take Weatherby, *tafahdali?"*

"He seems to have very little faith in you, Charlie." Kincade grinned. "Wants his own bang-bang. You know how to shoot a rifle, *nyati?"*

"M'zuri damu!" Balshakkar said.

"Bloody fine my foot!" Kincade said. "Probably hit me in the back of the head. Okay, Bwana Pain-in-the-Ass, tote dat barge. Back us up with the Weatherby. But off to one side, understand? I don't want any nervous pants-shitter doing me a Macomber, thanks a lot."

"Let's get on with it," Ravensmith said quietly.

When they reached the *donga* down which Fitz had promised to drive the lion, they took up their positions. Ravensmith rested his barrel easily on a rocky outcrop. Kincade ducked behind a man-size boulder so as not to divert the lion's charge. They placed Balshakkar off to the left some distance behind them. Now the lion would have to get by all three of them or else climb the side of the gully, presenting a fine shoulder shot.

The whole area had become strangely still, except for the mechanical chonking of tourists' lorries far down the gorge where the main track crossed the bottom.

They watched the two thorn trees which covered the hidey-hole. Kincade could hear Ravensmith's hard breathing. Or was it Balshakkar's? No matter. He felt incredibly calm. The whole hunt was foregone. Charlie was really a *piga m'zuri.* No sweat. Simon spent the time slapping flies.

Above them, Fitz-Owens opened up with both barrels of his scattergun. The loud explosions echoed down the canyon. There was a hard muffled roar of anger high up behind the thorn trees. Kincade watched the cliff and saw Njogu pointing and then saw Fitz fire two more barrels of double-ought.

Now there was a mighty roar, a true *ngruma,* and they saw him. The lion had leaped from the hidey-hole to a large boulder and was moving down the walls toward the *donga.* He was very long. His coat was wheat-yellow, mildly clayed, and the tuft of his tail was charcoal black, but his mane was crewcutted by time, an awful copper hue. He was not being

hurried. He bided his time. He used every fragment of cover coming down, never presenting a target to the men on the cliffhead, still unaware that others were waiting for him below downwind. He was a smart old *doumi*. He finally paused and raised his head to the cliff, bellying an astonishing rage toward Fitz. At the same time, he presented Ravensmith with an excellent setup for a broadside killing shot.

Ravensmith quickly sighted, aimed a third down the shoulder and fired. The range was about thirty-five yards, perfect for the first trajectory bullet rise. Instantly there was a sickening *thwunk!*

"Piga!" Kincade said.

"Kufa!" Ravensmith said, elated.

Ravensmith was premature. The lion was hit, yes, but far from dead. He roared in agony and snapped violently at the right side of his own belly. Ravensmith had hit him in the lunch.

"Impossible!" Kincade heard the Aussie whisper.

Ravensmith aimed his rifle again, but the shoulder shot was gone. The lion had seen him half rise and, with another bellow of pain and fury, dived into the *donga,* stiffened his tail out like a flagpole and started a charge.

The Aussie fired at him again, head on, aiming on a spot just below the white beard. But he missed completely, the .375 exploding a geyser of gray dust near the haunches on the lion's right side.

The old boy was hitting the speed of knots. He was flat out and furious. That had been a mistake, thinking him a toothless old *budi*. His fangs were showing, yellowed, chipped but deadly.

Ravensmith did not panic. He worked the bolt and fired again, square at the muzzle of the cat, but again the bullet dug a ditch to the left and rear. Plainly the gun was way off left. Also plainly, Bwana One-Eye on the cliff was not going to be able to assist. It would be crossfire, and *simba* was much too close to them now, coming for his revenge.

Kincade saw Balshakkar raise the Weatherby and take aim. (But that was really a tough shot. He would have to lead the lion from a broadside position, and he might lead right into Ravensmith.) Balshakkar did not shoot.

Kincade stepped out from his cover. The lion was twenty feet away. He fired both shotgun barrels square into the face of the cat. The angry yellow eyes vanished into a welter of quick gore from the eighteen buckshot. *Simba* reared, carry-

ing forward, and scratched at his eyes with both paws, falling forward, rising again, coming on, and then rearing to get the blood and pellets out of his sight. His muzzle was bright red with muck, but he was not dead or dying.

When he last reared, at ten feet, Kincade sat on his backside, shoved out the S&W Magnum, and, two-handing it, fired it double-action at the lion's neck.

He knew he had broken the neck with the first shot. He could see the sudden snapping cant of the spine. But he continued to fire. Three more times. Two bullets went through the roaring open jaws into the brain. The fourth missed completely as the lion spilled, his impetus carrying him within a yard of Charlie Ravensmith, who had given up firing now and was extending the Mannlicher as the first vengeance for the lion's jaws.

The lion twitched and trembled as Kincade ran to him, poked the .44 into one ear and fired again. *"Kufa!"* Kincade said, and this time it was true.

12

NEXT MORNING, in a frigid dawn, the safari flapped up and rattled its way back to the main road across the Serengeti. Fitz had decreed that they depart early and at fifteen-minute intervals to give the dust cloud from the leading car time to settle down before the next section reached it. "Of course," Fitz said, "some ambitious Yankee bugger will undoubtedly think of the same thing, so when you overtake the crashing bore, don't make an argy-bargy out of it. Curl around the clot, take your chances on the grass, and after you pass the silly beggar, fash the muck back at him!"

"You're awfully, *awfully* colloquial this morning," Melisande said wryly.

"Fact is," said Fitz-Owens, "I'm still awfully, *awfully* pissed and happy as dammit from the do we pitched last night. Which means, even though my arm is mending sweetly, and my ague fading, I think perhaps Charles will drive my *gharri* today. If you don't mind, old kiwi? That means, we'll be somewhat crowded, what with you, Mama, Njogu and myself, but it's not a bad lilt."

By the time they dust-clouded down into the Olduvai's sink and up the other rise which led back to the main road, only

one soul in the Leakey camp was up to wave *kwaheri*—Tess Maddox. She made the effort while the others were still hogging it in their tents. Still tiddily, she waved a glass of fresh beer at them in passing and shouted, "See you in London."

Kincade, who was driving the Land Rover with Littlesky and Balshakkar, stopped, hopped out and gave her a resounding kiss, which (she said) would have made her pregnant if she hadn't hit menopause the night before. Then, the group drove away, and she vanished in the rising cloud of dirt which would quickly silt up her drink. She downed the beer in prevention and then smashed the glass as if she were tossing a piece of auld-lang-syne crystal into some elegant fireplace.

Some ambitious Yankee bugger was not on the road across the great plain. It was clean of everything except the safari and the herds of wildebeest and zebra quite far off, seen only in the dust which marked their movement. Dust was a good indication of the safari itself. Far, far to the west, they could see the settling cloud of the heavier lorries, closer the cloud of Bwana One-Eye's Rover. Their own passage hung a high wake behind them, blotting out the mountains to the east.

"I'll have a beer, Tonto," Kincade said.

"*Ndio,* great honky," Littlesky said. He selected one from the untidy splash of miscellany atop the dashboard of the Rover, everything from Alka-Seltzer, toilet paper, cameras, cigarettes, matches, bug oil and sunburn lotion, to toothpicks, the S&W .44 (which was uncomfortable at the hip in a long trek), a *tinnakata,* and a bottle opener which Littlesky now used and passed the bottle over. The *beer-i* was as cold as the morning.

"Thanks, redbelly. That was a helluva barbecue last night."

Littlesky grinned. "A nice clean-cut massacre. I'm sorry Chivington missed it. The way you guzzled, Bwana, this safari is going to run out of gin, gall bladder and courtesy. You're going to feel plenty lousy later. Like *kte ota.*" He used the Sioux words for "very dead."

"It was worth it," Kincade said, smiling. "Man! That lion! A thing like that is to be highly recommended for any bad case of constipation."

"It wasn't supposed to be that close a call," Littlesky said.

Yes, Kincade was thinking. That was the mystery of it. What had happened to Ravensmith's rifle?

Poor Charlie. Kincade felt sorry for the guy. God knows, Charlie was a fine shot. God knows, Charlie had sighted that

Mannlicher in perfectly. God knows, Charlie had guts; he would have stayed and fed *simba* the last bullet and the barrel for breakfast.

What had happened? Certainly not buck fever. You could see the way his bullets were striking that he was dead on the range but off to the left a foot every time. When they had, on his insistence, gone back to the sighting range and tried the rifle there, he still missed the old blaze by one foot to the left. The instant he adjusted the windage to zero, the rifle came back to true. That meant that he—or someone—had turned the windage wheel on the telescope two full turns to the left.

"Impossible!" Ravensmith said. "Not flaming likely! I'm not exactly some trembling beggar who's never pegged out a lion before!"

"Charlie, pard," Kincade said, "think! You never let go of the gun after you sighted in. I remember Balshakkar asking to carry the *bundouki* for you several times, until I had to shut him up."

"That's true." Ravensmith frowned, disturbed.

Fitz-Owens said very gently, "Charles, old man, it often happens. Even I have diddled on the guns, in my time. It's the anticipation, while you're waiting with a thornbush stabbing your arse or with a blasted caterpillar crawling up your leg."

"No," Ravensmith said quietly. "My memory isn't dry as bones, Fitz. I did not touch the windage." He shook his head darkly, pacing to and fro. "I never touched it. It's almost as if someone tried to kill me."

"Then someone tried to kill both of us," Kincade said. "Me, I don't hunt lions with a scattergun."

There had been no arguing that. Ravensmith became instantly contrite. "I *am* a clot," he said. "Simon, I apologize, very stupid of me. And I haven't even bothered to express my gratitude." He gave Kincade a heartfelt hug. "You saved my life."

"What the hell, it was a dull day," Kincade said.

"But you did. Really. *You saved my life.*"

"You are mouthing gibberish," Fitz-Owens said. "What was Simon supposed to do, you silly beggar? Take *pichas* for *News of the World*? Or sniff some Masai mimosa like Ferdinand the Bull?"

"I mean, I'm grateful."

"Forget it," Kincade said. "Let's try for a hangover."

Now, having a second beer as he drove across the great plain, listening with grated teeth to the noisome spillings of Balshakkar's magic wireless, Kincade was giggly-glad that the Aussie was in his debt. Ravensmith had begun to smell a rat. Now the rat was dead. If you are a counteragent, you simply do not save the life of the man who is out to make you meat.

"*Wait* a second!" Kincade said suddenly. He stared at Littlesky with hard black eyes. "What do you mean—it was not supposed to be *that* close a call?"

Littlesky grinned. He turned to Balshakkar, motioned for the black to turn down the music and then shouted, "Hey, *mzee,* tell Bwana M'Cowboy who fixed Bwana Charlie's *bundouki?*"

Balshakkar showed beautiful teeth. "I fix. I fix *m'zuri damu!*"

Kincade braked the Rover into a four-wheel lock that piled their own dust up and over them. "Are you out of your fucking mind?" he shrieked at Littlesky, who winced and retreated. He lapsed into Shoshoni. "How much this black white man know?" (In the Indian world, the Negro came after the white man, who was known as *wacikun,* or bad medicine. *Wacikun sappa* became black bad medicine.)

"Something had to be done," Littlesky said, shaking, "and this clown made the right magic."

"Ravensmith never let the rifle out of his hands!"

"*Hapana 'kweli,* Bwana," Balshakkar said. "Not true. Once he give gun. When he look at tree, I turn wheel *upesi sana.* Plenty *haraka.*"

Yes, true enough. After the Aussie had shot his nine and sighted in perfectly, he had run to the tree to check out the hits, not trusting the big blue-black gunbearer. He had handed the rifle briefly to Balshakkar while he examined the holes, then taken it back.

Balshakkar had really hurried indeed to turn the windage wheel twice. Thank God Ravensmith had forgotten that brief moment!

Kincade put the *gharri* in gear, and they spun off again as he angrily speeded up for the lost time. He threw Littlesky a malevolent sneer. "Silly sonofabitch!"

"Not all all, boss," Littlesky said. "Old 'Shakkar here, he didn't want the competition bagging the first *simba.* He's gotten very fond of you. You're his John Wayne image. He seems to have worked with the Hawks company when Wayne

made *Hatari* around here some years ago. So he figured you'd use the Weatherby, and, when Ravensmith blew it, you'd come out smelling like a rose."

"Hand me another beer."

Littlesky plucked another bottle from the holder above the dashboard and jerked off the cap with the opener. "So when old 'Shakkar realized you were going to use the bellybuster instead of a rifle, he tried to get back Ravensmith's gun so that he could reset the windage wheel. And you, great honky, told him to leave your pal alone and shut up. After that, all he could do was back you up with your own Weatherby, and he never got a chance to use it. So we lucked in."

Kincade said, "How much does this black bugger know?"

"Nothing. Nohow. He's just an innocent ex-cannibal who's all hung up on Bwana M'Cowboy."

Kincade stared dubiously. He said, "Was it true—that smoke signal about the bones at Timbuctoo?"

"Strictly on the level. And that's what's so great, baby. The Stoner of Crows was sniffing at your back pocket like a hungry hyena. Now he's your pal. You saved his rosy cheeks. From here on, you're just another victim instead of playing I Spy. Makes life worth living now. Only half a chance of getting killed. He's ready for the Hemingway."

"You talk too goddam much," Kincade said, casting angry glances back at Balshakkar in the rear mirror. But the big gunbearer had his blasting radio up to his ear and was beating out cadences with his free fingers on his lower lip as if he were playing a Jew's harp.

13

THE GROUP at the Olduvai were delighted to be rid of the old lion. He had become a perilous nuisance, and now they would only have to worry about the hyenas stealing whatever could be eaten. Kincade remembered the dancing. Drunkenly he had swung his partner, Tess Maddox, who had a lot of staying power for an old broad. He remembered Bwana One-Eye changing to a super leering eyepatch as he hand-held his way around Melisande. He remembered Charlie Ravensmith drinking hard and crying real tears —wetting his Nelly Blyes—as he declaimed to the professors and the scientists of the Leakey group how the Cowboy had

saved his worthless life. It was a real wingdinging hoedown. It terminated with Big Chief Kincade stripped down to a bikini-sized pair of shorts, despite the coldness of the darkness, dancing an old Shoshoni war stomp around the roaring flames, carrying the tail tuft of the lion atop a 'Drobo spear, while everybody admired his New Guinean "arrow" wound in the right shoulder and his "Massim" initiation snake scar across his belly. In all his lifetime, he had never been felt and prodded so much without sexual intent, and he was pleased to see that Charles Ravensmith was the least curious.

Far across the Serengeti, the therapeutic powers of beer began to wane. The green nimbus cloud started its crushing descent. Littlesky noted his poisoned color and said, "Town called Seronera is just around the corner. I'll drive from there."

"What corner?" Kincade grunted, staring at the vast plain and the straight road.

Balshakkar pointed at a darkening ahead. "Seronera *kuja sasa.*"

They paused briefly at the game-control outpost while Littlesky took up a knapsack and went off on some mysterious business. Balshakkar stayed in the Land Rover with Kincade, who slid over to the left side, leaving the wheel free. It was hot now. He got rid of the pony-skin coat, which Balshakkar embraced like a true fan. Kincade dropped off painfully into a snoring snooze. He vaguely heard Littlesky return, heard the engine start and would have kept his eyes shut if Littlesky hadn't elbowed him hard.

"Honey baby," Littlesky said.

"For God's sake."

"Old Flatface has just relayed us some more clippings for your scrapbook."

Kincade jerked sharply awake. "Hobble your lip!"

Littlesky peered at the rear-view mirror. "He's gone beddy-bye."

Kincade glanced back swiftly. Balshakkar seemed to be sound asleep. His snore had true timbre. Even so: "You're giving this gorilla behind me great credit for a great lack of intelligence, aren't you, redbelly?"

"I figure it this way, Bwana. If that cat is smart enough to dig this scene over the engine, the wind and my eclectic colloquia, then he ought to be back in Nairobi filling Tom

Mboya's vacant chair and arguing with Double-O Odinga on tribalism versus a democratic state."

"Sure." Kincade stared at him hard. "Except the chips you're playing the game with are *me*." He shook his head. "I'll never understand how we lucked in so good at the Olduvai. Nobody ever passed the law of probability in a congress, but having a beat-up old lion drive out an auld acquaintance named Dulcy Quinn the night before her possible identification of me is too much. Just *too* goddam much."

"True," said Littlesky smugly.

"You know something I don't know."

"Lots."

"Share the thought."

"You told me to hobble my lip."

"I'll hobble your jaw if you don't let up on the smart-assing."

"*That's* my old boss!" Littlesky said, grinning. "Full of vicious vim and violent vigor. Which reminds me. How'd you like the old squaw?"

"Who, Tess Maddox?" Kincade ruminated for a moment. "A great dame. I mean, just *great*."

Littlesky smiled.

Kincade stared at Littlesky. "So that's it."

"Yassa, massa."

"Impossible. Not enough time. You sent the message from Arusha. Even if Tess grabbed the first Pan Am bird to Dar-es-Salaam, she couldn't have beaten us here in time from New York."

Littlesky smiled. "Oh, Mrs. Maddox was already here. It was just a case of Flatface briefing her from long range."

"How was that accomplished, if I may ask?" Kincade's voice was bittersweet.

"One of those planes that grasshoppered over us on the way to the Ngoronogoro crater. Another friend of the family."

"Who?"

"I don't know, and by Jesus, I don't *want* to know," Littlesky said fervently. "I've got my own *shauri* to run, and I didn't exactly graduate *magna cum laude* at UCLA. I'm just a poor struggling Indian child in a bigoted world, trying to live a good clean life—"

Kincade made Indian sign, a sharp cut across the face, which meant Stop-or-else. Littlesky stopped instantly. Kin-

cade frowned, "Still don't see it. How could Tess have worked the lion thing—"

"Easy, boss. The lion was around and about and scaring hell out of the camp. She just used the ploy. She konked your lady love with a six-cell flashlight, right on the medulla oblongata, and then knocked down the lodge pole across Miss Quinn just for good measure. Naturally she was the first one there, the first to assist, and the first to say what happened, even if it didn't."

"Guts," Kincade said quietly. "If I was fifteen years older—"

"You wouldn't have a chance. That old squaw would screw you rubber-brains."

Kincade said, "And then she forced Dr. Whozis to send Dulcy into Nairobi for hospital treatment."

"Oh, the gal needed treatment. Tess opened up a nice little gash. That was no problem." He smiled. "All caught up, boss?"

Kincade shook his head. "You never catch up with that nitty-gritty admiral. . . . Try and stay on the road."

His head still ached considerably as he corked off, but he slept soundly. When he awakened, disturbed by the lack of noise and motion, he was in the heart of the new *camp-i,* deep in the control block which the Tanzanian Game Control Commission had assigned to Bwana One-Eye for the safari.

14

THE FIRST NIGHT was quiet enough. Except for the bleating bush babies and the xylophonic gigglings of the hyenas, who kept tripping over the tent ropes, and the ominous heavy sawing of prowling leopards, and the hard coughing hunting grunt of asthmatic lions and the tintinabulation of all the bugs of Tanzania.

But in the bright morning, when the big casaba of a sun sprang ripe and full out of the east, Kincade began to appreciate the beauty of the spot that Fitz-Owens had chosen for base camp.

It was paradise. The tents were neatly ensconced on the apex of a small green hill, spread in an arc of 180 degrees, under the spreading bumbleshoots of a group of flam-

boyant fever trees. To the north, other rises swelled away like the big soft seas of a jade ocean. These, truly, were the green hills of Africa. To the west, half a mile distant and sparkling in the young sunlight, a rill of the Lululapa River extended to them, providing water, and marshes, fens and bogs with the texture of warm magma, the sort of earth that the wild game seeks when it goes to waterhole. To the south, there was real jungle country, lush, green and damp with thick cover for the stealthier game, such as leopard. To the glorious east, the plain stretched out infinitely, bright yellow from sunburnt grass and studded with splashed colors of wild flowers. Far off, zebra, impala and Tommy gazelle were grazing peacefully and warily.

Kincade felt a richness of spirit which filled his throat. A movement beside him enhanced the feeling momentarily as Melisande's hand found his. She was breathless from the vista. "Beautiful, isn't it, Simon?" she said. "Just utterly lovely. For one exquisite moment you can't see all the lurking death in it."

Fitz-Owens rounded the corner of the tent wearing his evil eyepatch, his good eye violently violet in the crispness of the morning. "Come along, you cot-hoggers," he said pontifically. "And none of that gaspy keen sex madness, thank you. Can't have ancient married types exercising the hand-hold approach at this decaying hour—"

"Decaying hour?" Melisande said. "Why, it's only eight o'clock."

Fitz grinned. "I let you soft souls ziz away out of deep consideration for your damaged bums and outraged livers. Let me remind you, the normal safari reveille—which is when Githiri hands you your morning *chai*—will be five A.M. and no screams of anguish if you don't mind. Scares off the game."

"So we're not hunting today?" Kincade asked.

"We shall see," Fitz-Owens said softly with a secret smile. He took Mama's arm firmly, pulled her from Kincade and led her into the compound where white-haired Salehe was watching the capricious cook, making hot rolls in a debbie tin on the fire. Willy Littlesky was sitting at the morning table with Ravensmith. They were both dressed, Littlesky to the nines in his new bush jacket. The smell of rich coffee permeated the air along with the indescribable scent of the fresh-baked bread. Everybody said *H'jambo,* or Good morn-

ing, chums, or *washte* or whatever, and they fell to the *chakula* with vulgar zest and ate ravenously.

It was a while before anyone spoke. Littlesky said, "How's your head, boss?"

"The hair still hurts a little," Kincade said.

"And your arm, Fitz?" Ravensmith asked, piling a mountain of Scotch marmalade on a steaming biscuit.

"Tickety-boo, thank you." Bwana One-Eye was very cheerful. "Bloody fever is down too. Feel well enough to hunt Cape buffalo by hand."

"*Good* show," Littlesky said, rising.

"Where you going?" Kincade asked.

"To the sanitary tent. *If* you don't mind."

Littlesky stalked off. Kincade shrugged him away. "My God, that sure was an abattoir of an orgy at the Olduvai, wasn't it? Rain dances. Lion dances. War dances. And all on account of one decayed old puddycat. What happens to the gall bladder when Charlie collects his record rhino?"

Melisande grimaced. "I shudder to think."

"May be sooner than Christmas," Fitz-Owens said. "Charlie could get lucky. Yesterday late, while you self-defiled tourists were suffering from the overeffects, I sent out Njogu and Githiri to look over the game and do some tracking. The very interesting find is yours, Charlie. Njogu!"

The file-tooth little Kamba came running over to the table. "*Ndio,* Bwana?"

"Tell Bwana Charlie what you found, Njogu."

Njogu grinned. "*Abahati!* Very lucky." He pointed south. "*Mingi m'kubwa kifaru, m'kubwa doumi.*" He extended his hands as far apart as they could get.

Ravensmith's eyes darkened to turquoise. "Am I catching this chap's meaning?"

"He says, old boy, that he spotted a gaggle of huge rhinos," Fitz-Owens said, smiling secretly as he enjoyed the expression on the Aussie's face.

"*Wapi?*" Ravensmith asked, hiding his excitement.

"*Kumi ya gharri.*"

"Ten miles by the Rover," Fitz-Owens explained, quite unnecessarily. "*Asante,* Njogu. Stand by. I fancy that Bwana Charlie will be screaming for the four-seventy as soon as he terminates a pretense of icy calmness and stops dripping that coffee all over his trembling chin. Charles, I think I should use the big double on old *faro.* Balshakkar will go

with you too. He shoots creditably. Let him back you up with the Mannlicher."

"Simon, you're sure you don't mind? I shan't be tossing the jockey, dashing off this way?"

Kincade grinned. "Wear your rhino in good health, Charlie."

"Thanks awfully." Ravensmith couldn't wait to rise. "I think I'll be getting on with it. Long drive. Getting late."

"Don't forget to take a chop box with you," Fitz said.

Ravensmith barely heard him. He had already waved Njogu and Balshakkar into a Rover, and five minutes later, hugging the neutral ground between the yellow plain and the clover-green forest, he vanished southerly.

"Silly beggar," Fitz-Owens said, smiling. "Why are the most devious always the most naïve?"

Kincade said, "I thought that rhino frustration of his was pure gambit." Melisande was puzzled at both of them.

"No. Quite real. He ran from one once on that safari with me." Fitz began to chuckle openly.

"What are you two raving about?" Melisande asked.

"That darling cannibal of mine," Fitz said.

"Njogu?"

"Really, that snaggle-toothed old Janus lies like a white man. Such intensity! Such heartfelt sincerity!"

Melisande looked blank. "I'm lost."

Kincade said, "He means that Bwana Charlie has just been sent after the wild goose instead of the big-horned rhino."

"Precisely," Fitz said. "Not a bloody *kifaru* in the entire area south. Now now, Mama, don't knit a brow. It's simple. Your *watu nyekundu*—red man—prevailed upon me to call a high-level meeting, and since Charlie is not a member of this Parliament, I sent him after the Questing Beast."

Littlesky came across the compound from the privacy of one of the sanitary tents, looking very serious. When he reached the table, Kincade asked in Shoshoni, "You make smoke?"

Littlesky said in Shoshoni, "Heap much."

"Damned if you will!" Fitz-Owens said mildly. "I'm in this mucky little *luga* as much as you chums, and since I'm to be the corpse, we shall discuss all intimacies in a language which I understand."

"Well," said Littlesky, glancing around at the boys in the *camp-i*. "I'd rather we went hunting or something. It's un-

likely, but Uncle Platypussy may have mikes rigged here for stowage of info on tape. I'd feel better away from the big city."

Fitz nodded. "As a matter of fact, we do have to pack in some fresh meat, not only for ourselves but for the boys. They've been urbanized too long. They're dying for some *punda* fat, and we could certainly enjoy some Tommy chops tonight."

"Fine," Littlesky said. "Let's put the *shauri* on the road."

15

THE SUN HEATED the open plain rapidly as it rose. Melisande sat on Kincade's lap; Fitz-Owens was driving. Littlesky bounced in the rear with Githiri, whose sharp eyes were searching not only for game but the anthill which would afford the hunter some cover. There was no hurry. Fitz-Owens drove in a leisurely fashion, watching for pig holes. He said, "Bwana Aborigine, how do you know that the Charlie hasn't bugged the Rover?"

"Because I checked it out," Littlesky said flatly.

Fitz-Owens shook his head. "I was jesting, old boy. I mean, after all, this establishment isn't all that omniscient, is it?"

"That kind of thinking loses scalps," Littlesky said. "So, here is the news of the day—"

Fitz-Owens raised a hand. "Hold up before you clue us in. How the devil *do* you communicate, and where do you communicate, and with whom do you communicate?"

Littlesky stared at Githiri.

Fitz said, "He can't speak or understand one bloody word of English."

Kincade nodded to Littlesky that it was all right.

"Where? Seronera. Eighty miles." Littlesky sighed. He disapproved of this break of security. Fitz-Owens was cleared through highest British maxsec. But when you broke one rule, the others might get fractured. Still, he saw Kincade's viewpoint. Fitz was playing the most dangerous part of the African act. Maybe he did have a right to know. "The transmitter is this suit I'm wearing."

Bwana One-Eye looked astonished. "Not really. You mean, the Ahmed Brothers in Nairobi are making spy toilette—"

"This isn't the one I bought in Nairobi. This is the one the NSA had made for me from Ahmed Brothers designs. I bought the one in Nairobi for cover. It was shoved in a garbage pail before we ever left Kenya. This whole outfit is a piece of pliable copper. Long-range batteries in the lapels, very thin. Short range in the third button. Amplifier in the second button. Rf section in the first button. Microphone is at the lapel hole and in the piping of the cording. Extra batteries in the phony bullets in the thongs. This suit has a big range."

"My word!" Fitz felt the suit, staring at it. "And whom do you chitter with?"

"MI six," Littlesky said. "Exactly who is classified, even to you, Fitz."

"Sir Julian Keys? He was the *tembo* who lured me into this pit. You won't say? Pity. Still, I'm sure it's he."

"Let's knock off the conjecture," Littlesky said in the strict voice of a spymaster. "We've got to review the entire setup because on Thursday everything will be go."

Fitz asked, "What happens on Thursday?"

"You get killed."

"Thank God." Fitz sighed. "With this rotten arm and this cocked-up safari and my fever, I thought I'd never go."

Littlesky didn't think it was so funny. "Here is the sked. Tomorrow: The boss and Ravensmith go rhino hunting again. You stay home. Mama stays home. Mama takes care of you."

"Jolly good!" Fitz leered, cocking the evil eyepatch at Melisande. "My mind boggles at the prospect! What a ridotto we shall toss, eh, Mama?"

Kincade stared at him with glittering black eyes.

Littlesky continued: "When the boss and Bwana Charlie return to camp, they find you and Melisande in *flagrante delicto*. There is a scrummage. He disowns the bride. You stop drinking his whiskey. I mediate."

"That," Fitz said, "is the only reason I accepted this patriotic commission—"

"Please," Melisande said. "Be serious, Fitz."

"Deadly serious, m'love."

Littlesky noted Kincade's lower lip hardening and his brow lowering. Littlesky said, "Fitz. The gambit calls for you to fake this love grab. At exactly three P.M. tomorrow."

"Dear chum, I'm a man of honor. Even if I wanted to fake it, how could I, with beautiful Mama in the buff?"

"Stop the car," Kincade said. When Fitz-Owens did, leav-

ing the engine just ticking over, Githiri wondering why Bwana One-Eye was not continuing to approach the herd of Tommies not far distant, and with lumpy anthills to provide a good shooting blind. Kincade leaned across Melisande in the front seat. He said quietly, "You may be kidding. I don't think you are. But if you try anything sticky with Mel, you could lose your other eye."

Fitz-Owens smiled, undaunted. "I don't think so. And what makes you the keeper of the chastity belt? Mama's a grown girl."

"I meant what I said."

"Undoubtedly, old darling. Frightfully moral of you. All that. But you simply couldn't handle the job, Simon. Not with my one eye and my fevered brow and my wounded arm."

Littlesky said, "The boss gives Mama back to the Indians. Pardon the expression. Bwana One-Eye takes Mama hunting, with Njogu. I go along to keep the peace. Pardon the expression. In some anger, the boss scouts us, taking Charlie along."

"Dangerous," Fitz-Owens said. "Do you think he will believe the makeup?"

"Anybody will believe the makeup," Kincade said. "It's brilliant. First time I saw it on redbelly, I nearly threw up, it was so real."

"Besides," Littlesky said, "he'll just get one look at it through the blood before I cover the body. One look will show the man you're dead. It's really quite a hunk of scenery."

"I fancy," Fitz said. "If he sees through it, you realize, we'll have to kill *him* or incarcerate him for the duration."

"It'll work," said Littlesky.

Melisande was curious. "What is it like? I never saw it. Simon wouldn't let me see it the night you"—she meant the Indian—"wore it in the house at Natrona."

"Fantastic," Kincade said. "Max's Factory made it specially for NSA. It's as if Fitz puts on a whole new body. A thick foam-rubber sort of shirt, short-sleeved. Worn right under his hunting blouse. All he has to do is rip the shirt open and hit two spots in the foam rubber, and Technicolor movie blood spills out everywhere. As for the wound, the entrance hole is built for a three-seventy-five entry, but the exit hole—Fitz will be shot in the back, so the exit hole is in front—the exit is God-awful appalling. Too much gun for a man. Huge horrible gaping hole, with a piece of his

heart hanging out, splintered rubber rib, broken off like a dagger, sticking out, and residue flesh ooze . . . I tell you, Mel, I went green when that goddam spiv came into the living room back in Wyoming that night." He threw Littlesky a malevolent look in remembrance. The Indian grinned.

"It's real enough, mem, m'love," Fitz said, driving closer to the Tommies. "But so is Ravensmith. It should be useful, however. Charles will be watching Simon more than my poor shattered bod."

Littlesky consulted the notes. "Now, here's how we do it. We will require one rhino. Any rhino. Any size horn. Any sex, even *wmanamouki.*"

"The *faro* will turn, no matter where you hit him," Fitz explained.

Littlesky continued, "Fitz-Owens, Mama and I are in the vanguard, with Njogu on the flanks. Bwana M'Cowboy and Ravensmith are a hundred yards behind us, watching us to keep pattycake off the prairie. The rhino charges. One-Eye, with a four-fifty-eight, gets a phony gun jam. He works at the breech and yells. Bwana M'Cowboy uses a three-seventy-five and tries to shoot the rhino, like the Francis Macomber affair. He misses the rhino and hits One-Eye in the back. Actually, his bullet will be high and will cut between you, Melisande and One-Eye. You'll be six feet to One-Eye's left and *stay there. Don't move an inch.*"

Melisande tried to think. "But if Fitz is theoretically shot and falls, who stops the rhino?"

"I'm the takeout," Littlesky said. "I'll have a four-seventy off on the side. You'll have the thirty-oh-six. Bwana M'Cowboy still will have four slugs left in his Weatherby. Don't worry. We'll stop the *faro.* And then the fun begins."

Fitz-Owens tugged off his double-brim and ran his big fingers through his yellow crop as he drove left-handed, wincing a trifle at the leopard-clawing. "The usual form in these accidents is for the blacks to see the manner of the accident so they can be pertinent witnesses back in Arusha. Not to get complicated. To keep it simple. They see the shooting. They see the dead man. They see the rhino. They keen in mourning for their beloved Bwana One-Eye and the play is over."

"Not quite," Littlesky said. "I send 'Shakkar back to the *campi-i* to radio Seronera from your field set. Seronera sends the chopper, loaded with MI six. They pick up your cadaver

and fly you out. Not to Arusha. To nowhere. Ostensibly, since meat doesn't keep well in this country, they ascertain the manner of death and then bury you."

Kincade asked, "Where *are* they hiding you until the Keyhole mission is finished?"

"On one of your bloody nuclear submarines!" Fitz-Owens said briskly. "Without shore leave or *wmanamoukis!* So be good chaps, eh? Don't take forever to bring the game to bay." Githiri touched him gently on the shoulder. "Yes, I see it. Now then, chums, since my future rests in your shooting eye, one of you to nail a rhino and the other to *miss* me by a split hair, suppose you cheer me up considerably by demonstrating your skill. That Tommy ram there, at the head of the herd."

Kincade said, "I'll take him." To Githiri: *"Toa* Weatherby."

"Isn't three-seventy-five too much gun?" Fitz asked. "There's supposed to be some meat left for us to eat."

"Better use the same gun I'm using on you."

"Righto. Drop off by the anthill. Githiri, *kwenda kwa* Bwana M'Cowboy."

He wheeled the Rover close to the big anthilll, and Kincade dove out with the Weatherby, followed by Githiri. Fitz-Owens wheeled the jeep two hundred legal yards away and swung around in a circle. As he did so, the rifle cracked, and instantly there was the sound of the bullet hitting home. Not a *tunk,* however. More of a *karak.*

"I'll be damned!" Fitz said to Melisande. "That lad of yours doesn't play post office. *Piga. Kufa.* He shot the head off, or Bob's your blooming uncle."

The herd had high-tailed, literally, after the *nyama* fell in his tracks with the top of his head blown off. Githiri, who was not Moslem, nevertheless performed a *hallal* throat-cutting on the Tommy so that the Islamic boys in camp could safely eat the meat. As the black tied the ram onto the rear of the *gharri,* Kincade climbed back aboard. "I suppose you actually aimed at his head?" Fitz said.

"Naw," Kincade said. "I was shooting up his arsehole, and he turned on me." He handed the rifle back to Githiri, who was pleased and proud of Bwana M'Cowboy. *"M'zuri, m'zuri,"* he kept saying, pleased.

"Jolly well done," Fitz-Owens said. "Now that we've proven I won't get pranged by Simon, let's go make sure I don't get pranged by the rhino. Willy—you take the next one, which will be zebra. If I were you, I'd—"

"Sure," Littlesky interrupted, his dark eyes glinting. "I know just what you mean. *Toa* thirty-ho-six, Githiri!"

They rode south down the plain until they reached the grazing zebra herd. The *punda milia* seemed very settled down, milling gently in large circles. Fitz said, "Right out of the box. They're happy as Christmas. That rather obese type toward us in the rear, Willy. The boys will love his fat."

Littlesky dumped out onto the ground, with Githiri falling after him. The Rover sped off again, and when Fitz made his turn at two hundred yards to see the action, it was over. Again the rifle sharpness, again the *karak* instead of a flesh *tunk*. When the Rover had reached the scene, after Kincade and Fitz-Owens had exchanged eloquent glances, Githiri was leaping with joy at such a marksman. Littlesky climbed into the jeep and stowed the 30.06 in the gun rack. He had shot the *punda* behind the ear. The *punda* never knew what hit him.

"Well, that's settled," Bwana One-Eye said in awe. He stared at the Indian. "When do they start teaching you gunnery—in the cradle?"

"Yep," Littlesky said blandly. "Shooting the flies off our toes."

"Let us *kwenda* the hell out of here," Fitz said after the zebra was lashed aboard the bonnet. "I could use a pinker."

16

NEXT DAY, eight miles southeast of the main *camp-i*, Ravensmith was easing the Rover along, with Kincade at his side, and both Njogu and Balshakkar erect in the rear, hanging onto the gun rack. Ravensmith was outraged. His leptorhine nose was sharper than usual. He said bitterly, "Damn that flaming fool Fitz. He's been sending me up! Two days of beating this bush with no sign but half-arsed ostriches scaring off any real game. You wouldn't read it!" He stepped heavily on the throttle. "I've had it, Simon! Let's go back."

Kincade checked his watch. It was too early for the copulation confrontation in camp. "There might be some sign down by the river, Charlie."

"Blast!" Ravensmith said. "This just isn't rhino country. I have *had* it."

"Whatever you say, pard," Kincade said, settling back, thinking of some way to delay them.

They returned listlessly, Ravensmith nattering incessantly like a spoiled child. They threaded on a route between the polychromatic plain to the east and the damp whispering river forest to the west. It was a soft lovely day, growing hotter. Kincade grunted assents to the Aussie's niggardly comments and was puzzled at the petulance of a man so cold-blooded that he could be Scissor for Keyhole.

Not odd really. Cruel people are childish; all children are cruel. He began to wish that Charlie would really stumble over a *faro* with a thirty-inch sticker. Anything to relieve this mountain of frustration which was building inside the man.

Suddenly Balshakkar barked, *"Kitambile!"*

Kincade didn't see the brace of cheetahs, only the direction, ahead to the left, where Balshakkar pointed. He jabbed Ravensmith in the ribs sharply. "Slow down!" Then he reached a hand back to Balshakkar. *"Toa* thirty-oh-six!" When Ravensmith slowed, he grabbed the rifle and pitched out of the doorless side of the jeep to the grass, hoping to God he wouldn't land on some transient cobra. He was aware as he went that the magazine of the 30.06 had detached itself from the action and clattered to the bottom of the Rover. By then, the jeep had passed on, having spilled out Balshakkar too. Balshakkar had seen the magazine fall; he did not have a spare. The Rover roared away to the legal proximity limit.

Sonofabitch, Kincade thought, lying on his stomach in the grass. He pulled back the bolt of the Remington and gazed at an empty barrel and an empty magazine slot. Beautiful. He rose to his knees to locate the cats and felt ice water pump through his veins. They were fifty yards from him, both erect now, both annoyed and curious, both spotting him as his cavalry hat cleared the grass. He was downwind. They could not scent him. They were growling. One was a slim, beautiful tabby, the other a large and nasty tom. Nice-looking animals. You could tame them pretty easily. But not today. Simon me boy, you have bought the packet. Et up in your prime because you are downwind. These critters ain't afraid of you because they can't smell you. They don't know what you are, and—by God!—*here they come to find*

out. Balshakkar? He could see the gunbearer's frightened face above the grass, twenty yards from him, the face more ashen than carbon.

The *kitas* were not charging. They were exploring, aggressively. Kincade reached for his .44 Magnum, thanking God that he wasn't entirely weaponless, and then remembered that he *was*. The big revolver chaffed the hip when you were in the *gharri*. He had left it on the windscreen shelf, along with all the other impedimenta. There was nothing left to do but rise abruptly, which he did, take off his cavalry hat, which he did, and charge. He went yelling and screaming like a Kilkenny banshee.

The cheetahs snarled sharply and fled for the shadows of the river forest. The speed they attained, almost instantly, was fantastic.

Kincade sighed, but the relief was so violent that it forced him to vomit casually to one side. He wiped off his mouth and waited for Balshakkar, who approached tremulously. The gunbearer was wild-eyed with terror, his hands shaking violently, his teeth bared in a grimace, showing his blue gums.

Kincade said calmly, "Did you load this *bundouki?*"

"Pole-pole, Bwana," Balshakkar said.

"Oh, sure," Kincade said. *"Pole-pole."* He was very calm now. Almost dangerously serene. *Pole-pole.* Take it easy.

"All fall out," Balshakkar said, his pavid eyes still wide. "No catch." *Pole-pole.* What the gunbearer meant was that he had not jammed the magazine into the action far enough; it had not locked in. More likely, Balshakkar had probably forced five cartridges into the magazine instead of the usual four. No magazine could lock into the rifle under those circumstances (that proved to be right). All in all, Kincade thought, the Rendille was really kind of a half-assed African. But Kincade no longer cared. He was enjoying a silent but fetid revenge. The scent which Balshakkar was emitting was not all the bitter stench of fear-formed sweat. There was something else, the result of an ineffectual sphincter muscle. Balshakkar had shat his britches.

"Throw them away," said Kincade with an evil smile. "You can wear your kongoni poncho back to camp. I'll give you another pair."

"Asante sana," Balshakkar said, breathing heavily, still watching the forest for the hunting leopards as the Rover came racing back to them.

After the rifle's magazine had been located on the jeep floor, they continued the drive back to camp, Balshakkar a thoroughly chastened man. Kincade glanced at his watch. The confrontation timing would be about right.

But he could not help considering how easily all the intricate scheming could have been made fruitless by those two stray *kitas*. If the cats had been on the prowl, if they had been wounded by some other careless hunter, he would now be dead. At least heavily mauled and chewed. The Keyhole pursuit would be finished as far as his services were concerned. The things you didn't expect, the things you couldn't plan on, were all roosting there on your shoulder, like vultures on the naked limb of a dead mimosa tree, waiting obscenely for your first mistake or your last breath. Yes, Kincade thought dimly as the jeep bounced and staggered along the forest line toward the distant green hills, "the best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley," as Mr. Burns was wont to say.

17

ONE HOUR LATER, as he ran frantically to the portable fridge for more ice cubes, Willy Littlesky was wont to say that Mr. Burns didn't know his anus from a hole in the ground. Or, at least, he couldn't distinguish between a gang a-gley and a ghastly glitch. Everything had fouled up. The confrontation had been beautiful, if you liked sights like Hiroshima.

Willy ran back to his own tent, wrapping the ice cubes in a towel. He yelled at Salehe in passing, "Kick in the generator and make some more ice—*lette barafu!*" Poor Salehe was very wan under his burnished skin and obviously shaken.

In the double-fly, where Charlie Ravensmith was keeping a pair of teal wide eyes on him, Kincade lay on a cot, pale and still. Littlesky returned and applied the ice pack to the back of Kincade's skull. Ravensmith said, "He stirred. He's going to be coming around. What a flaming mess, what?"

"Yeah," Littlesky said. "Give me some room, Bwana Charlie? Thanks. Why don't you check on the mem and see if she's okay."

"Thready time for it," Ravensmith said reluctantly. "But I suppose somebody has to."

"She'll appreciate it," Littlesky said.

"Of course, Willy." Ravensmith groaned. "That bloody fool Fitz-Owens!" He strode out, tight and nervous.

Wouldn't that grab you? Littlesky thought emptily as he applied the ice pack in short rubs to Kincade. Here we have Scissor and Keyhole right in the side pocket and that egotistical sonofabitch One-Eye has to mire the mission. For surely, now, it was a ruptured duck, all of it. Willy hoped fervently that MI 6 executed its agents when they went rogue. Or at least castrated the cocky ones. Like Bwana One-Eye.

Kincade grunted, stirred, and his shallow breathing became much fuller. "Uh," he said. "Not so goddam rough."

Littlesky eased the rubbing and just held the ice pack in place as Kincade opened his dark eyes and stared up. "Where?"

"My tepee," Littlesky said.

"Lemme up."

"In a minute."

"You the one who hit me?"

"Yes," Littlesky said and added apologetically, "you were going to kill him."

"I sure as hell was," Kincade said. He sat up painfully. He held the ice pack himself. "Thanks, redbelly."

"Yeah, yeah."

Kincade cast a bloodshot eye at him malevolently. "Did you have to wallop me so goddam hard?"

"I was in a hurry, sweetie. Didn't know my own strength. And you were mad enough to be hit *real* hard. I was afraid I might not stop you."

"You did right. The skull okay?"

"Just a real live goose egg. Scared me for a while. But there's no sign of fracture, and your eyes are fine, and you're not bleeding anywhere."

"Well. Yes indeed. Quite a party. It sure was a ball." Kincade stretched his neck painfully. "Charlie?"

"Checking the squaw."

"Good. Very good. Not her fault. I know that now. For a moment—but I know better. She was just jumped. That fucking bastard. He really had it coming, but I'm glad you stopped it, redbelly. I'll be all right now."

"Anyway," Littlesky said very quietly, "tonight I am coding a President's Eyes Only."

"What for?"

"Scrubbing the ball game. Called on account of rape."

"Like hell you will!"

Littlesky looked alarmed. "You can't go through with it as planned." Kincade nodded. "It'll never shine, boss. The one-eyed bastard will never believe you. He figures you'll be setting him up for a real wallop instead of a phony."

"You tell that piece of meat," Kincade said evenly, "that I'll kill him if he *doesn't* go through with it. We've come too far. Christ, Charlie has got to be drooling at the way things turned out!"

Littlesky shrugged. "Not yet. He likes you. He's kind of hacked himself."

"But later, when he reports to London, some of the empathy will give way to avarice," Kincade said. "It's perfect. We've got to go on. We're pure pigeon now. Let's get it over with and get our little tails to home." He groaned. "Godamighty but my head hurts."

Simon looked into the worried face of the Shoshoni who stared intently at him.

Littlesky said, "You wouldn't give your brother-in-law the forked tongue, would you? This is on the *emis?*"

"Straight up and level. Go ahead and talk him into it. I've got to stay on my back for a while." Kincade stretched out, with a heavy sigh, and rested his swelling on the melting ice in the towel.

"It'll take a hard sell," Littlesky said.

"Tell him anything. But sell him. I'm sick to death of all this."

"You said tell him anything."

"*Anything,* for Christ's sake!"

18

AS HE DRAGGED his steps toward Bwana One-Eye's green tent, Littlesky could see it all again. Melisande and Fitz-Owens at their romantic luncheon for two. They had played it damned well. The hand-holding progressing to a little fanny feeling, then a little leg stroking, while Fitz-Owens gurgled happily on the Beefeater's gin. And then when Memsaab had gone to her tent and passed him back a lingering look, the boys in the camp had quietly faded away, just like now. They knew that the hanky-panky ensign had been hoisted and that their presence was deemed unneces-

sary. Littlesky had excused himself early from lunch and gone to his tent, ostensibly for an afternoon snooze. Actually, he had peered from the double-fly slit at everything and listened while he worked. It seemed to him that Fitz-Owens had started the action a trifle early and that Fitz-Owens was a trifle tiddily on the gin. But there was nothing he could do.

The Rover had arrived about the time that he heard strange sounds from Melisande's tent. They could have been from ecstasy or they could have been from distress. When Kincade and Ravensmith left the jeep, the sounds had become terribly obvious. Littlesky had to rush to keep up with Kincade as he burst into the tent.

A hell of a mess. There was Bwana One-Eye, stark naked, lying atop Melisande, stark naked, she hitting him and protesting, he pumping away at the coupling with violent zest until Kincade's roar, which might have terrified a lion. Fitz-Owens came off Melisande with a creditable eight-inch swelling, his stem glistening with vaginal glair, his remaining seed spilling onanistically upon the ground as his one livid eye took in Kincade. Ravensmith was struck dumb by the lodge pole, disbelieving the sight, his blue eyes horrified. Kincade sprang across the tent and flailed a ferocious left hook which caught Fitz by pure luck, knocking him over nakedly and tearing the leering eyepatch from its place. When Fitz-Owens sprang instantly to his feet, his face was grim and hard, and he was snarling. He did not look so glamorous anymore, with the sunken hole of his missing eye and the scarlet welt where Kincade had hit him. He met Kincade's charge, and in the solid exchange of face blows they knocked each other down. Fitz-Owens was up first, but when Kincade came to his knees, his hand flashed back for the .44 Magnum.

Somehow Willy Littlesky had known that Kincade would do that. Kincade was no longer a thinking man; hot blood and bad memories had screened his mind. Willy was on his way before the hand movement, and it was he who skinned the Smith & Wesson backward out of the holster and Earped Kincade with a solid barrel blow on the head. Buffaloing, they used to call it. Kincade collapsed instantly. Fitz-Owens had run for the hills, leaving his clothes behind. Ravensmith had hastily thrown Melisande a sheet. She was crying openly, and there were heavy bruises on her shoulders.

Now Littlesky paused, his heart heavy, as he reached Fitz-Owens' tent. He glanced back and saw Ravensmith come

out of Melisande's tent and make a thumbs-up sign. Good. He made one back and indicated that Charlie should attend Kincade. Charlie nodded and made a brief wave. Littlesky then stepped into Fitz's tent.

Bwana One-Eye was pacing to and fro at the far end of the lodge, smoking heavily on a cigarette and muttering to himself. He turned sharply, defensively, as he heard Littlesky, who had been, after all, as silent as an Indian. "Christ, you gave me a turn!" Fitz-Owens said glumly. "For a moment I thought—oh well. Come in. Sit down. Have a pinker?"

"Negative," Littlesky said. "And you lay off that tanglefoot too. And that's an order."

Fitz-Owens had put a new eyepatch over the sunken hole. It was a bland, innocent eye sketch. It almost made him look repentful. "Since when are you giving orders?"

"I always gave the orders for this *shauri,* and MI six damned well told you so," Littlesky said. "You step out of line once more, white-eye, and your own firm will find you a quiet little St. Helena where they disappear their own people when they break security, or maybe you never were sworn in under the Official Secrets Act?"

"Sorry." Fitz-Owens closed the gin bottle and raised his hands briefly in defeat.

"I'll bet."

Fitz-Owens sat down. "Actually, I am, Willy. Didn't mean to toss the honey badger amidst the chickens. But, well, it was a rather seedy do, wasn't it?"

"In every sense of the word."

"Lost my head."

"But you didn't lose your erection."

Fitz shot his good eye around, the color brightening from violet to orchid. "Look, old man, I'm no angel. I was trying to do the thing straight. But I had had a few bites of the bottle, you know, and she is a wonderfully beautiful *wmanamouki,* and we were just lying there, faking—I really was dry-running, you know—and suddenly the touch of her —I can't explain. I just had to know it, so I—you know. I'm terribly sorry."

Littlesky was silent. He just stared.

Fitz-Owens sighed.

"Well, I suppose it's a touch too thick for anyone to believe me, so I'll take the worst of it. What are your orders, Bwana *Zuu?* We scrub the safari, obviously. Do you want

to use the field set to call for a plane and fly back to Nairobi? Or what? I'm not the steadiest of thinkers this day."

Littlesky leaned back in a camp chair. "Would you mind getting your head away from that lodge pole?"

Fitz frowned and moved a foot away.

Littlesky eased his long thin skinning knife from his Apache boot and flicked it across the tent. It hit the lodge pole cleanly and quivered in the wood like a thrilling arrow. Littlesky got up, retrieved it and slipped it back into his boot before he sat down again.

"What was that?" Fitz-Owens asked heavily. "Threat or therapy?"

"Just testing," Littlesky said. "Now, where were we? Oh, yes. Everything is go. Tomorrow. Exactly the way we planned it. The setup is perfect. Bwana Charlie has to believe everything he sees now."

Fitz-Owens peered at him as if he were insane. "Not on your bloody life."

"I have spoken," Littlesky said in the old form.

"Not for me you haven't. That *shenzi* tried to kill me today. And you expect me to play target tomorrow for a near miss?"

"He was a shade too Rhadamantine," Littlesky said blandly. "But he had his reasons. It won't happen again."

"Thanks awfully, but no thank you. Might as well stick my bleeding head in a crocodile's jaws. No, Willy, the safari is *kuisha,* if you'll forgive me for being so crushingly selfish about my own survival."

"You're *not* being," Littlesky said.

Fitz's single eye blinked carefully. There was something too quietly ominous in Willy's tone of voice. "Meaning?"

"You were right when you guessed Sir Julian Keys, the chief of MI six, was over in Seronera. He flew in with the team from London. Standing by the chopper to pick up the 'body.' When I reported to him, some minutes ago, he seemed kind of nasty." Fitz-Owens was looking more and more worried. "His last instructions to me were very simple. He said if you broke security again or failed to cooperate in the execution of this gambit, I was authorized to—*quote* —'eliminate you with prejudice'—end quote."

Fitz-Owens paled. "You're sending me up."

"Negative."

"You mean, I have no choice?"

"Two choices. Play or pay."

Fitz-Owens had sensed the change in Littlesky. Happy Jack Squirrel had evaporated away, along with the bright young Hollywood stunt man. Nothing of Littlesky was left now except a Shoshoni Indian, whose black eyes were veiled and lifeless and whose smiling face had ingrown, gone gaunt and shadowed. A sense of dread welled in Fitz-Owens' belly.

"Well," Fitz-Owens said hoarsely, "this all fails to make me happy."

Littlesky was ominously silent.

"He'll kill me, you know."

"Negative."

"What makes you so bloody certain?"

"He said he wouldn't. He's never lied to me in his entire life."

"Marvelous!" Fitz-Owens grunted cynically. "That's not much to risk my future on."

"We're wasting time," Littlesky said patiently. "You *have* no future if you chicken. So I will tell you a story you don't deserve to hear. But at least, you'll understand why he did it."

Fitz-Owens listened to him with fear in the orchid eye.

"I was born and raised in Wyoming," Littlesky said quietly, old images looming, "on the Shoshoni Reservation in the heart of the Wind River Mountains, one of the most beautiful places on earth. Imagine, a summer's day, a giant thunder cloud of pure purple in the north, mountain peaks all white with glistening hoar frost falling on the grape-green forest below. I was born full-blood. My family was related to Washakie, and my old man was chief of the tribe. But he died when I was young, and my mother, Running Deer, remarried. She met this white-eye, a retired archaeology professor from the University of New Mexico, name of Moseley, and he was the father of my sister, Jenny Starlight. She turned out to be the prettiest flower in those misty forests. But still, she wasn't white, you see, nor was she Indian. She was half-breed."

Fitz-Owens frowned, puzzled.

"The Indian agent at Wind River had a son named Sam Carson, a little older than me. We grew up together and hunted together and kept the old ways. Then, when Jenny reached the tomboy age, she joined up with us, and the fact is, she and Sam fell in love, and finally when he was twenty-two and she was only seventeen, they got married. I was the best man. Got a cigarette?"

Fitz tossed him one. Littlesky lighted up, reflectively. "Turned out that Sam Carson was a genius. His mind was all fired up with the wildest inventions, electronic things you never heard of, yet they all worked, and pretty soon Sam was winning tuitions and grants of one kind or other, and finally he went off to MIT. He was big medicine in the tribe. Actually, he was only a white Indian, which means he was only one-eighth blood, the rest being Irish. Anyway, Jenny went off with him. Those two were happy together. Real true heart, real one blanket."

He paused to puff. He was very grave.

"Wasn't bad at college. But when Sam graduated from Massachusetts Institute and was moved into the real honky world, Jenny began to have trouble. There was a firm bidding for Sam's inventive mind, but the Government dictated that he work on their projects, and by the time he was twenty-five the kid had been cleared through Top Secret.

"But he also saw what was happening. They were stationed in the Southwest. Now, the American Southwest, my friend, is a bad place for Indians. There is nothing lower in the Southwest than an Indian, lower than Spanish-Americans, lower than Mexicans, lower than blacks, even lower than sidewinders and coyote droppings.

"Jenny felt the brunt. She was beautiful, remember, but she was Indian-blooded. She was insulted, she was passed at by every rednecked white-eye, she was treated like an available whore. The two had nothing but trouble, trouble finding a decent place to live, trouble with the invasion of their personal privacy, trouble with censure, bigotry, bias, exclusion. You name it."

Littlesky ground out the cigarette. "There was a very hush-hush installation near Provo, Utah, a state with lots of open country, all of it beautiful. Sam had been assigned to work on the brain of the MIRV, which is the nervous system for our Multiple Individually Aimed Re-entry Vehicles. The Polaris class subs carry them. Hydrogen bombs. Anyway, Sam and Jenny were driving up from the Grand Canyon, Kanab side, and took a back road beyond Moab for Provo. Very remote. The wild country. Eroded rock, wind-made stone arches, scarlet mesas, enormous natural spires. Really as far from town as you can get."

"Virgin earth like down on the Ruaha River," Fitz-Owens said.

Littlesky continued. "They were tooling along in their car

when they saw a broken-down station wagon. You'd call it a shooting brake, I guess." Fitz nodded. "They stopped to lend help to these five men. Five white men, all businessmen, normally decent. Three from L.A. and two from Bakersfield, all up in Utah for the October deer season, ready for a toot of a shoot. Well, they were a little drunk and a little sore at a lack of deer and a little mad at the pooped engine. They took one look at Jen and saw she was half-breed Indian, and then the fun began. They made some cracks and some filthy propositions, and Sam belted one of them. The others jumped him. They staked him out on the back of the wagon, and right before his eyes the five bastards raped her. They raped the hell out of her, boozing it up and having a ball. Right there in the open on this dusty trail back of Moab. And afterward, when reaction set in, they panicked, with Sam yelling that he was going to kill every one of them. They crapped their pants. So one of them took his thirty-oh-six and bashed in Jenny's skull with the end of the stock. She never felt it; she was out cold by then anyhow. And this guy tried to stove in Sam's head, even broke the rifle stock. They cut him loose and tossed him aside, and they cleared out of Utah like frightened prong-horns."

"But they didn't kill Sam," Fitz said.

"No. He was a hardheaded character. With a brain. He remembered the license number. California plates. And he remembered their faces. And it just happened that Sam was so goddam important to this MIRV program that he had muscle and the United States sent an honest-to-God Attorney General out for the case. J. Edgar Hoover sent special agents—because state lines had been crossed, you see—and they nailed the owner of that wagon. He went state's evidence faster than you could say Rumpelstiltskin, and that was that.

"One guy ran for the hills. The other four stood trial. You know what the defense was? 'She was only an Indian.' Anyway, one fink drew a life sentence.The other three took Utah's choice."

"Which is?"

"Hanging or a firing squad. They chose the firing squad."

"What about the fifth man? Did he get away?"

Littlesky shook his head. "No. He didn't. I caught up with him south of Yellowstone Park, where I made a citizen's arrest."

Fitz was captured. "And?"

"He resisted. Since there wasn't anybody around, I buried him myself. There's some of his topknot hanging in my grandma's house up in Wind River today."

"Sweet Jesus," Fitz breathed. "And then, this chap, Sam—"

"Yeah," Littlesky said. "My brother-in-law is just across the way. Bwana M'Cowboy. So now maybe you understand why he saw red. You can believe how he even broke through the brainwash when he busted in and saw you and Mel."

"Rather," Fitz-Owens said. He sighed. "Can't say I like tomorrow very much, but I really don't have much choice, do I?"

"On or off the pot."

"I'll climb on. Oh, one thing. Do give Simon my most abject apologies, if you will," Fitz said with a smile.

"Good show," Littlesky said, not without contempt.

When he left the tent, Willy knew that Bwana One-Eye was going to have the rotten night he had bought. But more than this elemental revenge, he was pleased that everything had worked out this easily. Because, actually, Sir Julian Keys, head of MI 6, was back in London where he belonged and not in Seronera at all. The truth was that nobody had given Littlesky the authority to 'eliminate with prejudice' anyone. As Fitz-Owens himself had said contemptuously of Ravensmith, the most devious chaps were inevitably the most naïve. Silly beggar!

19

THE EVENING was not as tense as Fitz-Owens had expected. He knew that he could not sulk in his tent and avoid a meeting with Kincade. If he did not make face, he would lose his entire team of blacks. He was, after all, their *tembo,* not to be made quivery-kneed and white-livered by some wild-eyed Yankee. They were aware of his past exploits in the fine art of cuckolding, and he *had* been caught before. But he had never skittered away bare-assed before.

Fortunately, Kincade made it easy for him. Simon had sent word by Githiri to Salehe that he would dine in his tent. This eased the problem for everybody. Kincade did cross the compound once, meeting Fitz's eye steadily and

coldly as he headed to Melisande's tent. (He had had Githiri and one of the *cho*-boys move his gear into the double-fly with Littlesky and Ravensmith, with their permission.) Simon revisited his former lodging only to make his disavowal. They all heard him plainly as they sat around the fire, swigging nervously on their overounced sundowners. He was invisible beyond the canvas walls, his voice crisp and calm.

"Let's have a clean break, Mel," he said. "You wanted a divorce before I went to New Guinea. You wanted it after I got back. You wanted it the other night in Nairobi. Okay. You've got it."

"Thank you," she said.

"You recall," Kincade said without feeling, "that you signed a quit-claim to any part of my estate or community property when we were married."

Melisande said with dignity, "I don't want your money. I don't want anything that will ever remind me of you."

"What a crock," he said. "Oh well. Anyway, I'm settling a hundred large bills on you, for which you will get a quick and quiet divorce when we get back. That ought to keep you in contraceptives until you hook your next sucker."

"Thank you. You're so kind and thoughtful. I am going to miss your tender and loving care, you dear sweet obnoxious sonofabitch."

Out by the fire, everybody pretended not to have heard anything and they all hoped it would not get any rougher than this. But in the tent, Melisande's eyes were moist and pained as she attempted silently to say, "Sam, it wasn't true. I had nothing to do with it. Look at the bruises on my shoulders. He took me, he hurt me. Sam, it's a wound that leaves no scar, you mustn't remember it, nothing has changed. Sam, I gave him nothing, not one fragment of feeling, no texture, no thought nor act of love, you must believe me!"

Kincade left the tent and walked firmly to the fire. "Fitz," he said, "I hope you're drinking your own gin."

"I am," Fitz said carefully. But there was no fire in Kincade's eyes.

"Tomorrow and from now on, I will hunt with Bwana Charlie. You draw the mem, God help you."

"Jolly fine," Fitz said quietly. "Then you laddybucks can have Balshakkar as your gunbearer."

"Thanks," Kincade said sourly. "Thanks a puddle. That's like giving me a Boy Scout to pillage Rome. Or a eunuch

for the rape of Carthage. You won't mind if we take Githiri too?"

"As you wish. That gives me Njogu, which leaves Mama a trifle shorthanded."

"But she's got *you,*" Kincade said.

Fitz shrugged. Ravensmith blinked his eyes at Littlesky and wished that Kincade would ease off. Hadn't they tossed enough feathers?

Littlesky said, "I'd better hunt with Mama, boss. You won't need me. She might get in trouble."

"Again, you mean." Kincade smiled wickedly. "Okay, redbelly. But just don't forget you work for me." He looked Fitz in the violet eye. "Well, old darling, good hunting. And may all of your trophies have crotch rot."

20

THE COUNTRY was perfect. It stretched flat and far, studded with heavy thornbushes where the tse-tse hovered and where the rhinoceros should have lurked in camouflage. The grass was short; the plain was dusty and studded with many anthills. Often, old muddy wallows appeared suddenly underwheel. To the northwest there were fens of some probing finger of the Lululapa. In all, it was *faro*-land. "She's apples!" Ravensmith had said earlier, with enthusiasm. But now he was mired in gloom. She was apples, all right, except for the fact that they cut no sign of rhino. Off to the east, giraffes and gazelles grazed and once even a sable—one buck with a perilous fifty-inch rack, which would have been a creditable trophy—but Ravensmith was not hunting antelope this day. Kincade secretly was hoping to God they wouldn't find *anything.*

Ravensmith sat in the left front seat, beside Balshakkar, who was driving the Land Rover carefully so as not to raise dust and scare off the game. Kincade and Githiri stood erect in the back of the *gharri,* clinging to the gun rack, scouting the area. At least, Githiri was scouting. It was marvelous to see how far he extended his lower lip, pointing with it silently, when he spotted a herd of Tommies, or some wildly pronking springboks.

Ravensmith flung off his *terai* after a fruitless time and glanced up at Kincade. "Wouldn't that smart your apple

tart?" he said petulantly. "I mean. Simon, look at it. Pure mustard. But no rhino!"

Even as Ravensmith sulked adolescently, the body tag behind Kincade's left ear began a very strong tingling. Kincade plucked eagerly at his Levi pocket and extracted a hand compass. He noted that his own nose was pointing due north, magnetic. He hazarded a guess that the signal source, Willy Littlesky, would be due west, magnetic. The signal was strictly five by five, loud and clear. He plainly felt his call letters, *"dahdit-dah-ditditditdit."* It continued monotonously.

"What say, Simon?" Charlie Ravensmith called up to him. "Shall we bid *kwaheri* to this zone? As for rhino, even you will admit that's all she wrote."

Kincade held up a hand to quiet Charlie and turned his head swiftly south 180 degrees. The signal in his body tag was just as strong. Now, slowly, as if he was studying the country and his compass, he carefully pivoted his head back toward the north. At 270 degrees magnetic on the compass, the signal diminished. It was at minimum reception. That meant that Willy Littlesky's safari was due west of them and not too damn far either.

"I figure, pard," Kincade said, making Indian sign toward the west, "that the split-zipper cyclops gave us the shitty end of the stick and is running his *shauri ya faro* in the real country, west of us. Why don't we take a rattle at it?"

Ravensmith was suspicious. "Sure you aren't trying to blow up another Willy-Willy, old man?"

"You worry too much," Kincade said blandly. "What the hell, amigo, we came to hunt, so let's go hunting."

21

BEHIND A spired anthill which smelled of milky musk, Littlesky was dividing his attention between the green sweep of low hills behind him, north and east, and the pair of elephants ahead of him, not fifty yards away, browsing in the trees on the bend of the river, which was wide and deep at this point. Willy had set up the tiny transmitter atop the anthill, where nobody could see it. He checked the big express .470 rifle often, making certain there were two loads in it. Then he practiced holding two more of the awesome cartridges in his left hand, between fingers, like asparagus stalks,

just to make sure he could reload quickly in case he should miss his target the first two times.

Off to his left some fifty feet he could see Fitz-Owens and Melisande. Since he was on a slight rise, he could easily keep an eye on them, even when they crouched down in the high grass. Frequently, Fitz would pop up, check the two bulls and then exchange a glance with him. Willy would shake his head so that Fitz knew that Kincade's party was not yet in sight.

Off to Fitz's left side, Njogu squatted silently in the grass, wondering if Bwana One-Eye had gone crackers. What was the bwana waiting for? Everything out in front was ideal. The *tembos* were trapped by the river. They would not try to cross it at this deep point. They would either break through the hunters or try to run east, presenting an ideal shoulder shot. The wind was right even if fluky. The elephants were upwind. Everybody could have stood straight up without startling the beasts. There wasn't any way the *tembos* could scent them until the wind changed. But now and then, in fitful gusts, the wind *was* changing, backing east and then north. When it hauled from the north, those elephants were going to move. Hard and fast.

After Littlesky had radioed for Kincade, he had returned to the tall grass for some instruction on elephant killing from Bwana One-Eye. Fitz held his seminar under the tops of the waving grasses. "You will not shoot *tembo* at more than twenty yards, preferably less. Loxodonta is one beast you want to take up close. His brain is shaped like a sausage, not very large. It is suspended sideways across his skull between the two ear holes. Imagine that line, just over the eyes. Hit him there, and you will kill him instantly."

"I've got it," Littlesky said and returned to his watchtower atop the pink anthill.

Fitz turned to Melisande and took her by the arm. "Best tuck it down here, Mama," he said. "We may have to burn some daylight before Bwana M'Cowboy arrives."

"Please don't touch me," Melisande said.

22

KINCADE'S JEEP rumbled out of the east, some half mile above the elephant ground. Twenty minutes later, Simon tested the wind, found his position safe. He swept the scene

south with his binoculars. The first thing he saw was Littlesky on the anthill. Willy, secluded from the elephants behind the rise, waved briskly at him and indicated the others below him to the left. Kincade found Fitz's *terai* poking up in the tall grass and then his kaffir-colored face as Fitz turned and recognized the second jeep. After a moment, Kincade discerned Melisande off to one side of Fitz. At this point, Littlesky killed the transmitter, and the irritating *ditdahing* in the body tag ceased. Kincade unconsciously rubbed the area behind his ear, relieved of the tingle. He located Njogu, who had risen in the grass, having seen the arrivals. In the glasses, Njogu looked puzzled, even alarmed.

Kincade swept the binocular field to the south and found the quarry. *"Tembombile!"* he said suddenly, breathless. "A young buck and an old bull. By God, that youngster has got himself a nice pair of teeth!"

Simon handed the glasses to Ravensmith, inhaling deeply. Everything was obviously go. Fitz had taken advantage of opportunity and chosen the *tembos* for the gambit. Which was right smart. He chuckled harshly. Littlesky would be wetting his pants. Willy had never killed anything bigger than a bull moose and nothing more dangerous than a grizzly bear.

Ravensmith whistled gently. "That young bull will go eighty pounds each side," he said. He handed back the binoculars. "Shall we watch the mottle-and-mud, Simon? Or shall we join the fray?"

Through the glasses, Littlesky was waving him in.

"We'll make a little reccy," Kincade said. " 'Shakkar, *kwenda.* Put us alongside the other jeep, *upesi.*"

Balshakkar, sweating, eased forward, taking it carefully, aware that dust or noise might bugger the *shauri.* When he pulled up behind Katinia, in the first Rover, Kincade signaled him to kill the engine. Everything got very still, except for the gentle wind rustling through the tall grass. Kincade watched the grass. It was changing its position, tending to bend from the east. The wind was shifting.

"Let us *kwenda* the hell down there," Kincade said. "Githiri, stay with the *gharri.*"

"Ndio," Githiri said, not unhappy.

" 'Shakkar, you *kwenda!"* Kincade said. *"Toa* Weatherby . . . what rifle do you want, Charlie? Just to back them up."

"For elephant? No choice. *Toa* four-seventy."

Balshakkar pulled the Weatherby .375 from the gun rack after unscrewing the holding hinge. Kincade took it from him

and checked the magazine. Full. He cocked one into the chamber and put the rifle on safety. Ravensmith saw no point in lugging the heavy .470 double. It was Balshakkar's function. They left the Rover and crossed down the rolling hill toward the others, moving carefully.

Behind the anthill, Littlesky caught Fitz's sharp eye and made signal that the others were closing down on them. Fitz nodded. "Now just settle down, Mama. The troops have arrived. . . . Njogu!"

The wondering Kamba scuttled to him through the grass, indicating Kincade's party behind them. *"Ndio."* Fitz nodded crisply. He indicated the eastern gap through which the elephants might escape. He wanted Njogu's scent on the fluky wind so that the *tembos* would panic toward the hunters instead. *"Lette tembo kuja ku tu shambulia."* And then the obscene word for hurry. *"Suria!"*

Njogu murmured assent and then slithered away silently through the grass to flank the elephants on the east.

Littlesky kept his dark eyes on Kincade. He found he was sweating. Presently, Kincade halted. Willy had to admire the boss's perception. He was almost exactly one hundred yards behind Bwana One-Eye. He stayed there, Ravensmith beside him, with Balshakkar abaft. Ravensmith had not even asked for the double yet.

Okay, Littlesky thought. Let's make it. Ready when you are, C. B. Quiet on the set! Roll 'em! (Admiral McCabe, sir, could we have *absolute* quiet on the set?)

Fitz-Owens glanced up at Littlesky's anthill. Willy gave him a jerking thumbs-up gesture. "All right, Mama. We're on the plate." Melisande stood up beside him, holding her 30.06 and trembling as she stared at the elephants. "Stay right where you are, Mama. Not a move, not an inch. Remember!"

"Yes," Melisande said.

The young *askari* had his trunk raised to test the wind; when suddenly he tasted the rancid scent of the file-tooth Njogu, he screamed a trumpet of warning to his *baba*. The old bull instantly stopped browsing and raised his own huge trunk, smelled the same life-threatening stench and blasted violently. He made a small charge toward Njogu, his huge frayed ears flapping out from his head like sails running before the wind, clouds of dust rising under his huge feet; but then he stopped. The *askari* waited nervously for the old bull's decision.

"He'll come," Fitz said. "Steady, Mama."

Fitz broke his .458 and began the pretense of jamming shells into it. He had intentionally provided himself with a pair of .470 shells which would not fit. Thus, later, the evidence would show that he had had a real jam and that he had been careless.

Behind him, Kincade sighted through his telescope. He was going to wing one close enough to Fitz-Owens so that One-Eye would hear that bee buzz by sharply and realize what *could* have happened. He checked his windage again, one click left, because of the wind, which had hauled east.

The old bull finally squealed his last outrage toward Njogu and then turned, put the river at his back and began that incredibly rapid ambling away from the horrid scent, directly into the hunters. The *askari* followed instantly. They both ironed their ears flat back, both running away from the danger. Or so they thought, until the younger bull spotted Melisande and Fitz-Owens and blew a high, shrill warning note. The old bull stopped, saw them too. But now there was no retreat. The old *doumi* flapped those great ears forward, then half curled them, locked them, lowered his head, tucked his trunk and charged. His splintered tusk loomed like an inverted grappling iron.

Fitz frantically tried to load his rifle and yelled his head off. He looked up at Willy Littlesky and waved a hand and bellowed trouble.

"He's jammed! He's caught a jam!" Ravensmith yelled in horror at Kincade's ear. "Simon, we'll have to give *tembo* the hammer-and-tack!"

Littlesky diligently waited until the old bull, who was leading, had thundered down to sixty or seventy feet. He took very careful aim with the .470, meanwhile thinking that he had a bit of a sticky wicket here. The *askari* was not that far behind the bull and half covered by the older animal. First shot had better be good or the *askari* could break through and would have to be handled by somebody else. He hoped somebody else, whoever it was going to be, recognized the situation. Then he fired.

The *doumi* was hit clean above the eyes, not quite center, but damn well good enough. He fell in running stride, after the bullet dust-clouded his skull, and lay there with his hind legs stretched out astern and his forelegs curled for running, tucked under him. He froze in this tableau for a split second and then tumbled heavily on his side, unbaring the younger

bull on his right. (Where the hell are you, boss? Now is the moment!)

Littlesky swung the other barrel onto the *askari,* who was flabbergasted by the falling of his lord. He turned away, no longer charging, yet taking a dangerous angle toward Melisande, who was standing five feet to Fitz's left side. Littlesky hadn't been told about this shot, so he broke a .470 high through the hips of the *askari,* and by the time the crippling blow had stopped the young elephant in his tracks, Littlesky had forked his spare shells from his left hand, into the hot barrels, and precisely planted both of them, singly, behind the young bull's left ear.

Simultaneously, Kincade fired.

Simon had watched the action, aware that the *askari* might break through and that the Shoshoni had his hands full. It delayed his false attempt on Bwana One-Eye until he was certain the real danger was past. When he saw the hip shot, he knew Willy could handle the rest and shifted back to Fitz. He took cool aim and slowly squeezed on the trigger of the Weatherby. It was a good trigger, even, crisp, and it was coming back nicely. Then through the telescope he saw Melisande moving. Briefly, there was no worry, only the question of what the hell the girl was doing. Then she moved sharply, and she was looming into contention. He knew he had to ease the squeeze on the trigger, but it was too late; the physical commitment had already committed the sear, and the Weatherby fired with a sharp violence, socking the rubber-padded stock into his shoulder hard. He lost the view in the scope, and when he surveyed the scene with his naked eyes he saw only Fitz-Owens on his feet, Willy Littlesky racing down from the anthill, two dead or dying elephants, and no sign of Melisande.

"My God!" Ravensmith said. "I think—I *think*—"

Ravensmith threw the big rifle back at Balshakkar and raced to the scene. Kincade hurtled out after him, overtook him and plunged through the grass to the spot where Littlesky and Fitz-Owens were making odd ministrations.

Littlesky had seen it happen because Fitz, having played out the gun-jam business, had been reloading the scarred .458 with proper cartridges to make sure of the *askari.* To Willy, it seemed as if Melisande's entire head exploded. Then Fitz looked. Willy had reached the spot at last, and they both swallowed the horror with an unfeeling sense of unreality.

Melisande was lying on her face where she had fallen. But

there was not much face left. The .375 Magnum had taken her center in the skull and ranged forward, carrying away the entire top of her head, the complete brain pan and all of her forehead down to her eyes. The eyes themselves, those gentle green-gold eyes, had been pushed out onto her upper cheeks from the concussion within her head. There was blood everywhere and brain too, much of it on Fitz, who automatically began to shed his shirt to elude the horror.

"Hapana, you damned fool!" Littlesky said, vomiting. "You'll show Charlie the fake wound and abort the mission!" Littlesky stripped off his bush jacket, but before he could sully it in the wreckage, Njogu arrived, his black eyes popping in astonished revulsion, and Fitz grabbed the Kamba's *shuka*-like burlap shawl and dropped it over the mess that had just been a woman.

Littlesky looked back. Charlie and Kincade were running the course frantically. "Quick. What happened?"

"Cobra!" Fitz said. "She yelled 'snake' just once and leaped for me. There, in her left boot, you can see the fang. Bloody snake is gone."

"Lose it fast," Littlesky said. "No snake. Makes it too much an accident."

Fitz nuded his bush knife and dug the venomous fang from the left boot. It dropped into the grass, out of sight. He looked up at Njogu, who was starkly stunned. *"Kuisha. Simama ulimi."* Your tongue is finished. Njogu could only nod dumbly; his *"Ndio"* was not even audible.

"Now, man, for God's sake, cool it!" Littlesky said. "Or her dying isn't worth a damn!"

"Righto!"

They waited grimly as Kincade arrived, still carrying the Weatherby, his face mottled from the exertion, his breath coming in brief gasps at the dread, his eyes wide open, the look of a man who knows what has happened and rejects the reality. Behind him, Charlie Ravensmith panted up, white and trembling. Balshakkar, last of the trio, had a peculiar blue-gray look to his black skin. He was terrified.

Kincade looked down. "No," he said.

Fitz said, *"Kufa."*

Kincade threw the rifle away from himself and knelt, just staring. "No," he said again.

"My flaming God!" Ravensmith said.

Fitz looked at him. "Charlie, be a good lad. The young

bull is floundering over there. Give him one behind the ear, that's a chum."

"Righto." Ravensmith marched stolidly off to the quivering *askari,* looking back most of the way.

Kincade reached for the *shuka*-burlap.

Fitz kicked his hand away. "No! My bloody soul, no, old darling!"

Kincade looked up in dumb bewilderment. Littlesky touched his shoulder. "He's right, boss. *Wacikun.* Bad medicine. She's gone away. Don't look at this. I forbid you to look at this." He shook Simon abruptly. "You hear me? *Bear Paw, you hear me?*"

"Yes," Kincade said insanely. He sank, unknowing and abject, into an attitude of orison, hands clenched, head bowed, jaws trembling, his face bloodless, his open eyes stark. (But this could not be Melisande. She was not mortal. She could not be rotting meat on an African plain. She could not be carrion for the *ndege,* offal for the hyena. She was a Fijian forest, soft and green; she was crystal springs fluming down the hills to become a womb of love-making; she was golden eyes and gentle laughter. She was an incorruptible body, alive with the scent of tart frangipani. She was the image and likeness of life.) Kincade began to cry, sobbing silently, not a sound issuing from him, his big body convulsed in an internal struggle between reality and fantasy.

"God almighty!" Fitz said quietly. "I have shot animals in less agony."

"Let me," Willy said. He walked behind Kincade, skinned back the Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum and clouted Kincade on the other side of the head, the unhit side, wondering how much of this sort of thing Bear Paw could stand before he went scramblebrains. Kincade collapsed silently over Melisande's legs and lay still. Then Littlesky shoved the revolver in his belt and walked to the anthill, trying to remember he was an Indian, and Shonshoni, so that he would not cry himself.

Fitz-Owens, sighing, realized how many things there were to be done. "Observe the manner of the accident," he said to Njogu and Balshakkar. And as Ravensmith arrived back from the elephants: "You too, Charlie. Observe the manner of the accident."

"Accident," Ravensmith said thickly.

Fitz eyed him coldly. "Mind your manners, chum." He turned and whistled at Katinia in the Land Rover. Katinia,

awake from the shooting, hustled the jeep down toward the site. "It is necessary to *taka pichas.* Charlie, you get a camera and handle that chore, eh? That's a good lad. Willy, you'd better let Balshakkar drive you back to the *camp-i.* Use my field radio to call Seronera and give them details of the accident. Tell them to send an *upesi ndege—*"

"A quickly bird?"

"Aircraft. Got to get her body to Sesanera or even Arusha. Authorities at the Seronera Research Institute can tell us which. There's a DC over there."

"Roger," Littlesky said heavily. "Let's go, 'Shakkar."

"Take Katinia back for the other jeep."

Katinia climbed in and drove off with them, while Ravensmith uncovered Melisande, Fitz having tugged Kincade off her legs. Ravensmith took several pictures. They were most unpleasant. The flies were swarming now. In fact, the whole lonesome reach of the killing ground was suddenly infected with carrion eaters. The vultures, those intuitive *ndege,* were already gathering on the low branches of the acacia trees; the hyenas, those inevitable morticians, had snickered up from the river's marshes; out of the forest across the Lululapa, scores of Luo natives had suddenly appeared, their ravenous eyes fixed on the mountain of elephant meat, which sat rotting in the sun.

Fitz noted the influx and shrugged. (What the devil, it was their country.) "Njogu," he said, "tell those black hyenas they can have the meat. But *taka meno ya tembo,* cut out the ivory."

"Ndio," Njogu said and ran for the dead elephants.

"That's enough *pichas,* Charles," Fitz said as Ravensmith took angles of Melisande's crumpled form, particularly of the empty brain pan. "Cover her up before Simon stirs. What a bloody mess! Help me pour the Cowboy in, poor bastard." Githiri, in the second Rover, leaped out and helped them too, because Kincade was deadweight heavy, all rubbery and uncontrollable. They stowed him roughly in the rear of the jeep.

Fitz said to Githiri, "Do not leave her side until the quickly bird comes."

"Ndio, Bwana," Githiri said gravely, staring at the body and swiping at the flies. He took a sad breath and added a deeply respectful, "Eeeeh . . ."

"That seems to be the lot for the mo," Fitz said heavily and sat down, bloody as an abattoir. His hands were begin-

ning to shake. Ravensmith squatted down beside him. They watched Njogu cutting the tusks out of the young elephant while the ravenous Luos poured over the old bull like safari ants, slicing open the *tumbo* for the repugnant delicacies inside the still steaming gut.

Ravensmith said, "Beautiful ivory, Fitz. It'll go eighty pounds each side, at least."

Fitz didn't react. He glanced at Kincade's unconscious form in the Rover and shook his head. He was glad to be alive. He was sorry she was dead, but it was a fact that Simon had not tried for him. "It's going to be bloody hell for the old darling," he said.

"Rather," Ravensmith said politely. But he was thinking coldly that if this was hell for Simon Kincade, the Cowboy had something to look forward to. From this day forward he would live with a brand of hell not even conceivable in his hairiest nightmares. "Very bad turn."

After that, neither of them spoke. They just sat there, leadenly, listening to the plaintive fluting of the boubou shrikes as they waited for the airplane.

BOOK THREE

Keyhole

"Let sleeping dogs lie—who wants to rouse them anyway?"

—*Charles Dickens,*
DAVID COPPERFIELD

1

ADMIRAL JOHN JEREMIAH MCCABE was not happy. He sat in his bleak office in the high-rise iron lung known as the National Security Agency, at Fort Meade, Maryland, and lighted one of his brown cigarillos dolefully. It had been a lousy fortnight. He stared at the desk calendar: September 9. Then he stared at his hot-line telephone which connected to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C., zip 20402, and gloomily realized that sooner or later it was going to ring and ask questions.

He was startled, therefore, when it rang at that moment. McCabe sighed emptily, ground out the newly lighted cigarillo and picked up the handset. The party on the other end turned out to be Mr. Nixon's private secretary. Mrs. Woods asked him politely if he could drop by the White House within the hour.

"Can do," McCabe said reluctantly.

The President was seated at his desk in the Oval Room flanked by all the staffed armed services flags. Secretary Laird (Defense) was seated at one end of the desk, talking seriously, but he arose at once; both men said hello to McCabe warmly.

McCabe said, "Good morning, Mr. President, Mr. Secretary," and shook their proffered hands, afterward returning to attention.

"Thank you, Mel," the President said to Mr. Laird. "We'll continue at the meeting." The Secretary nodded and took quiet leave.

McCabe said, "You look fit, sir. Must have enjoyed your stay in Orange County."

The President smiled. "Very much so. You must see the other White House sometime. Do you know California?"

McCabe said wryly, "I was stationed for four years in San Diego and three in Long Beach, sir, and I know every Norman's woe from Balboa Island to Mothball Bay."

The President chuckled. "Let's sit over there." He led McCabe to the twin sofas which stretched away from the fireplace at the other end of the room, opposite the desk. There was a portrait of Washington over the brass-screened hearth but no flames glowed on the fire dogs. They sat opposite each other. The President hesitated a moment, staring at the cof-

fee table, then explained that he had just checked all the PEOs with Secretary Laird and that he was disturbed at the course of events.

"Yes, Mr. President," Admiral McCabe said stonily. "That makes two of us. Do you want me to start at Adam's apple or just cover the part that went over the fence last?"

"The African tragedy," President Nixon said.

McCabe started to open his attaché case, then resnapped it shut. "First let me say, Mr. President, that if you ever give this country back to the Indians, start with Willy Littlesky. He's got it coming. He saved the mission, and we are still go, all the way."

The President repressed a smile and glanced at his watch, as if to indicate that he had little time to spare before his Cabinet meeting. His reputation for punctuality was well known. Admiral McCabe nodded. "Sorry, sir. I'll flank speed. Mrs. Kincade was killed accidentally. A cobra struck her at the critical moment, and she leaped into the line of fire. An honest-to-God glitch that could never happen again and probably will. They dug the fang out. It did not penetrate her birdshooters. She was not actually hypoed." McCabe drew a long sad breath. "She was quite a girl, Mrs. Kincade."

President Nixon nodded soberly.

McCabe continued, briskly now: "They flew her body into Arusha. The inquest was held and the verdict was accidental death. The party did not even have to go on to Dar-es-Salaam, so we were not required to muscle the decision. Then our team returned to Nairobi for a few days and finally departed Africa."

The President nodded again.

"The team has arrived in London," McCabe said. "I'm sure our man is going to be nibbled. I think Keyhole has taken the bait. I feel we are halfway home in eliminating this organization."

What seemed to bother the President was that Keyhole dealt in extortion. This required a victim who was already some ilk of lawbreaker. Were they doing a right thing on an international basis, or was this an Interpol matter?

"Mr. President," Admiral McCabe said gravely, "please forgive my bluntness, but not all men are criminals simply because they are reticent. It's the innocent who might suffer the most. Ibsen once wrote—*Pillars of Society*, I think it was —that if you looked into every man's heart, you would always find at least one flaw—one black spot—which he has

to keep concealed. These men would be most vulnerable, in my opinion, and I have your own experience in the Checkers case to prove it. All victims of this kind of tyranny don't have your courage. Keyhole could make a malicious mince out of them."

The President, agreeing, frowned thoughtfully.

"Furthermore, sir, as you are aware, I have detection teams—electronic-countermeasure experts—which give your private and Presidential areas a thorough electronic vacuuming, more often than daily. When you left for San Clemente, you may recall the grandfather clock was running slow, and it was sent out for repair. Before you returned, my office found a universal FM transmitter in one of the brass studs. In fact, it *was* a brass stud, no larger than a pinhead. We don't know who planted it, whether Keyhole or some KGB agent. Furthermore, you might be interested to know that when you dedicated that redwood park to Lady Bird, one of the screws in the dedicatory sign was a universal FM pea pod with a range of five miles. Just in case you dropped some confidential word to former President Johnson. We zapped it before you arrived. We don't know who planted it. But the point is the same." He coughed. "A little knowledge —like Pope's 'learning'—is a dangerous thing."

The President glanced at his watch and rose. He shook hands. "Thank you, Admiral. I think we had better bankrupt this firm as quickly as possible, and I leave the foreclosure in your capable hands."

My capable hands, Admiral McCabe mused wearily as he climbed into his staff car. (Maybe I ought to be sitting on them. It seems to me that the team is doing damned well without my capable hands.)

"Where to, sir?" his driver said.

"Back to the salt mine, Rufus," McCabe said emptily. "No. Wait. Drop me off at the Capitol rotunda."

The late Senator Dirksen was lying in state. Admiral McCabe paused at the green-bowered casket to pay his respects, then returned to Fort George Gordon Meade. Ashby of IDENT had an urgent call in to him. He went down to Ashby's department and received a one-time Hagelin encoded tape from Eusec. It was prenoted with a PEO—President's Eyes Only—so that not even old Ashby could find a codebook to decipher it. McCabe took it topside, back to his office, where he unlocked the secret Bear Paw code and took the message apart.

MESSAGE STARTS:
MAXSEC TOPSEC
1217/1911/0058/Z0
TRANSMIT TO: G W I F A
PROJECT: KEYHOLE
CODE: BEAR PAW (MI6/Zed Omega)
PRIORITY: ALPHA 4 INTERNAT
CLASSIFICATON: PEO
VIA: EUSEC+KG-13
BEGIN MESSAGE:
RED NIGHTCAPS GALORE AND KATIE-BAR-THE-DOOR IF GWIFA ABLE DIRTYEAR SQUAW ARROW KEEPERS FOR STITCH TUCK AND GORE STOP ALSO PONYEX TO PAINTER PATRIOT'S PEMMICAN IDENTIFICATION LOVE FROM FUSTIGATOR.
END MESSAGE.
END SEND.

When he finally understood it, after staring at it for nearly five minutes, McCabe spated a bellow of laughter and slapped the desk to a shudder. Those crazy goddam redskins! The whole thing was really an open message except for GWIFA, which meant himself, the Great White Father. The rest of the jibberish was Old West lingo. For instance, Fustigator was a Drover colloquium. It meant a horsewhip, which was Littlesky's function. He was majority whip of the expedition in the field. Red nightcaps meant bloody scalps. Katie-bar-the-door was a mountain-man term for hostiles-on-the-war-path. Dirtyear indicated the Indian's use of the ground to locate an enemy. Arrow Keepers meant medicine men of the Cheyennes, the holy ones who held the sacred tribal arrows safe. Therefore a squaw's arrow keeper was a lady's medico. Ponyex meant pony express or pronto. Painter was an old trapper's word for panther or lion, and lion meant Sir Julian Keys of MI 6. The patriot was obviously Patrick Henry Duffy, a bank robber, and pemmican meant the loot he had carried out in his parfleche bag. So when you took your chances and broke it all down to bleached buffler bone, what Littlesky had radioed, via Eusec and God knows what relays, whether meteor trail, or weather satellite or nuclear submarine, was as follows: "Us Injuns ready for warpath if Pappy can tell us who are the gynecologists for Lady Dara Henley, Niji Fukimora, and Buffy Pristine. Also send to MI 6

quickly the serial numbers of the bread Duffy stole from the Falmouth bank."

McCabe proceeded to dispatch a Hagelin-coded tape to Commander Paul Sampson, using his own staff cipher and classifying the message Top Secret. He marked it for transmission via the United States Navy Communication Systems to de-emphasize it. It went to Sampson in a place called Kirkwall on the reach of the Scottish Orkneys, not twenty miles north of a formidable anchorage known as Scapa Flow. Sampson was ordered to implement Bear Paw's request, and to inform Fustigator that New Scotland Yard was in possession of all the serial numbers of the stolen Falmouth National currency.

That done, Admiral McCabe looked at the synopsized mountains of intelligence reports on his desk, starting with North Korea and North Vietnam, thence to Egypt and Israel, *ad infinitum*. He sighed and picked up the daily Washington *Post* for a quick review of current events, wondering soberly how Simon Kincade was standing the gaff. He found out very quickly when he saw the headlines on a prominent story, date-marked London. They read: YANK OFFERS ENGLAND TEN MILLION FOR STONEHENGE!

"Jesus H. Kee-rist!" McCabe groaned.

The subcase headlines continued: *Home Office Outraged; Sportsman Wants Historical Site as Airplane Marker for Cheyenne Airport.*

McCabe read further, in a state of shock.

"Don't see what all the Jessie is about," Millionaire Eccentric Simon Kincade was quoted in an interview with the London Daily Mirror. *"I figure our cousins needed the spondulicks. They sold London Bridge, didn't they?"*

As the shock dissipated, Admiral McCabe suddenly understood what Kincade had done. The admiral could not repress a chuckle which matured into solid laughter. He didn't have to worry about Kincade standing the gaff. Kincade was swinging it wide, trying to set the barb in a great big fish. A killer whale.

2

FORTY-EIGHT HOURS later, 8:15 P.M. London time, Simon Kincade was seated in the exquisite gaming room of the

Montebank, a private gambling club in Mayfair. He had his elbows locked onto the green baize of a kidney-shaped baccarat table, his dark eyes fixed upon the uncomfortable bald banker; sometimes he shot a hard-nosed glance at the elegant croupier. Both these men were mildly apprehensive. The American might as well have been Doc Holliday, with a nickel-plated bullet-laden pistol on the deck, watching for the first evidence of a "seconds" deal. The game, like all gambling in the resplendent Montebank, was completely honest, but due to Kincade's threatening mien, both the banker and the croupier were praying that honesty would be enough. Kincade was having a spectacular run of luck "bucking the tiger," as he put it (although that term really applied only to faro and had nothing to do with baccarat).

Kincade had become a cynosure. Behind him, Willy Littlesky stood and watched in some amazement. To his left, Charles Ravensmith hovered, no longer betting. The other players, including twittering Henry Dieu, the couturier, had ceased to make antes, in fascination at the American's game. Other members of the club had gathered around as the pound plaques mounted in the center of the tense table. At the moment, there were sixteen hundred pounds in neat twin stacks, equivalent that evening to $3,808, according to the devaluated quote on the quid. Simultaneously, a swarthy-skinned gentleman took up a stance behind the sweating banker. He folded his arms, his dead black eyes watching Kincade.

"Hey, Bwana Charlie," Kincade said. "Who's the case-keeper?"

"Don't follow, Simon?"

"The lookout. Behind the tinhorn there."

Ravensmith glanced up from the table. "Oh, that's Vic." He waved to the man and beckoned him over. The dead-eyed man approached the table more closely, still behind the banker. "Vic!" Charles Ravensmith said. "Meet Simon Kincade. Simon, this is the director of the Montebank, Vic Tarantella."

"My pleasure, Mr. Kincade," Vittorio Tarantella said.

Kincade watched the boot of cards. He waved. "Hi, pard. You'll forgive me if I keep my eyes skinned on the deck. This your doghole?"

"I manage it."

"I'm going to bust it," Kincade said. "What's the house limit?"

"Your net assets," Tarentella said and bared his brilliant white false teeth in a smile that resembled the snarl of a mongoose in cobra combat. Kincade spared him a swift appraisal. Tarantella (code name Seam) was of average height with a shining olivy skin, glowing from oil, not sweat. His hair was unnaturally black and patent-leather highlighted. His lean body, taut and spare, moved youthfully. He did not seem like an ex-Mafioso, except for the telltale diamond ring on his left pinkie. His midnight-blue dinner jacket fitted him perfectly, with just a fragment of crisp white shirt cuff visible at the end of the sleeves, the sparkle of diamond cufflinks apparent.

"Deal, blackleg," Kincade said to the croupier, who was already passing two trembling cards each to Kincade and the banker.

There was a hush as Kincade looked at his cards. "Big Mother!" he said inelegantly and slapped them over, face up, on the baize. They were a queen of spades and a nine of hearts.

"La grande à la pointe," the croupier announced, more correctly, and then paused to see the banker's hand. The banker turned over an eight of clubs and a ten of hearts.

"La petite à la banque," the croupier announced. "Monsieur wins again."

The banker counted out sixteen one-hundred-pound plaques and stacked them with the others in the center of the table. They grew into four stacks of eight each, a total of $7,616. Excited murmurs babbled around the table.

Kincade glanced at Littlesky, who looked handsome, even distinguished, in his wine-red dinner jacket. "How many haircuts is that?"

"Five."

"Why don't you get in on this action, redbelly?"

"On what you pay me? No thanks, boss!" Littlesky grinned. "Besides, if I broke your run, you'd be a caution to snakes. That's why everybody else dropped out. To give you lots of legbail."

Kincade lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "Don't you fret about me, redbelly. Nobody swallows my property tonight. I'm as ripe as the corn in milk and heavy on the shyoot."

Oh my God, Littlesky thought. Easy does it, Chickenheart, and ease up on the Old West jazz with these Pikespeakers.

But privately he was astonished. If Kincade had not garnered enough tasteless publicity with his legitimate offer to the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works to buy Stonehenge and ship it home to Wyoming, he would certainly acquire notoriety this night. All eyes in the casino focused on him. He sat there arrogantly, highlighted under the glow of the lamps, his jacket gleaming like solid gold (which it almost was). It was richer than a lamé, its material hand-woven twenty-three-carat gold thread. It had cost three thousand dollars at The Seven Needles on Savile Row. It was not quite what Charles Ravensmith had had in mind when he begged Simon to forgo the blatant Indian jackets and reform in something more conservative for his London stay. But when Kincade saw the material (which was really intended for aging fag hags, advertising their opulence in the quest for beautiful males) he had chosen it instantly. Not even the negative pleas of God—Henry Dieu, that is—could dissuade him. He had met Dieu when Ravensmith enforced his visit to The Seven Needles. Mr. Dieu was an amusing little homosexual, as high as Kincade's chest, dainty as a Persian cat, chirpy as an English sparrow and wearing all the impedimenta—dyed toupee, replaceable teeth, rouged cheeks and glistening vaselined lips.

The Keyhole clan derived one major satisfaction from the purchase of the monstrosity. Next to platinum, gold was the finest conductor of electrical currents; the result was a jacket which emitted a fantastically fine frequency-modulated radio signal, cleanly broadcasting every word and breath and heartbeat of Kincade to the ever-listening receivers of the Keyhole monitors.

Littlesky examined the boss while Tarantella offered a house drink and a moment's respite from the tension of the game. "Don't mind if I do," Kincade said. "Could use a little leg-stretcher about now." He opened the gold jacket to air his damp body.

The gold jacket was bad enough, Littlesky thought, but the belt that held up the slim-legged, satin striped trousers was garish neon. It was a huge Navajo concho belt, a massive continuity of four-inch-square silver squares, each studded with a solid circle of turquoise. Instead of a normal Belvedere evening tie, Kincade wore a black shoestring with a draw piece handcarved and cast by the Zunis, a silver bison head mounted on a turquoise background. But worst of all the outfit, perhaps, were the black alligator cowboy boots,

high-heeled and with mule-ear straps. Around the ankles of the boots there were silver conchos which tied into a California-style, straight shank spur on which revolved small sunset silver rowels. On each shank a small silver bell hung, like an overblown thimble. When Kincade moved, he jingled.

He downed his leg-stretcher in one long swallow and said, "That tasted like pure Cincinnati, Mr. Tarantella."

"More like Kentucky." Tarantella smiled coldly. "American whiskey, sour mash. I thought you would prefer it."

"Damn kind of you," Kincade said. "But that isn't going to keep me from busting you. What do you say, Blackleg—shall we open the ball?"

"Your wager, Monsieur?" the banker asked, wincing.

"Burn all the wood. It's a go."

Ravensmith coughed politely. "That's thirty-two hundred pounds, old man."

"You worry too much, Charlie. Bet you five hundred on the side that I take the sixth scalp."

"No *thank* you, chum!"

The croupier started dealing the two hands alternately, and then passed Kincade's to him on the polished black paddle.

Kincade ignored the hand and yawned.

Littlesky shook his head. The boss's detached aplomb was unnatural. It had existed ever since they left Nairobi. It had been at its iciest on the first night they arrived in London, air-weary and spirit-spent, when the room steward ushered them into their luxurious suite at the Dorchester, and they found it already occupied. Kincade had not blinked an eye. "Well, well, well," he said too casually, "if it isn't Bwana Kaka-pants."

"H'jambo, Bwana M'Cowboy," Balshakkar said.

The Rendille sat in a brocaded chair, one long leg dangling arrogantly over its arm, while he sipped a whiskey from the bottle of Scotch which the hotel's managing director had thoughtfully provided for Kincade's party. Nor did he rise. He regarded both Littlesky and Kincade with a leering smile. He looked ridiculous, wearing a comical deerstalker on his hairless pate. He was dressed in an overbright and overchecked jacket. It didn't seem to bother Kincade at all, but as soon as the room steward had been tipped and had departed, Littlesky turned on the gunbearer.

"How the hell did you get to London?"

" 'Shakkar have *kipande* and *passporti.*" (*Kipande* was an ID card in Kenya.)

"And money," Kincade said.

"Ndio, Bwana."

"Who paid your freight?" Littlesky asked sharply.

"Kwa mimi," Balshakkar replied haughtily, meaning it was none of Willy's business.

Kincade saw that Littlesky was losing his temper, so he cooly made sign to indicate the suite was undoubtedly bugged. That inhibited Willy.

Kincade said, "And now you have come for more *shillingi?"* Balshakkar nodded, showing his white teeth. "How much? *Kadiri gani?"*

"Elfu moja," Balshakkar said.

Kincade did not understand. He glanced at Littlesky, whose face was scarlet. "One thousand clams," Willy said. "Shall I toss him out on his ass?"

"Pay him."

"Boss, this is a bushwack—"

"Pay him," Kincade said. "You see, he has collateral. If we do not pay him, he will no longer say Melisande was an accident. He will swear I mau-maued Mama, and he will get Katinia and Githiri and Njogu to swear the same, and they will hang me. Right?"

"Ndio," Balshakkar said, pleased.

Littlesky was dangerously angry. The bankroll trembled in his hands. Kincade took it and threw a single bill at Balshakkar, who instantly picked it up. *"Asante sana,"* he said and made for the door.

"One thing," Kincade said, stopping him. "If I ever see you again, you obscene sonofabitch, you know what will happen?"

"You *piga* me," Balshakkar said.

"I *kufa* you," said Kincade and slapped the Rendille across the face. Balshakkar's arrogance quickly became ashen panic. He fled. Kincade then unpacked, bathed and retired as if nothing at all had happened.

3

ONCE, THE MONTEBANK had been a bombed-out townhouse, centrally situated in Mayfair on South Audley Street. It

had stood starkly charred and skeletonized for many post-blitz years, not quite an eyesore because its harsh reality had been a monument to one of Britain's finest hours. But when The Seven Needles purchased the property and rebuilt it, almost entirely, it had been transformed into a thing of beauty, tourist mecca and W.1 landmark.

There were four stories. The first was used for reception; it was darkly wood-paneled, with a grand Victorian bar, ladies' retirement rooms, gentlemen's reading rooms, private card rooms, and it was so staid it would have delighted even that testy timepiece, Phileas Fogg. The second story housed the casino.

The long room was a sweep of Orient, from the silken robes of the Levant to the snarling porcelain dragons of whilom Chinese dynasties. Golden pillars studded the draped, white-brocaded walls, with huge ceramic Ceylonese elephants trumpeting silently at the strategic arches. At the far end of the salon the circular bar shimmered in sparkling crystal, tinged with the reflection of ormolu corbeils. Persian rugs of extraordinary design lay underfoot, soft as moon dust, luxurious mementoes of Xerxe's empire. The bar boys and bus boys were garbed in white pantaloons, newly out of ancient Baghdad. They wore golden turbans, each studded with a single jewel from which geysered a single egret feather. The croupiers, bankers, pit bosses and tellers were all garbed richly in the British ambassadorial costumes of the mid-nineteenth century, so authentic that they might have reincurred the hostility of the Nizam of Hyderabad or invoked another mutiny from the Sepoys. Clive of India, seeing them, would have felt right at home.

But right now, nobody felt at home. The moccasin telegraph had alerted all the other gamblers. The casino had slowly stilled. It was not the most money ever wagered, nor the most coups ever passed at baccarat, but it *was* the most eccentric Yank playing a game he should not have known that well.

Kincade finally looked at his cards and turned them over.

"Little Joe from Kokomo!" he blatted, eying a king of spades and an eight. There was a prolonged sigh around the table. The sweating banker turned his cards over. He held two jacks: baccarat. Zed.

"La petite. Et baccarat," the croupier said calmly "Monsieur wins again."

The banker fed the pile in the center of the table, thirty-

two one-hundred-pound mother-of-pearl plaques, beautiful enough to frame and hang.

Littlesky said, "How much cowrie is that?"

"In dollars? Exactly fifteen thousand, two hundred and thirty-two stones."

Everybody momentarily relaxed, but Tarantella's eyes flicked wisely at the croupier, who urged· *"Faites vos jeux, mesdames et messieurs."*

Nobody made a move.

Kincade said, "What?"

"Your wager, monsieur?"

Kincade grinned. "Kill the coyote."

"C'est bien, monsieur," the croupier said, losing some of his serenity as he glanced at Tarantella, who nodded briefly, like the flick of an ash from a cigarette.

Littlesky's hands were shaking. He clutched the back of Kincade's chair to steady them.

Ravensmith said, "You are utterly mad, Simon."

Kincade gave him a long slow wink. "What've I got to lose? I started with two hundred quid. This is all house money."

"But it's *yours* now, you ruddy kiwi! Take it and do a Tommy Smith! The cards are bound to turn."

"Who says?"

"The laws of chance!"

The croupier was dealing the two hands. Now he passed Simon's cards over on the paddle and deposited them on the baize. Kincade picked them up so that they were in plain sight to everybody behind him. There were groans, led by Littlesky. Kincade held a ten and a queen. Zed.

Kincade said coolly, "Hit me, pard."

That meant that if the banker held an eight or a nine, the game was over. The banker didn't. He had a ten and a seven, an excellent hand. Tarantella permitted himself the faintest of relieved smiles. The croupier pulled one card out of the boot, where the eight intermixed decks slanted toward the slot, and passed it to Kincade on the paddle. Kincade slapped it down.

"Big Dick from Barstow!" he roostered loudly.

It was a nine.

"Neuf à la pointe!" the croupier gasped. He was rapidly losing his sanguinity. He paled as the banker turned up the seven. *"Sept à la banque . . .* Monsieur wins again!"

Littlesky tried to figure Kincade's winnings in dollars, and

he came to something over thirty large bills. He began to feel a little sick to his stomach because he knew the boss would continue the lunacy until all was lost.

Kincade said, "I'm buying for the house."

"We don't allow that, Mr. Kincade," Tarantella said. "Why don't you let me send you another libation?" He imitated a smile. "That is, if you intend to continue the play."

"Two sour mashes'll do, and thank you kindly, amigo. Redbelly, keep your peepers on that boot. Nobody touches it till I wet-whistle."

The bar stewards were getting a roaring traffic in whiskey-and-sodas from the spectators around the baccarat table, while the nerve-wracked banker wiped his steamy pate with a white silk handkerchief. The croupier found himself hoping the loudmouthed American would win, because now it would mean a paralyzing *pourboire*. Mr. Tarantella joined Kincade in the respite, clinking glasses and saying, "I like your style, Kincade."

"Yours isn't exactly tacky, pard."

Tarantella shrugged. "I never gamble."

"What's *this?* Jackstraws?"

"It's a sure thing. You lose. Inevitable. We didn't build this club because people win. The grind, my friend. Some advice? Take your money now, and be happy for this night, before you lose it all. Odds are you blow it next turn."

Kincade smiled. Then he downed his whiskey. It felt good. He was getting a little heady, but not stupidly. He rubbed his hands briskly and hawk-eyed the croupier. "Well now, Blackleg. What's the name of this game?"

"Baccarat, monsieur. *Faite votre jeu.*"

"The whole elephant."

"Tout? Everything?"

"Yep. Many mouths to feed and many rivers to cross. You may deal when you are ready, Gridley."

The croupier passed Kincade his two cards on the black paddle. Then two to the anxious banker, who broke protocol and instantly examined his hand (which evoked a scowl from Tarantella). Kincade picked up his cards. An ace of spades. A king of diamonds. Total: one.

He said, "It's a go. Hit me."

The banker nodded to the croupier as he turned up two queens. Zed.

Kincade lighted a cigarette. He puffed to make sure it was burning well before he examined the given card. The knave

of clubs. Total, still: one. There were groans behind Kincade.

"Carte," the banker said.

The croupier donated a queen of hearts. The banker held three queens.

Baccarat.

The lone ace in Kincade's hand had won. Kincade smiled up at Tarantella, who shrugged.

"I pass," Kincade said. "Cash in my checks."

The croupier had stacked the plaques. He pushed them over to Kincade. There were £25,600 in all, a total of $60,928.

"Wait, *wait*—I want to *suivi,"* Henry Dieu said excitedly. He tossed a one-hundred-pound plaque on the green baize.

On the next hand, the bank drew eight, and Dieu lost his hundred pounds with a five.

"I'll be a dingo's dinner!" Ravensmith said. "I'm shouting for the drinks."

But Tarantella interrupted. "Mr. Kincade will meet you in the dining saloon upstairs, Mr. Ravensmith. He has a little business with me first, I'm sorry to say."

Kincade said, "Something for the boys." He tossed over four one-hundred-pound plaques to the croupier and the banker. They *mercied* him with wide eyes.

"See you in Guzzle Gulch, Bwana Charlie," Kincade said as he followed Tarantella to the lift. Over his shoulder he called, *"Kwenda,* redbelly." And he added in Shoshoni, "Now! Eyes open! See all!"

"Whatever you say, boss," Littlesky casually replied.

4

THEY STEPPED into the lift. Kincade noted that there were only three pushbuttons for a four-story building. Tarantella picked up the interphone in the lift, said briefly, "Four," and the lift ascended. Kincade gawped and said, "Hey, that's pretty classy, if you like privacy, and I like privacy more than money. Redbelly, we ought to put that geegaw into the elevator back in Natrona."

"Natrona?" Tarantella asked politely.

"The old homestead," Kincade said. "Back aways in Wyoming. How does it work? You call your man, and he hits the switch?"

"No," Tarantella said. He pushed the stop button. When the lift halted, he handed Kincade the phone. "Try it."

"Sure." Kincade spoke into the mouthpiece. "Four."

Nothing happened. Tarantella took back the phone and said, "Four." The lift continued its ascent.

Kincade's mouth sagged. "How?"

"Electronic," Tarantella said. "I don't mean to be rude, Kincade, but if I told you how we do it, then you'd be able to interrupt my privacy. The fact is, although my office is here, I also keep my 'digs' here, as our cousins put it. In a club like this, we handle considerable scratch. London has more than an average share of the most successful, high-rolling thieves in the entire world. They're hard to discourage."

Kincade shrugged. "Why not guards?"

"The Montebank entertains the finest clientele in the world," Tarantella said, a trifle too archly. "If I stake out pistol-packers around the house, you get that uneasy Las Vegas charisma. And you have to employ guards to watch guards. No, Kincade, I've found that electronics provide not only the best protection against heist, but also the most *unpleasant* punishments, without recourse to law. The word gets around Soho and points east. After the first two tries, the Cheapside slashers have left us very much alone."

"That shines," Kincade said as the lift stopped. The doors opened automatically. The sound of the lift operating continued, however, for some ten seconds. Littlesky heard it and tried to suppress his interest. He got the feeling that Tarantella was trying to suppress his also. They stepped out into a big room.

"Make yourselves comfortable," Tarantella said, indicating his office. "There is a bar if you'd like a splash. I'll confirm your winnings."

He sat down at the oaken desk. Kincade and Littlesky gaped at the room. "By God!" Kincade said in awe. "This place is a museum!"

"Not really. All copies. No hard-money value. Look around."

To the left of the lift there was an eight-foot-tall color photograph of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, regal in a blue gown, a tiara on her head, as she sat on a golden chair and stared across the room at John Trumbull's magnificent painting of "George Washington at Verplanck's Point." Tarantella said, "The Trumbull original is in the du Pont Winterthur

Museum in Delaware. Had it photographed in color and then copied. Took me three artists before I got a good match. Hello? . . . Clyde? Exactly how much did Mr. Kincade's plaques total? . . . Uh-huh. Okay. Send it up."

Next to Her Majesty, left, there was a larger-than-life reproduction of Yousuf Karsh's famous photoportrait of Winston Spencer Churchill when wartime Prime Minister. On the American side, opposite, there was a copy of Rembrandt Peale's "Thomas Jefferson," executed from the original in the White House collection. Then, again left, an outsized reproduction of the Magna Carta, matched, on the right, by an outsized copy of the Declaration of Independence. Left, an oil of the "Battle of Trafalgar"; right, the sea fight between the *Serapis* and the *Bon Homme Richard*. Left, a painting of Lord Nelson's death; right, a painting of Oliver Hazard Perry's death. Left, the propeller from R.A.F. ace Tony Bartley"s last surviving Spitfire in the Battle of Britain; right, a half-life-size enlargement of U.S. Navy ace Neil Armstrong putting mankind's first foot on the surface of the moon. There was much more: an oil of George III; an oil of Dwight David Eisenhower; the white battle standard flown by the British cruiser *Exeter* during the *Graf Spee* sea meet; a six-foot hand-carved Kittery eagle from the old clipper ship *Benjamin Packard*. Finally, as the left and the right walls met at the center, a massive replica of the Atlantic Charter.

"Here's your money," Tarantella said.

"This is fantastic," Littlesky said, meaning the room.

Kincade was curious. "Why?"

"It's simple enough," Tarantella said. He even smiled. "You don't see a picture of that sonofabitch Tom Dewey up there, do you?"

"So?"

"He ran me out of the country way back when. An undesirable alien. Well, it's like that story 'The Man Without a Country.' I lived in Napoli a long time, then I came here to England. This place I like. I was here in the blitz. That automatically made me a citizen. I guess you'd call me a foreign resident. But I still get homesick."

Littlesky asked, "How could you get homesick for the United States if you were an alien?"

"I was born in Sicily, but my people went to the U.S.A. when I was on Mama's milk. So, first, it was New York. Now it's New York and London. When I went legit, I put

it all up there on the walls. That's it. Shall we finish the business?"

Kincade said, "That's a great story, amigo."

"Thanks." Tarantella counted out sixty one-thousand-dollar bills, all quite new. "You don't mind American money?"

"Not if it isn't funny."

Tarantella peered at him. "You can have it in pounds, or lira or New Francs or pesetas or guilders, for all we care."

Kincade said, "I was joking, amigo. I expected a check."

"We don't deal in checks."

"How do you prove your losses?"

Tarantella handed over a receipt for Kincade to sign. It said he had received the sixty thousand dollars in cash and no longer held the Montebank responsible for any obligations. It was a clever setup. Losers didn't have to sign chits for the amount lost. That was up to Her Majesty's agents of Inland Revenue to cope with. But there would be no doubts about the house's losses. When Kincade had signed, Tarantella picked up a pneumatic tube cup, inserted the receipt, opened a tube cover behind his desk, and shot the receipt downstairs. They could hear the vacuum suck air as the message whumped off.

Tarantella said, "That's how the money came up. We don't keep much cash around here. Too tempting."

Kincade pulled his huge wad of normal pocket money out and wrapped the sixty one-thousand-dollar bills around it. The bundle became unwieldy. He turned to Littlesky and gave him half. "Here, redbelly. Hold it for me. It spoils the line of my pants."

"Okay, boss."

Kincade rose. "Nice to have done trading with you, Mr. Tarantella."

"If you intend to lose any of that," Tarantella said, "give us first crack."

"You've got it, amigo."

The telephone rang. After he answered it, Tarantella looked surprised, then sullen. "For you."

Kincade said, "How the hell? Nobody in the world knows I'm here."

"Wait a minute, boss," Littlesky said, looking shamefaced. "The Dorch could have tipped them off."

"You left the whereabouts?"

Littlesky nodded. "I met this kindly English squaw this afternoon in the lobby during the tea-and-watercress-sand-

wich crisis. She insinuated that we might have a sort of confrontation. I told the switchboard where we'd be, just in case she wanted to have me tell her the true story of Bill Cody's duel with Yellow Hand."

"You stupid spiv!" Kincade said.

"But it's for *you,* Kincade," Tarantella said coolly.

"Who?"

"The American Ambassador." Tarantella's eyes, as usual, had nothing in them. Littlesky thought how Injun the Sicilian could be. He also hoped that nobody at the Embassy was going to make an unknowing security break, because surely this phone was tapped and taping the intelligence, probably in the top drawer of Tarantella's desk. If the mission was *President's Eyes Only,* no soul at the Embassy was in the know. That meant trouble.

Kincade took the phone. "How!"

"Simon Kincade?"

"Himself."

"This is Christopher Percy, one of Ambassador Annenberg's secretaries."

Kincade said, "You sound limey. You trying to tell me the American Embassy can't afford real Americans?"

"I'd suggest you take that up with the Ministry of Labour, sir," Mr. Percy said with cheerful contempt. "Meanwhile, the Ambassador presents his compliments and requests that you see him at your earliest convenience."

Kincade said, "I'll give him a toot on the blower tomorrow."

"He meant immediately," Mr. Percy said.

"What's in his craw?" Kincade asked nervously.

"*Mr.* Kincade," Mr. Percy said, faintly frosty. "It is not for me to discuss matters of state, but if I were you, I should hop to it this very tick or it is not unlikely that you will be *persona non grata* in the United Kingdom by tomorrow evening."

"Okay, hoss," Kincade said, puzzled. He hung up. "What in hell have I done now? . . . Where is the Embassy anyhow?"

Tarantella said, "Up the end of Audley to Mount Street, then across the square to Number twenty-four."

"Thanks. Something fishy about this, though. Anybody downstairs knows I just won a bundle."

Tarantella smiled thinly. "Mr. Percy happens to be a member here. He also happens to be Mr. Annenberg's secretary—one of them. I recognized his voice. I'm sure it's on

the square. . . . Of course, if you wish to leave your money here . . ."

"Thanks, pard, but no thanks. Like I said, nobody swallows my property tonight." But Kincade still looked worried.

Tarantella called the lift up. They got in, pressed button one and descended. They looked morosely at each other. Kincade shrugged when Littlesky made sign, asking what the call really meant. Littlesky indicated a hidden microphone somewhere, and then made sign for small talk. "Boss," he said, "I'll bet it's got something to do with your offer on that pile of rocks."

"Stonehenge?"

"What else?"

"You think they've reconsidered?"

"They need the scratch, don't they?"

"Like blood," Kincade said. "The pound sterling isn't out seeing shrinks for nothing. Only, what did they get so goddam hairtrigger about?"

Enough already, Littlesky signaled. That covered the inanities for the eavesdrop. When the lift reached the first floor and the automatic doors sprang silently open, both of them shot out of the cage and nearly bowled over a woman and her companion. Kincade grabbed her as she recoiled; she was exquisitely lovely. Her obese companion was steadied by Littlesky.

"Sorry," Kincade said. He took a look at her. "I mean I'm *really* sorry, ma'am. I ought to be fustigated for busting out of the 'chute like a wind-bellied churnhead! I mean, damned idiot, not even looking where I was going! I might have sweenied you! Begging your pardon?"

She smiled. It was a dazzle. She said openly, "I'm afraid Dickie and I were just as overeager—"

"No, ma'am. All my fault." Kincade had glanced at Littlesky to see if he was the only smitten fool, but Littlesky's nonexpressive eyes were sparkling with clean lust.

They were looking at the perfect female. She had the perfect nose, faintly retroussé, and the perfect mouth, lower lip full, scarlet and gorgeously wet, upper lip fine, mannered, crisp. She had the steady, unrelenting, unescapable, chartreuse eyes of a leopard who is not going to get out of the way. Her eyebrows, instead of arching, were thin hairlines, almost straight, flaring up and out above her dark velvety (and real) lashes. She had the perfect smile, neither cold nor encouraging, with brilliantly white gleaming teeth, her ca-

nines pronounced sharply to give her true felinity. There was not a line on her face, not even when she smiled or crinkled a noncrinklable nose, or squinted nonsquintable eyes. She was a nocturne in green. She was gowned in emerald satin, and it moved and breathed with her body like living flesh. (With a sharp pang, Kincade recalled Bluetop in Nairobi, that blue thing on that sensuous form.) But this lady's body was not sensuous. It was too perfect for vulgarity, her braless breasts pointed firmly high without help, the nipples looking up into the inquiring eye arrogantly. She had no waist; her stomach was flat; the satin disclosed no outsized mons veneris; her long legs gave her a svelte line; her backside was pure sheer, no curve at all. She wore an insane Kelly-green wig, almost like an inverted mop, and from it a meshed golden mask extended down over her forehead and eyes. It was a loosely chained network which hid nothing and accentuated those awesome eyes. The gold mesh was studded with emerald chips to stress the emerald pendants which danced in flashes of green fire at her small flat ears. Even her voice was beautiful, low-pitched with an American grace, lacking any dishonest attempt at a broad A or a lah or a dee or a dah.

"God almighty!"

"I beg your pardon?" she asked.

"Kincade!" It was the obese little man with her. He spoke in a scratchy malignant voice. "You don't remember me? Dicky Dickerson? In New York?"

"You'd be a hard man to forget," Kincade said.

"I was writing the Cholly Continental column then."

"And I was probably drinking Forty Rod bangbrain," Kincade said, "because I don't honestly recall you, amigo, and I get the feeling that if I did, I'd probably owe you a jab of Green River in the liver for what you wrote about me next day."

Dickerson's little pig face pursed what might have been a smile. "I guess I *was* a little rough on you."

Nice recovery, Kincade thought to himself, because he had never been briefed on the fact that Dickerson and Kincade had met. *And perhaps they hadn't.*

"This is Lady Henley," Dickerson said finally. "Dara, this is the wild wrangler you've been reading about. Simon Kincade."

She offered a cool hand and shook his firmly.

"Howdy," he said. "And this buck here is Willy Littlesky."

She smiled at Willy. He smiled back, wide enough to show molars. "Why don't you join us?" she said.

"We were just leaving."

Dickerson dismissed it. "I demand you come along for a bottle and bird. I'm not writing anymore, so you've got no worries on that score. Not that I could write anything more detrimental than you've managed yourself."

Kincade did not like this man. Dickerson had the face of a mature boar, so jowled you couldn't tell where his jaw stopped and his neck began. His mouth was pink-pursed and his color was as scarlet as a pimiento. It was difficult to see his darting gray eyes behind the fat folds below and above them. "Maybe in a while."

Lady Henley said, "Don't tell me the casino has wiped you out already?"

"No, ma'am. In fact, I took 'em for sixty bills a while ago."

Her slanting eyebrows drove higher. "Sixty thousand dollars?" He nodded. She laughed. "I wonder how Vic took *that!*"

"Like a little soldier," Kincade said. *"Hasta la vista,* lady. And don't you go hitching up till I get back. Hear?"

"I'm not even asked for," she said. She smiled at him as Dickerson led her into the lift. The doors closed silently as Kincade and Littlesky stared after them. Then they stared at each other. Words were impossible in view of Simon's transmitting dinner jacket, but they both thought the same thing. *We're on the wrong side.*

A high-domed cab pulled up in front of the Montebank as they came down the steps. "Hack, sir?" the cabbie called.

"We're walking," Littlesky said while Kincade stared at the driver.

"Let's ride," said Kincade. "These new boots are killing me."

Littlesky looked at him in surprise and allowed himself to be shoved quickly into the cab, feeling Simon's hard pressure on his arm. Kincade slammed the door and said, "American Embassy" loud enough for the doorman to hear it.

5

AFTER THEY HAD turned the corner at South Audley into Grosvenor Square, Littlesky, puzzled, started to make sign, but Bear Paw cut him off. He pointed to the driver. Then he touched his nose with two fingers. Then he touched his mouth with two fingers. Lastly, he pointed at Willy. In sign language, the nose denotes blood. Two fingers in the mouth denotes that you have both suckled at the same mother's teat. In other words, blood brother.

Littlesky peered into the rear-view mirror to try and understand why the cabbie was his blood brother. He saw no kinship in the red-veined, swollen nose and the Bruce Bairnsfather mustache the driver sported. By then, the cab had pulled up in front of the Embassy. " 'Ere we are, Guv," the cabbie said, turning around. He quickly used sign, pointing at the jacket and then making the "small talk" indicator. Bear Paw nodded, pointed at Littlesky and made sign that Littlesky was clean of transmitters.

"Want me to mosey along, boss?" Littlesky said, having noted the silent dialogue.

"Better stay hitched," Kincade said. "I won't be long." He got out, glanced back once at them dubiously and then entered the Embassy.

The cabbie turned around full and faced Littlesky. "Hello, Willy," he said in a normal American flat voice. "You can talk. The wheels are safe, if you are."

Littlesky sighed and shook his head. "Hello, Commander," he said. "I *just* recognized you."

Commander Paul Revere Sampson thrust his hand back. Willy shook it heartily, relieved. Sampson said, "Sorry to take this kind of fool chance with all the theatrics, but it is vital we caucus, no choice." His voice dropped. "Awfully sorry about Mrs. Kincade. Rough?"

"Roughest."

"How is he?"

"A miracle. You guys must have built powerful inhibitions into him. I hope it isn't permanent."

Sampson smiled sadly. "I can personally debrief him in ten minutes. But there are built-in perils."

"Commander, he's damned dangerous," Littlesky said

quietly. "He was wet rawhide when he began. Now he's been in the sun too long. He's as tight as a bowstring. And if Keyhole doesn't make a move soon, he'll shrink enough to bust."

Sampson said, worried, "They should have opened the ball before this. Something is wrong. I would have thought the African accident would have made it a sure thing. But someone doesn't believe us. Now listen. We haven't much time, and we've got to steal some. I set up this Embassy thing, so pay no attention. It can only help if they are monitoring his jacket."

"They are, Commander. They monitor the rattle of toilet paper. That's another thing. It's nerve-wracking for him—and me too—always to be on, always knowing that everything you say and do is heard or seen. I sometimes feel they even know how we think."

Commander Sampson nodded. "When he comes back, suggest dinner, but you don't know where, so I'll pretend to drive you to Soho for a chance spot. That way, we get no tail."

"Where *are* we going?"

"When we arrive at the destination, pretend he's tearing his jacket as he gets out, and you defuse it. Can you do that?"

"Can do. I'll pull off the power button and glitch the antenna connection in the lapel," Littlesky said.

"I'd suggest instead of gabbing with a cabbie you get out and pace worriedly in front of this remote piece of Wyoming—plus the other forty-nine."

"Wilco." Littlesky left the cab, stared into the Embassy doors, lighted a cigarette and strode like a nervous father. He had a sweeping view of the square on the Brook Street side, where he walked to and fro. He saw no watchers, only sporadic automobile traffic on the Davies Street side, edging down toward Berkeley Square.

Kincade took twenty minutes for the interview. When he came out, his shoulders were sagging and he seemed dispirited. The soprano tinkling of the silver bells on his spur shanks sounded cheerfully incongruous. Littlesky peered into his face.

"Well," Kincade said morosely, "that Mr. Annenberg seems to be a very nice man, and he doesn't raise his voice at all, yet I get the feeling he was yelling at me all the time."

They returned to the cab. Kincade looked at Commander Sampson and the Shoshoni for a lead. Littlesky said, "Boss,

why don't we grab off a bite of *wasna* before we go back to the gambling hell?" *Wasna* was a Cheyenne word for jerked buffalo meat, crushed cherries and rendered hump fat.

"Sure, redbelly. Any particular hashhouse?"

"No. We can let Alfie here give us the tour and we'll grab the first decent wontonerry that throws out a friendly fried shrimp."

"Moi nime is Sklyes, sor," Sampson said.

"Steer for Soho, Sklyes," Littlesky said. "We'll tell you when to stop."

"Roight, sor."

They chuttled off. Littlesky gave the sign to Kincade to make normal chatter. "What happened with the Ambassador, Chief?"

Kincade sighed. "First thing, he slaps my hand for coming on so strong. Not good for Anglo-American relations. Stonehenge is a national shrine, all that crock. National shrine, that bunch of beat-up rocks! Anyway, I said I was sorry, and then he said that Harold had called. 'Harold who?' I asked. 'Harold Wilson,' he said. That boxed me. 'What does he do?' I asked. The Ambassador just looked at me through his specs. 'He worries a lot,' he said, 'because he happens to be Prime Minister of Great Britain.' Well, that made me feel like a Mexican dollar. Then he laid it on the line. Pick-your-partner-and-open-the-ball."

"Exile, you mean?"

"They call it deportation," Kincade said. "He said the only thing the country was willing to let go was Carnaby Street, and they'll give it away. So I smoked the pipe with him and made peace."

During the conversation, Commander Sampson had turned around the square, driven down Mount Street, touched Davies and then crossed the western side of Berkeley Square. At Charles Street he made a sharp right turn into Hays Mews and made sudden gestures.

Littlesky warned Kincade to silence and then said, "Hey, cabbie, that looks like a good greasy spoon. Pull up here, bucko! Come on, boss." As the cab groaned quietly to a halt, Littlesky added with acerbity that startled Kincade, "Hey, boss! Look out there! You're hung up on the door handle. You'll wreck the gold-plated jacket." Simultaneously, he reached over, pulling his Green River blade from his left sleeve, and cut off the third button of the coat, yanking it to fray it. After that, he felt into the left lapel until he found

the jack-and-receptacle of the internal antenna and pulled the plug. The imbalance put a kink in the lapel.

"You're turned off," Littlesky said.

Kincade leaned back and sighed heavily.

"Hight shillings," the cabbie said ridiculously. The Shoshoni gave him ten bob. They all left the cab. Out of the misting shadows of Hays Mews, near Farm Street, another cabbie evolved, identical in appearance with Commander Sampson. He accepted the ten-shilling note, climbed behind the wheel and drove away. Sampson explained, "One of Sir Julian Key's men from MI six. Follow along."

He led them into a little house, number 23-A, on the east side of Hays Mews. In the foyer they could see the entrance to a ground-floor flat. Sampson led them up the stairs to the second story. At the door he pressed a button on the top of the highest hinge. There was a sliding sound. "Interior bolts," he said. "Electronic lock." Then, using a normal house key, he opened the door and let them in.

The parlor was pleasant, properly tacky and properly English. The inevitable antimacassars were properly soiled from hands and hair pomade. The colorless drapes were musky with damp dun dust. The infrequently carpet-swept rugs might still have held mud scrapings from the boots of Boswell's friend. On dampening nights, such as this one, with incoming fog blanching the London darkness, you fancied you could still scent the sweat and droppings of the carriage horses that had once stomped on the stable boards below, long before.

The silver spur bells tinkled sweetly as Kincade walked heavily across the room and then paused, a strange exalted look in his eyes as he pivoted to see the flat. He chose a faded but circumspect easy chair and flopped into it with a hard sigh. A feral spring, uncaged from its holding in the cushion, struck him in the left buttock like a Gaboon viper, but he did not even wince.

Littlesky, seeing the parlor, frowned. "Commander, what is this place?"

"It's heaven, redbelly," Kincade said, closing his eyes and leaning his head back. "Sky-blue heaven."

6

AFTER A FEW MOMENTS, while Kincade's eyes remained closed and a tired but relaxed smile hovered over his mouth, Commander Sampson tapped Littlesky and beckoned him to follow. They went off into one of the two bedrooms. Sampson peeled a key from his ring. "House key," he said, handing it to Littlesky. "You'll notice it's an American Yale so that if you lose it it won't appear to apply to any local residence. Notice the label on it." Littlesky read the little tag attached to the key. One side said, "Wine cellar." The other side said: "If lost, return to Box 47 Natrona, Wyo."

Littlesky smiled. "*Good* show, sir."

Paul Revere Sampson then handed him a second key, which was no key at all. Just a plastic card which gave his club number as a member of the Cheyenne Ladies' Club and which had his signature plainly written on it across the top tape. "Hey," Littlesky said, "where did you get this?"

"We made it."

"How'd you know I belonged to—"

"Research. And you ought to be ashamed of yourself, from what we found out about the Cheyenne Ladies' Club."

Willy grinned like a trapped teenager. "Used to be a great rookery with the prettiest gentle Annies who ever pouted at the right time. Anyway, I've still got my old card."

"Give it to me." Sampson accepted it from him and then, with a sharp pocket knife, cut it to pieces and stowed the plastic strips in his own pocket. Willy watched, fascinated. Sampson took him to a double closet.

"Looks flimsy, but don't let it fool you. It's double bolted from behind. That card you're holding is magnetized and coded. Slip it between the two doors at key level." (There were no keyholes available.) Littlesky slipped it into the crack, heard a click, the slide of metal, and the doors went ajar.

Sampson laid them open, disclosing shelves on which reposed boxes of electronic gear and other impedimenta. He explained, "Up here, the latest fluorescent powders and dyes and your black light torches. You can use these powders safely in aftershave soap, perfume, even flowers, hair spray, deodorants. Over here, long-range zoom binoculars. This seven-by-fifty pair are black-lighted so that you can follow

your fluorescent target as required. Second shelf are all the latest transmitters, the old universals, all manner of bugs, including these newest. Look at them. Less than the size of a pinhead, but don't let them fool you, Willy. Same power generation as the bug in Sam's head, and the range—even for that microsize—is a half mile."

"Great," Littlesky said. "We were going to ask for these. Part of the plan."

"What plan?"

"You'll hear. I want Bwana Cowboy in on it."

"All right. Then see here. Closed TV camera, with optic fibers for a transmission line which can curve around corners and go anywhere. That little king-size cigarette box is the receiver. Too much, eh? Here are the infra-red electric bulbs. They light normally when a switch is on, but they give off infra-red when the switch is off, and you can shoot in the dark very efficiently. Now this thing, the size of a spider, eh? This thing is a bug which starts transmitting the moment anybody walks into the bugged room. The very capacity of the human body imbalances the static electricity in the room and starts it going. And these tiny vibration transformers can demodulate any transmission on tonal modulation. . . . Over here are your anti devices: your metal detector, r.f. detector probe, your tone generator and low impedance leads to detect a wire tap, your high impedance detector for a third-party wire tap, a couple of r.f. jammers, and here are some radiation shields. Over there, weapons."

"Commander—" Littlesky said.

"One moment. Down here on the floor, a pair of parabolic auditories. Big ears. They might come in handy."

"Negative," Littlesky said. "None of it is worth a damn to us except the pinhead transmitters."

"Why not?"

Willy shrugged. "Sir, the minute that Keyhole knows we are bugging them, or powdering them down for a tail, or big-earing them, or detecting *their* surveillances, *we have had it*. We are the suckers, sir. We don't know from nothing. We are pigeons for plucking. One lousy bug, and that makes us pros, and that makes us dead. That is what has been so tough. We can't fight back or we lose."

"Yes," Commander Sampson said thoughtfully. "Well, anyway, this gear is for you with love and kisses from the admiral, if you should ever happen to need it. I see your point. Very tough. Take the Geiger counter with you." Sampson

handed it to him. "Better give him a check and see if he—and we—are still in the ball game."

Sampson closed the closet doors, and the second they made contact, the heavy metal bolts slid home. It had an appalling magic. Sampson said, "This flat is a hideout. Not to be used except for psychological or actual emergencies. You carry both keys, the flat and the closet card. That is an order from GWIFA."

"Roger, sir," Littlesky said. They both returned to the parlor, where Kincade had opened his eyes and was relaxing with a dreamy smile. He said, "You wouldn't happen to have some Very Special Old Pale Reserve cognac in this mare's nest, Commander? Just for old time's sake?"

"Yes." Sampson smiled. "Just one second."

Littlesky turned on the Geiger counter and swung the probe all over Kincade's body. The check always incurred some breathless moments. The chatterbox indicated nothing abnormal and the meter the same, until, without warning, the radiation rush clattered like a bevy of rattler buttons on a bouncing pogo stick. It scared the life out of them all, the meter almost going off scale, until they realized that Littlesky had placed the probe directly atop Kincade's wristwatch, which just happened to have radium-painted shadowings on its dial.

"Clean," Littlesky said, "but I won't need a cathartic for some time."

"Let's powwow," Commander Sampson said as he brought out a bottle of Courvoisier and poured for three.

Kincade said, "You know about our African gunbearer—bastard named Balshakkar—being in town and tapping me?" Sampson nodded. "Who imported him?"

"I'd say it's obvious Bwana Charlie paid the way," the commander replied. "Keyhole is keeping him on the plate as their witness for when they decide to give you the scarlet card."

Kincade's eyes shadowed and his jaw went rigid. "I am tired of being hunted, Commander. I am tired of being a guppy in a fish bowl. I am tired of being watched and listened to. If these sons don't make their move soon, I am going to give up being a piece of live bait, and I am going to put on some war paint. Then Chief Many Merkins here, and yours truly, are going to go hunting, and when we do, I shall show these people some real old-fashioned Indian tricks that

aren't taught in your assassination schools. And there won't be any such thing as Keyhole anymore."

Sampson held up a hand. "Negative. The admiral warned you that you were not to be gangbusters. Your job is to attract Keyhole into extorting money from you and to learn —as safely as possible—where that money goes, where the Keyhole headquarters is, to deliver that information and to get the hell out."

Kincade leaned back and spoke to Littlesky. "Did you get that recording?"

"Want to hear it?"

"Replay."

Littlesky took a matchbox-sized recorder out of his pocket, rewound fifty feet or so and then turned it on. After a silence it repeated the entire conversation they had had with Tarantella in the Montebank lift, with Tarantella calling "Four" into the telephone twice. Kincade nodded. Littlesky turned it off.

Sampson frowned. "What's that?"

"That is the way to get into Tarantella's office at the casino. We played stupid for him, but actually it's a smart gadget. There are four stories. There are only three buttons in the lift. You can't go to four, to his digs, by pressing a button, and you can't short out the circuits. That lift works purely on a voice tape. I think that the monitor is probably coded into all the seven voices of The Seven Needles. You know the advances of voice tape comparisons the law-enforcement agencies have been working on? Same thing. If your voice isn't on the memory tape of the machinery, the lift won't go up to the fourth floor. Fortunately, we've got Tarantella's, so we can go any time we think it's worthwhile."

"Ingenious," Sampson said. "But why is that important?"

Kincade glanced at Littlesky again. "Did you hear that lift machinery continue to work after we stopped?"

"Yop," said Littlesky. "A good ten seconds. Bwana Shotgun didn't look too happy about it either."

Sampson shrugged. "You've lost me."

"We think," said Kincade, "that there is another lift. We think that you have to get to Tarantella's offices on the fourth floor before you can board the other lift, which is strictly nonstop and does not take passengers anywhere but down."

"Where would it go?"

"The subcellar. Board of director's room. Keyhole."

"And I think," Littlesky said, "that they would have to

have the second lift located right next to the first, to use the same shaft. Which means, that the second lift is right behind that big photograph of Her Majesty."

"Agree."

Commander Sampson briskly paced the small parlor as if it were a windswept quarter-deck. He began to bite a thumbnail, disturbed. "Wait," he said. He went into the bedroom. They heard a closet door open, then some scrounging. When he returned, he was toting rolls of architectural plans, which he spread out on the chintzy daybed after waving Littlesky off. "Xeroxes of the Montebank," he explained. "Also The Seven Needles on Savile Row. Sir Julian Keys of MI six procured these copies for us from the Bureau of Building and Industry Standards, London, without their knowledge, of course. Nor Keyhole's."

"Interesting," Littlesky murmured, examining the plans. Kincade's eyes glittered. He said nothing.

"As you are aware," Commander Sampson said painstakingly, "finding the location of the headquarters has been the prime objective of the entire mission. Keyhole is an entity which deals in extortable information, an inside intelligence of unbelievable scope, internationally."

Kincade sighed.

Sampson paused. "I'm doing my best, Simon. It does require some redundancy."

Kincade interrupted. "The point is that Supersnoop requires radio antennas, computers, tape machines, the whole machinery of espionage, and you haven't been able to locate any such *taka-taka.* That's Swahili for junk. Antennas are hard to hide. So where are they?"

"We don't know."

"We do," Kincade said. "While I've had snoopery riding on my shoulder, Willy's been a lot freer. I gave him lots of time off since we arrived, and he's been chasing Chelsea chicks as cover."

"Not exactly as *cover,*" Littlesky said, grinning. "What I mean is, the work wasn't that hard, and I'm not that ugly."

Kincade was impatient. "Point is, Keyhole followed him for the first week or so, and then they got tired of his orgasmatic grunts and groans—"

"Boss, you promised not to tell!"

"—and left him alone."

Sampson nodded. "That's true. We had a follower on their follower. His obvious dedication to sex bored them finally."

Kincade blinked. The double-tail was news to him. He shrugged it off and continued: "Willy got free enough to test out a few theories he and I had kicked around, when we got a chance, which was damned seldom. Now look, Paul. Keyhole is an uncontiguous whole. It is an organization of leopard spots, disconnected in location, but a solid single in actuality. To keep this unified texture requires radio communication and telephone communication in depth. Therefore, antennas for all frequencies must exist, and if they are to operate with worldwide efficiency they have to be placed where they have optimum reception and optimum transmission. These people communicate with the United States, Nairobi, Marrakesh, Rome, Paris, Venice, Zurich, Tokyo, undoubtedly Hong Kong."

Sampson smiled. "Very good. I'll have more on Hong Kong later. Go ahead."

"In other words, you don't put a high-gain selective frequency beam antenna in a cellar. You raise it high as Lucy-in-the-Sky-with-Diamonds, where anybody can see it."

"Uh-huh."

"There are no high-gain antennas on the roof of The Seven Needles toggery in Savile Row, and the building itself is only three stories high."

"We knew that."

"There are no antennas whatsoever on the roof of the Montebank."

"We knew that too," Sampson said. "If you are trying to discourage me, mission accomplished."

Kincade smiled. "It gets cheerier. I'll have another pop of that *tembo.*" Sampson hesitated. Smiling, Kincade added, "That's Swahili for elephant or hard liquor." Sampson reluctantly poured him two fingers of the cognac and hastily squirted soda into it to thin it.

"Thanks." Kincade swallowed off half of it. "Now, let's backtrack. Remember Patrick Henry Duffy. He took five hundred thousand dollars to a new office building at Oxford and Duke. The Tottenham Towers, just two and a half city blocks from the present location of the Montebank. He rendezvoused at an office numbered seven-two-two, let himself in with electronic Keyhole card and deposited the pemmican in a slot which fed out into space, seven stories above Duke Street. But the money never came down, eh?"

Sampson nodded, completely rapt.

"You know why? Because it went *up.* Not down. *Up.*"

The thought had never occurred to the commander. His eyes went blank, then instantly shrewd, as he understood.

"The eighth floor!"

"Exactly. The Tottenham Towers is eight stories high. The entire eighth floor is leased by British Electro Limited. All they had to do, knowing the time of the drop, was to hang a bag under the slot, haul it up after the drop, and giggle and gasp at the mystery of the lost loot."

"Credible," Sampson said excitedly, "but all of this is conjecture—"

"We know damn well that's what happened," Kincade said, with rime in his eyes, "and Willy took a hell of a chance proving it. Three days ago he made a little foray. If they'd caught him, his scalp would be hanging in their lodge. I hung around Mayfair, where they could keep an eye on me—whoever my shadow is—"

"Didn't you know?" Sampson showed surprise. "It's Henry Dieu's sidekick. The Polish pretty boy. Francis Bane."

Kincade's brow knitted. "Tall. Dark. Soft blue eyes. Full mouth. Hands big enough to strangle a watermelon."

"That's Bane."

"Thanks for the happy news. Anyway, I stayed in the open where they could see me, the American Bar, Les Ambassadeurs. Easy open country for them. They'd given up—we hoped—on Willy, so he went down to see the John Gielgud play in the West End, that English family thing, *Forty Years On,* but he split after the first act and cut back to Oxford and Duke."

"Three nights ago . . ." Commander Sampson reached into his memory. "Wasn't that when the night super at Tottenham Towers was slugged and bound?"

"*Coshed* is the proper word down Soho way," Kincade replied, smiling ruefully. "Sorry, Commander, but Willy couldn't take the chance with a bribe. For all he knew that super could be in the employ of Keyhole, and he needed those keys to get in. Anyway the old gentleman didn't suffer more of an egg than a Rhode Island Red manages. He was okay next day."

Sampson was appalled, thinking of Admiral McCabe's stony, disapproving face. "Almighty God, if you'd been caught, Willy—"

"I wasn't," Littlesky said. He poured himself another brace of ounces from the cognac bottle and did not add soda.

"Tell him what happened," Kincade said, "before you overguzzle that redeye and get Injun-stupid."

Littlesky stopped with his drink poised and looked unhappy. He lowered it. "I went up to the roof. Quite a view up there, Commander. No antennas on top of Tottenham except for a very nice TV array with a junction box and amplifiers to feed all the tellies in the building. Now, the boss had had this idea about the eighth floor, even if we don't know who or what British Electro Limited is. So I took an r.f. probe and a field strength meter. *Wakan Tanka!* I pointed the r.f. probe down at the deck and the needle went off the scale. It was hot. I was standing in a field of radio frequency energy that might have sterilized me. It was everywhere I pointed that probe. Okay. So then I took the field strength meter, and I tuned it through the Hertzian spectrum from twenty meters up into the ultra-high stuff. I got massive signal strengths on all frequencies. Which is to say, Commander, that eighth floor is stiff with transmissions on all the usable frequencies in the radio spectrum. And, sir, they were emitting. Which means they were in contact with those parts of the world which are Tomorrow or Yesterday, considering the time difference from London. This was around ten P.M."

Commander Sampson was elated. "Damn fine work. This will give us something to really bite into. I'll have British Electro checked out. But one thing, Simon. If the tapes and intelligences are received on the Eighth floor of the Tottenham Towers, isn't that a bit out in the open? I mean, we could get a warrant and raid the entire floor—"

"You'd pick up a bunch of antennas and a bunch of employed stooges, and nothing else. Because it's my studied guess that all those messages are fed to and from headquarters through transmitters, deep in the bottom of the Montebank. And they are carried by multicoaxial A.T. and T. cables which can carry thousands of messages simultaneously within the nonradiating sheath."

"How could that be done?"

"By passing your own cable through the conduits and sewers of the city of London. The distance is only two and a half blocks. Hell, man, I could do that myself, and I don't like methane gas."

Sampson's elation ebbed into thoughtful quiet. "That's it, of course. The building, except for the steel uprights, is practically solid glass. Black out the windows on the eighth floor, install your beam antennas, aimed by compass, and you're

emitting and receiving five-by-five signal strengths anyplace in the world!"

There was a gentle rap at the door. They all froze. Littlesky glugged down his *eau de vie* before possible hostilities could knock it from his hand.

7

A KEY WAS INSERTED in the lock, and then klatched into electric contact. The heavy black bolts, actually solenoids in a magnetic casing, were withdrawn back into their cells with no more sibilance than a hissing snake. The door was opened by a firm hand, and in walked a stranger with the orange-coppery hair of a Viking battleaxeman, except for the toggery, which only an Englishman could wear on his first trip to Disneyland, or his last stand at the half-crown seller's window at Epsom Downs.

"Sir Julian!" Commander Sampson said. "Come in."

"Half a mo," Sir Julian said, chirring like a grasshopper. He closed the door firmly, watching the double-pole contact throw the bolts into the lock position again. He tried the door briefly, then wheeled and waved the lionheaded malacca sword cane he carried. "Wouldn't want anything untoward to happen to you poor damned tourists." His voice was squeaky and high, and this time it chirked like a nuthatch. Littlesky stared in astonishment, thinking, This is the generation gap to dwarf all others.

The gentleman smiled. "Howja do."

"Hidy, old hoss," Kincade said, appearing relaxed but with wary eyes.

"You can skip the rerun of *True Grit,*" Commander Sampson said wryly. "Gentlemen, this is Sir Julian Keys, head of station, MI six."

"That's classified information, y'know," Sir Julian said reprovingly.

"Sorry, Sir Julian." Sampson smiled. "The one with the bells on is Simon Kincade."

"Howdy."

"Howja do."

"The other one with the Miss America smile is our wild Indian, Willy Littlesky."

"Hou cola!" Willy said in Cheyenne.

"Howja do."

Littlesky was thinking, There's a new Bwana Rinky Dink in the heavens tonight. This great Britain was something else. His pink unfurrowed skin glistened like parchment, belying flatly the truth that it was sixty-four years of age. The berg-blue untamed eyes never ceased their darting, face to face, place to place. They were infinitely restless and suddenly imparted the same tensity. Sir Julian sported handlebar orange-copper moustaches on his thin upper lip, faintly intersticed with lines of snow. His eyebrows were impossible, completely omnidirectional, a supercrostic of uncombed and unbarbered hairs which detonated raggedly above the blue eyes. He had a nonburning briar pipe clenched savagely in his good teeth, inverted to keep the nasty xanthic night fog out of the nastier black bowl. The pipe instantly had an aura of authority.

Sir Julian was wearing a visored sporting cap of some hound's-tooth material, and when he removed it his head hair erected with an uninhibited bounce, like the topknot of a ballet master. He also wore a three-quarter-length white sail-cloth rain jacket, fitted with wooden toggles and tarline instead of buttons. It ended above his knees. Beneath it you could see the hairiest Harris tweed sport jacket, and beneath that a brilliant yellow weskit, firmly holding in place a chocolate satin tie. His shirt was conservatively clean. The Scotch brogans, brightly shined, seemed too heavy for his small feet. He was, after all, not more than five feet three inches in height and weighed no more than nine stone.

Sir Julian stripped off gloves and rain jacket; he zitted at Sampson in his bird voice, "Good God, man, *do* remove that bloodshot tulip from your nose before it dissuades me from inquiring after the health of that VSOP chopin I see before me. Isn't that eighty-six point four proof? Out of some colonial PX? There, you see the penalty of conquest, which you ruddy imperialists are now but learning! If Milord, the Iron Duke, had *lost* the bloody Battle of Waterloo, then the silly Gauls would have exported their better brews to this realm instead of to the colonies. We only obtain the sixty proof, y'see."

"I thought there was a law in England limiting the proof," Sampson started to say, but Sir Julian dismissed him dangerously, with a close-shaved wave of the malacca. "Get rid of that ghastly makeup, old man. That's an order. I'll do for myself."

Commander Sampson shrugged helplessly to Kincade and

Littlesky and vanished into the second bedroom, while the Shoshoni leaped to his feet and said, "I'll get you a clean glass, Sir Julian." He scurried for the galley.

Sir Julian stared briefly at Kincade. "Seems awfully civilized for a savage, doesn't he?"

"He's housebroken," Kincade said without smiling. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. Been a long time hearing about you."

"Ah! Then, of course, you were prepared."

"Hardly," Kincade said flatly.

Littlesky returned and poured a whopping splash of cognac into Sir Julian's glass. The Englishman wasted no time in downing it with relish, extending it for refill and making some plaintive inanities about the night chill, how English cold gets into the bones and that the spirits had a rather brave bouquet. It became instantly apparent that Sir Julian was a gentleman of sound chutzpah, solid chivvy and wry chide.

As he waved the second drink, he said, "Terribly sorry about the flap down in Tanzania, Kincade." And when Littlesky shook his head disapprovingly, he added, "What? Not talk about it? Good lord, young thing, let's not be puerile. That's what it's all about, y'know, life and death. Damned bad patch for the lady, I give you, but Kincade can't pretend it didn't happen, and he doesn't need the infantile camouflage of well-meaning friends who pretend the sky did not fall in. . . . Incidentally, Fitz-Owens was well caned for his scratchy performance in the charade, I can assure you. In any case, regrets for Mrs. Kincade. Terribly sorry, old man."

Kincade said, "She was a one."

"Yes," Sir Julian said. "We've lost some sterling batters. I'll be ecstatic when the tiddling ceases; but at the moment, it seems likely that both *you* chaps are not exactly immune to mortality or we should have had Keyhole prevailing upon you before this evening. If they don't attempt a collection shortly, gentlemen, I'd suggest you are both blown, and I should certainly join a hasty hegira to Mecca."

"I overheard some of that," Commander Sampson said, coming back into the parlor. He had changed into his Navy blues and had removed the stage makeup from his face. He looked paler and thinner than Kincade last remembered him.

"I meant it," said Sir Julian quietly. "If nothing approaches Kincade within three days, he'd best decamp. They will not hesitate to chop him once they decide he's not worth the

candle. We've had two evidences of that just today. One in my bailiwick and another in yours, back in the States."

"Oh?" Commander Sampson said grimly.

Sir Julian reached to an inner pocket and pulled out a paper scrap, after which he donned a pair of tortoise-shell reading glasses for the close work. "London. St. Anne's-of-the-Shire Hospital. Dr. Lavendar Crichton-James. Chief radiologist at Harbinger Research Clinic. Perished of radioactive exposure." He stopped and waved the scrap. "Like that American chap of yours—Duffy, wasn't it?"

Kincade sat up sharply. "How do you know it was a Keyhole execution?"

"Dr. Crichton-James became aware of his own plaint in time," Sir Julian explained. "After all, he was highly experienced in radiation treatments of various diseases. He realized what had happened to him. He had been given a massive dose, Iridium one-ninety-two, and with the same isotope, Gamma thirty-five, he had been smuggling to Keyhole itself. So he telephoned Inspector Ewing Hawkins, Scotland Yard, and made a deathbed statement. Hawkins is under signal to inform us of any and all mortalities that might be connected with Keyhole. We also found the atomic doctor's Keyhole card. No clues or leads, of course. Dr. Crichton-James had been out in Londontown last eve, seventeenth anniversary or some such. His wife was unharmed. Obviously a jolly fine murder, the presumption being that in his field he had been overexposed to the various radiations which were used on his patients. He *did* bleat to the Inspector that he had been undergoing extortion for two years, and he did admit that it stemmed from a nasty malpractice thing when he overdosed some chap or other. We have all the details. None of them will help."

Kincade said, "In other words, Dr. Crichton-James was the man who provided Keyhole with the isotopes which they used on Patrick Henry Duffy."

"Jolly fair presumption."

Littlesky frowned. "But why did they dump him?"

After a lustful sipping of cognac and an oversized blowing out of his lips, which jiggled the copper mustache alarmingly, Sir Julian said, "Fancy poor old Bones ran out of his usefulness and lolly. I mean, young man, how much rare isotope clagger can one successfully swipe over a period before some fateful ferret discovers the lack? Undoubtedly, as we shall discover post-facto, there was to be some sort of hue and cry

at Harbinger's concerning the missing Iridium one-ninety-two. Keyhole merely closed out the medico's account before he could become contrite and involve them. This was all last eve."

Commander Sampson nodded. "What about the other execution, back home?"

"Some well-known Yank barrister who had, apparently, been looting an estate. Name of Gideon Fields."

"When?" Kincade asked.

"Let us see. The twelfth October. That would be three nights past." Sir Julian regarded him shrewdly. "Why?"

"Because Ravensmith alias Scissor could not have done it." Kincade thought hard. "He went over to Ireland on some—"

"My dear chap, *please,*" Sir Julian squeaked. "You are trespassing into *my* rose garden. If I may tell you?"

They all listened in silence.

"Lady Dara Henley, Mr. Dicky Dickerson and Francis Bane are—and have been—in London, along with Henry Dieu, who came in with Bane from Paris concurrent with your arrival from Nairobi, and Mr. Vittorio Tarantella, who makes residence here permanently. That leaves Miss Buffy Pristine, who arrived from Marrakesh this morning. And Miss Niji Fukimora, who will arrive shortly on the freighter *Poseidon,* from Hong Kong, under charter to British Electro Limited. Miss Pristine actually has been in Marrakesh, so she is ruled out. Miss Fukimora actually is aboard the *Poseidon,* somewhere off the Portuguese coast, so that rules her out. That leaves only the mysterious Henry Lambeth, who has never been seen since; the arcane Father Cochin, who has never been seen since; the gruesome Lavinia, the senile Sedonia Widdecomb, who have not been seen since; vanished Peter Pluxton; *and* Charles Ravensmith."

"I'm telling you, he was in Ireland," Kincade said. "Charlie told me about it. Asked me if I wanted to bang along. He's tied up with some group that's trying to salvage the sunken hull of the S.S. *Lusitania.*"

"First," Sir Julian interrupted, "let me say it is not a group. A Massachusetts Yank named John Light paid a thousand pounds to insurance companies for the wreck some four years ago. And while it is true that Ravensmith is a fine diver and *has* assisted Mr. Light and his company in exploring the *Lusitania,* my evidence seems to indicate that Ravensmith does his own diving much closer to Old Head of Kinsale than where the old four-stacker lies decomposing. The *Lusitania*

is in three hundred and four feet of water eleven miles off Old Head. Ravensmith does much diving within the limits of the ten-fanthom shelf, not two miles off Old Head. Which I personally find fascinating." He cleared his squeaky throat and continued. "Nevertheless, while it is true that some days ago Ravensmith flew to Ireland in The Seven Needles plane, he did not remain there. He motored to Shannon and took an outbound VC-ten for New York. He arrived in New York in plenty of time to execute Mr. Fields. He was back in Shannon not fifteen hours later and instantly motored to Cork, where he boarded his own aircraft and returned to Heathrow. In other words, Kincade, he probably did slaughter your barsister. And was back in plenty of time to douse our dear radiologist with isotopes. Ravensmith has proven to be an immensely busy and efficient chap, all things considered."

Kincade and Littlesky exchanged frowns.

"I know, I know," Sir Julian said. "You've lived and hunted with the bloke, and he seems human to you. But let me reassure you he has less compassion than Henry the Eighth's headsman. He is a thorough cannibal, and if Keyhole gives him the proper word, he will waste you like a bloody spendthrift."

Kincade asked, "Why haven't they tapped me? I represent a lot of money to them, and I can afford to pay forever and a day. We've done everything perfectly. Even Melisande's accident played into their hands."

"Ah, you see. Perhaps they realize it *was* an accident. And as for the perfection—perhaps you've been too perfect. Lady Henley is an ice-cold troglodyte with a computer mind and with one diamond-hard point of view. Obviously, *she* does not believe you. Yet."

"But two million at least a year in extortion—"

"Tempting, dear chap, but not worth a farthing if you are a counteragent and destroy a magnificent monopoly on the earth's conscience money."

Littlesky shook his head. "We just met her."

"Hard to believe," Kincade said. "She's everything a woman should be. Beautiful—the most beautiful female I've ever seen. She could have been constructed by a computer."

Sir Julian chirred happily. "Not quite a computer, Kincade. But damned well stitched together with guts and catgut."

Kincade and Littlesky looked nonplussed. Sir Julian nodded at Commander Sampson. "You'd better jade their adolescent reveries, Paul."

Sampson checked his chronometer. "Do we have the time? They are almost an hour deep. We can't keep them out of circulation too long, or we'll muff it, and there are more pertinent problems to discuss."

"Surely, a mad American can spend at least two hours in Soho," Sir Julian said. "So dash along."

"All right. Lend an ear, you would-be Lotharios. I don't have her file here, so you'll have to take my memory for it. Real name Sarah Dorinda Gaffrey, born illegitimately in Contookcock, New Hampshire. Raised on a poverty-stricken farm, family black sheep. Never legally adopted by the Gaffreys. Mother died in childbirth. When she was seventeen, her mother's grandmother passed away and left her twenty thousand dollars. She blew New Hampshire for New York and began a rehabilitation to become an actress.

"She was wall-eyed, had adolescent teeth, a bad case of breast hypertrophy, an almost ludicrous condition of what is termed 'riding breeches,' with much adipose fat on the lower hips and a backside cheek curl of monumental proportions, jowls, prominent ears. The proverbial ugly duckling, including her beaked nose."

Kincade gasped. "You're putting me on."

"Not in the slightest. First thing, she had her eyes straightened. They are gray, incidentally, not green."

"But how could they change—"

"Contact lenses, Simon. You can change the color of your eyes to anything with contact lenses. She is myopic. Wears them all the time. Next, she underwent rhinoplasty for the nose. She was using Grandma's inheritance for this. Then she had a partial mastectomy to shape her breasts. With this much of a start—imagine her intent—she finally got a Broadway role with Dickerson's aid, and when it went to London she went with it. Now, in earnest, she underwent a trochanteric lipodystrophy, which shed the adipose hip fats, cut away the backside overhang and made her sleek. Orthodontists found her teeth, though healthy, hopeless and merely made her a perfect set to be implanted permanently over the ground-down stubs of her own."

"Incredible!"

"The fury of a scorned female," Sir Julian said, picking up the tale, "is historic, eh? In any event, she was now in my bailiwick, and, what with a further touch or two of the scalpel, evolved into the most devastating Lorelei of Mayfair, with an utterly intriguing contempt for the men she

could so easily fetter. Of all the opulent proposals—and some extravagant propositions—she chose Lord Robert Henley, who turned out to be the least lucrative of the suitors, though she could not have known that. Lord Henley was from good stock, family and whatever, but the dear cost of peerages had precipitated an economic decline in the fortunes. However, Lord Henley was a brilliant electronics man, when young, and was instrumental in the radar defenses of Britain during the tenuous days. After the war, he managed government contracts for amplification of the various gadgets of war and peace and started a small plant in Middlesex, so that he was doing well enough to support Lady Dara in the style to which she aspired. He remodeled the house on South Audley, which is now the Montebank but which was bombed out during the blitz. She wanted it rebuilt as their townhouse, things were *that* good, but suddenly, unfortunately, he was killed in his own plant, electrocuted. No foul play. We are quite sure of *that*. I imagine Lady Henley received much more shock than the deceased when she learned that he was really quite pinched. When the death occurred, the government canceled contracts, and there she was, what with death taxes, rather on the thin side of things." Sir Julian raised his now empty glass to Littlesky. "I'm whistling like a wattle-headed flycatcher," he remarked. "Better wet me down."

Littlesky poured a healthy three ounces and started to make himself one but was dissuaded by Kincade's sharp-eyed negation.

"Time," Sampson said, worried.

"At my age I'm more aware of it than you are, Commander," Sir Julian said after a huge sip. "To continue, she seems to have met up again with this Dickerson chap, who had come to England in retirement, to be a foreign resident. That means, to avoid taxes, he would have to live here on past capital earned. No income. You can imagine where a New York columnist could amass that kind of lolly, eh? Blackmail obviously. At the same time, sweet Dara learned that although there was little sterling in her estate, she *had* acquired the patents to a number of devices which Lord Henley had conceived in his time, most of them spy clutter. From here, I conjecture. They put their wicked little heads together and began Keyhole. Dickerson supported her in interim. She went everywhere with him. I doubt they were lovers. But with his dossier of human frailty and her acute mind and snoop-clagger patents, they forged ahead. I imagine

the others were taken into the firm as exigency and circumstances warranted. The Seven Needles became the corporate body. It went international, purchased the South Audley property, among many others, and, ergo, Keyhole was actuality. Potently rich actuality." Sir Julian smiled. "Fortunately for Keyhole, sin is marvelously universal."

Commander Sampson said, "We were discussing British Electro earlier. Then you mentioned the company had chartered that freighter from Hong Kong. Just what the hell is British Electro?"

Sir Julian swallowed more cognac. "It is a legal corporation which bought out Henley Electronics and is owned by The Seven Needles. It manufactures cheap electronics in Hong Kong." He looked swiftly at all their faces with his darting blue eyes, smiling a smarmy smile.

"What an octopussy," Littlesky said.

"How much pillage do they garner?" Kincade asked.

"No way of knowing. A hazard? Hundred million annually. Perhaps more. Most of it unnaturally untaxed, naturally."

"Where does it go?" Kincade asked. "You can't shove money around the world without controls any more than you can ship hashish and horse. There are import-export rules on money." He rose and began to stride, his spur bells tinkling merrily. "I can understand the Montebank. You can flow marked money through the games and never be held responsible when and if it's detected. Like this cowrie in my pocket. They ship the legal net to the numbered account in Zurich. But those vultures are dealing in huge sums, much bigger than the club handles. It's got to go somewhere else."

"Where would you send it?" Sir Julian asked.

"I've never had the problem."

"A free port?" Commander Sampson asked quietly. "Hong Kong? From where you can translate into the gold market or anything else you wish?"

Sir Julian beamed. "Commander, I dare say a man of your stripe will definitely make admiral one of these days."

Kincade wheeled and pointed a trembling finger. "Which is why the freighter is coming in. Which is why Ravensmith goes to Ireland to 'raise the *Lusitania.*' "

"Exactly." Sir Julian finished the cognac, and when Littlesky rose with the bottle, Sir Julian held up a pink hand. 'That's sufficient for the mo, thanks awfully."

"We are definitely bankrupt on time," Commander Samp-

son said to Kincade. "You have got to get back into the mask—"

"How the hell do we ever find out the facts on this hydra-head?" Kincade asked. "I don't see the end of it!"

Sir Julian spelled out the simplicity. "You merely locate their headquarters. Somewhere there is a complete file on every operative of the organization, victims as well as victimizers. Somewhere there is a documented plan of the entire networks, depositories, personnel, the utter carapace of Keyhole. A piece of cake, chaps. *Once* you have provided us with that information, that is. We then decapitate the hydrahead, and the body of the serpent expires at sundown."

"You're beautiful," Kincade said. His voice was not friendly.

"Simon and Willy feel the HQ is in the subcellars of the Montebank," Commander Sampson said hastily, noting Sir Julian's placidly deceiving smile.

"Impossible." Sir Julian sounded like a fife in high register. "You see the plans. They are real. The entire structure was gutted during the blitz. Every piece of reconstruction was thoroughly checked by Standards and double-checked by one of my organizations, MI five. There is no subcellar. There is only a normal basement, as indicated."

Kincade jabbed the plans angrily. "You see that roof? Those are air-conditioning ducts up there. What for? Since when does a house in London require air-conditioning? It requires heat, not cooling; warmth, not air."

"We *have* begun to dabble in modernity," Sir Julian said stiffly. "And that system, if you would check it, happens to be one of hot-air heating."

"When was that house first built? It doesn't look like an ancient site to me."

"Nineteen thirty-eight, as I recall."

"Year before the big war. Peace in our time. And Lord Henley had it built for himself?"

"Yes, as I recall."

"And Lord Henley was engaged in absolutely top-secret electronic work for the Defense Ministry then?"

Sir Julian nodded, his blue eyes no longer amused.

Kincade shrugged. "Well, at that time I was still plucking phlug out of my belly button, back on the reservation, Sir Julian, but in view of the fact that that was the year Hitler invaded Austria and won Czechoslovakia from Britain and France in a poker game, isn't it possible that the Defense

Ministry *and* Lord Henley had the foresight to build an air-raid shelter under the main structure so that he could continue to work in the event of more than likely blitz come the inevitable conflict?"

"You're extrapolating."

"You're damned right I am, and if you'll look up the original construction plans of Henley's haven, I'll bet you'll find my extrapolation to be a fact!"

"Dear me . . ." Sir Julian sighed. In exculpation, he added, "You just might be right, old man, but unfortunately all of those statistics and drawings are long since ashes from the Nazi bombings. So the only other way to get at the truth is the hard way, and at the mo, that way happens to be beyond our legal powers and could be rather sticky."

Kincade looked at Littlesky, his hard eyes glinting. "Get the pinheads."

8

SIR JULIAN AND Commander Sampson stared at Kincade silently, awaiting some explanation. Kincade declined to elaborate. He said, "Paul, these pinheads are magnetic, aren't they?"

"Not only that, they'll even stick to wood," Sampson replied. "The curved side of their casings is heavily magnetized. The flat side has a small pull-away cover which exposes a sticky coating which will resist a twenty-pound pull. They'll cling to anything except gelatin or water."

"Good." Kincade extracted his money from his pocket. He had given Littlesky the older half of the wad and had retained the crisp new notes he had won in baccarat at the Montebank. "Did you get that list of numbers from the Falmouth National?"

"Right here, old man," Sir Julian said. He handed over the sheaf of serial numbers which the Federal Bureau of Investigation had cabled on to New Scotland Yard. Kincade took it, sat and started comparisons between the serial numbers of his winnings and the numbers on the list. He was instantly successful. "Here's a make. . . . Another. . . . Another. And another. . . . Ten in all. Just enough. Figures."

Sir Julian was not so sanguine. "Good lord, man, you needn't be so bloody chilly about it! This is the first hard

evidence we've ever had that Keyhole was involved in Duffy's death and extortion! That is the first time this bit of stolen goods has come above ground."

Kincade regarded him with a sad smile. "Not worth a damn. It's part of the Boston loot, all right. So what? It doesn't prove Keyhole heisted it from Duffy. It only proves somebody tried to pass it through the Montebank. There's no way of proving who lost it at the tables, even though it's probably been in the Montebank vaults all this time, since Keyhole couldn't know whether or not the Falmouth National had records of Duffy's pillage. They've been passing it through their normal take, bill by bill, sending it on to Zurich with the legit wins."

"Then why pay you off with it?" Sir Julian asked.

Kincade chuckled humorlessly. "The rope to hang myself with. Because, as an agent, I'm supposed to turn it over to you. You match the numbers with New Scotland Yard. Keyhole finds out two things: one, I'm a fink; two, the money is numbered. That makes them careful in passing it, and that ends my little game of cat-and-canary. I'd be blown. Which is why I am keeping this cowrie. I will spend it normally, even lose it back to them normally, so that everything will still be in doubt as far as they are concerned."

Littlesky returned and showed Kincade the tiny pinheaded transmitters in their plastic shell boxes. Kincade shook his head admiringly. "By God, they *are* small. Perfect for our game."

Paul Sampson looked worried. "Exactly what is your game, Simon?"

"I can't force these bastards into prevailing upon my wealth and good nature," Kincade said, glancing at his watch carefully. "But I can try and get you some evidence that the headquarters of Keyhole is in the earth under the Montebank. I'm going to tag one or two or more of The Seven Needles with these transmitters. You'll have to provide the followers, the radio detection teams, starting tonight. You know the emission frequency. Once I plant them and give you the word on whom they are planted, the ball is yours."

"I've got a directional receiver too," Littlesky said. It was as big as a thimble. He stuffed it in his left sock, after stuffing the pinheads in his right sock.

Sir Julian sniffed as if the flat had gone sourly rank. "Very dicey patch, old boy." He stuffed his briar in his pocket and

paced tensely, blowing out his moustaches. "I shan't authorize it. Much too thready."

"I agree," said Sampson grimly. "You said yourself, Willy, that if Keyhole had found that you had hung body tags on any of them, you'd buy the broken china instantly."

Littlesky grinned lasciviously and glanced at Simon.

"They won't find these," Kincade said. "Not if you have the gynecologists list, Sir Julian."

Sir Julian unzipped an inner lining and brought out a sheaf of papers, handed them over, then rezipped. "Those wicked pornographs!" he said primly. "Like reading *Playboy* or some such! I am utterly fascinated, sir, as are various department heads who went through considerable tomfoolery to procure these vaginal histories, just why the devil you need this sort of muck in the pursuit of this mission."

Kincade ignored him. He examined the lists. There were three gynecologists listed, along with their office addresses on Harley Street. Each gynecologist handled a different lady, and each lady's medical file had been carefully duplicated, just as each doctor had written it in his own hand. Littlesky looked over Kincade's shoulder at the first report, which belonged to Niji Fukimora.

"This is beautiful stuff," Kincade said. "We just asked for the witch doctors, expecting to steal the records ourselves. How the hell did you pick up this dope?"

"Because we *project,*" Sir Julian said frostily. "My dear Kincade, you are beginning to prick my patience—"

"Oh-oh," Littlesky said, reading. "One dead duck."

"What Willy means," Kincade explained, "is that Miss Niji Fukimora, though in the very best of health, has never been fitted by her gynecologist for an intrauterine device, which is normal in view of the fact that she is abnormal and belongs to the derring dildos."

"The *what?*" Sir Julian squealed.

"She is a Lesbian. Therefore, we cannot use her to plant the seeds. They will not in her garden grow."

"I'm damned if I can grasp your meaning—"

"But as for Lady Dara Henley, gentlemen, we've got a live one here!" Kincade said excitedly. "Her I.U.D. was replaced only three weeks ago. And not one of those modern plastics either."

Littlesky had been reading Buffy Pristine's medical history. "And Bluetop, too! Cervical plug, metallic. Not only that, boss, but *here* is something for the books!"

He handed Kincade the pages and pointed at a paragraph. Kincade looked surprised. "Something for MI six to check out, Sir Julian. Miss Buffy Pristine, alias Bluetop, seems to have suffered a massive clitoridectomy many years ago."

"Ridiculous!" Sir Julian said. His voice in excitement reminded Kincade of the high-pitched grating of the twilight bats at the *camp-i* in Tanzania. "Girls do not undergo circumcision."

"Excision, not circum," Littlesky said, smiling.

"The medico notes that the scars healed splendidly. He also notes that the clitoris and labia minora were almost completely removed. And not by surgery. He notes the operation as a tribal rite."

Sir Julian was transfixed. He instantly lost his testiness. "Kikuyu!" he whispered.

"Don't understand," Sampson said.

"The Kikuyus of Kenya," said Kincade, "have this dainty little ceremony when their girls reach the pubic years. To prevent undue desires and unwanted pregnancies before nubility, they just plain shave off all the seat of eroticism so that the maidens have to hold out for the main business or nothing. Buffy Pristine is Kikuyu—"

"Or Bob's your bloomin' uncle!" Sir Julian said happily. "This will be no trouble at all. . . . But exactly what are you two beggars up to?"

Littlesky grinned. "We are the rakes who will hoe."

"It's simple, if it works," Kincade said. "Lady Dara and Buffy Pristine both wear metallic cervical rings in their cervixes. That is the mouth of the uterus, Sir Julian, in case you had forgotten. We have pinheaded magnetic body tags. Now if a gentleman of some persuasion could induce either or both of these ladies to indulge in some dedicated coupling, then one of these magnetic emitters will attach itself to the cervical plug, and the lady can then be followed anywhere she goes and never know she is wearing a body tag."

"Good God!" Sir Julian said in horror.

"Heterosexuality bothers you?" Littlesky asked.

"One of these ladies happens to be black," Sir Julian chitted. He was not happy.

He stared at Commander Sampson helplessly. Sampson stepped in to placate. "How do you actually plant the tags, Simon?"

"You've been circumcised?" Kincade said. And when the

commander nodded affirmatively, Kincade turned to Sir Julian. "And you, sir?"

The MI 6 chief was affronted. When he realized that Kincade was asking the question sincerely he was even more affronted. "That, sir, will remain a secret among my wife, my God, my doctor and myself."

"Then obviously you *are,*" Kincade said. "Or you wouldn't have mentioned your doctor. The point is that Willy and I still have our prepuces."

"We need everything we can get," Littlesky said plaintively.

"Hobble it!" Kincade said, annoyed at the outhouse humor. He was trying to keep the subject clinical. "Back on the reservation, they don't bother with circumcision. Otherwise, this plan would be impossible. Before coupling, the foreskin is retracted, exposing the glans. The pinhead transmitter is laid against the rim of the corona, and then the foreskin is pulled up again, covering the tag and holding it in place. Even erection won't disturb the transmitter at that point. But when the penis enters the vagina, the friction automatically retracts the sheath again, and with normal length and thrust, the pinhead can be planted against the cervical ring, where it will attach itself magnetically. Once that's done, the act can proceed in the normal pleasure for which it was designed and the ladies are unknowing emitters."

Sir Julian struggled earnestly to stay outraged, but the ice in his ice-blue eyes began to melt, and he soon jiggled into shaking laughter which grew until he squealed like a wounded butcher-bird. "Not in the annals of espionage," he choked, "not even in the case of Mata Hari—"

"Yes," Kincade said, not finding it so funny. "Sorry, sir. But our time has run out."

They all shook hands. Sampson said, "There'll be a cab to pick you up the minute you hit the street. From now on, we'll have our automatic direction finders on Lady Henley and Buffy Pristine on a twenty-four-hour basis. And good luck."

"Remember, chaps," Sir Julian said, more soberly, at the door, "this lady—Lady Henley—isn't a lady at all. She's damned dangerous, a true Medusa."

"Sir Julian," Kincade said quietly, "if it meant the success of this mission, I'd bugger Frankenstein's monster."

"But *she's* prettier," said Littlesky as the door closed behind them and the electronic bolts whispered their skid into a metallic relock.

9

SOMETHING was very wrong.

First, there was the insidious cold, icy-wet, fog-ridden, swirling all around him. Kincade kept reaching for the blankets, but somehow they were not there. He kept imagining the impossibility that he was stark naked, freezing to death, as he reclined upon a bed of nails like some flamboyant fakir. This can't be a nightmare, he thought sanely. I am hallucinating. But he could do nothing about it because he was fighting for his life. Every breath he drew was a hard struggle.

Second, there was the moon, a strange moon with the lovely face of Lady Dara Henley, transformed now into the bared unfriendly snarl of an attacking leopardess. He forced his eyes open finally and saw the real moon. It was a half-moon, weirdly visible through the swirl of delitescent mist, and that made no sense whatsoever. When you are asleep at the Dorchester Hotel in Suite 104, there is a ceiling above your eyes and you cannot see any kind of moon up there, neither dream nor actual.

Then there was the sound, the incessant chattering of worshippers at some rotted altar, with the sound of guitars under it. *Guitars?* He listened and tried to understand because it kept him alive, instead of letting him dream off into this cold death that embraced him so ardently. The chants sounded like, *"Oh Dis our God of ancient stones, our sacred prayer for thee intones, we drink thy blood in loving cups, and break for thee Man's bones . . ."*

Dis? That was pretty far out. Dis was a god of the dark underworld before the Bronze Age. It was damned unlikely that he had a reservation at the Dorchester. Or that the steel-stringed guitar had been invented in his time.

Kincade's breathing was getting stronger. He did not have to fight so hard for the next inhalation. I am *not* hallucinating, he thought. This is real. This is happening. His teeth, chattering like arid castinets, socked reality to him. He stared up, through a fog hole, and, by God, there *was* a real moon up there, riding a prosperous cloud.

Then, something black, wet and chilling cold reached out of the darkness and touched his cheek. He twitched, startled, and turned to find himself looking into the soft-brown face of

a milch cow. His movement frightened the cow, who bawled a very normal *moo;* she vanished into the darkness.

As his breathing strengthened and his hold on survival became certain, Kincade's logical mind damped his panic and eased the hairy terror of his predicament. Still flat on his back, wary of moving, he realized that he was lying in a shallow grave on top of rough-hewn scalloped rock. There was something vaguely familiar about it, something coming to him. The mists broke again, and in the moonlight, one hundred and ten feet from his naked feet, a huge megalith stood, sixteen feet tall and eight feet wide, weighing some thirty-five tons and resembling a waiting coffin. Kincade stared at it and knew he had seen it somehow before. Now just wait; it's coming, it's coming.

I am not hallucinating, he thought. A familiar pain had arisen in the back of his head, an ache that he had had before, once aboard Air Force One, after his abrupt departure from McMurdo Station in Antarctica, and once on Vanua Levu, after his rhinoplasty, and once more aboard the submarine *Amberjack* en route to New Guinea.

Kincade realized that he had been hot-shotted. Some sweet soul had slipped him a gram of "Blue Heavens" and put him away. The amytal-amobarbital sleeping pills, on top of all the booze he had imbibed, had damned near freaked him permanently out. Somebody had played a little chemical roulette with him, and the very cold he thought was killing him had probably saved his life by awakening him. Or else the brown cow's muzzle had done the job. He rose to his elbows, the headache now sharp, and stared at his body in the moonlight. "I'm bare-assed," he said aloud, astonished. He was stark naked. He could see some kind of legend inscribed on his chest, but he could not read it. He stared at the megalith before him, watching the brown cow drifting past it like a bovine ghost through the thinning mists. "Thanks, bossy," he said aloud.

The incantations were coming from abaft him. He tried to stand, but it was difficult. He was stiff, shivering cold, studded with goose pimples, teeth still achatter. So he leaned around and looked and then knew where he was. Behind him, backlighted by harsh Coleman lamps, stood the trithalons of Merlin's enclosure, "that gigantick pile" of hanging stones, that "doleful moniment" which—legend says—was stolen out of Ireland by Uther Pendragon and with the aid of Merlin's "engines" transported to the Salisbury Plain.

"Oh Dis our God of ancient stones . . ."

Kincade staggered to his feet and began slapping his body hard to get some circulation going. He did an Irish jig to get his feet working and looked around for a bush or a Band-aid or a barrel to cover his nudity. Even the grass had been grazed down to a pinfeather carpet. He didn't feel well enough to worry about it. Anyway, there wasn't any choice.

"Ho! Ho! Ho Chi Minh!"

That didn't sound very Druid. It was plain that a group of hippie squatters had invaded the ancient observatory.

He thought ironically that since the hippies had conceived the idea of "letting it all hang out," they would damned well have to handle the actuality. He took one last look at the irregular rock bed on which he had been laid out, Parsee-style, and recognized it to be the misnamed Slaughter Stone. The other awesome cromlech, off in the mist, would be the Heel Stone of the Neolithic temple, over which the midsummer sun had accurately risen since 1900 B.C. No wonder it had all seemed so familiar.

He was finally mobile, in a taut, unsteady way. Still slapping blood into his frigid flesh, he crossed the dewy grass, passed the great Sarsen circle and entered the hall of the giant pillars and lintels, where around the fallen megalith named the Altar Stone a barbaric horde of teenage Visigoths were disporting themselves in sadly premeditated hell-raising. They were blowing tea instead of drinking it. They were swallowing mescaline, for a short trip, injecting methamphetamine for a speed run, swallowing yellow jackets as downers. They had cast horoscopes and were dealing tarot cards. They were also slapping guitars and chanting Druid odes, spitballed on the spot, and also yodeling antiwar slogans. Most of them were garbed in their own concept of Druid priests and priestesses, with vines of oak-grown mistletoe wrapped around their heads, and some of the girls were painted bright blue like the old Picts. It was a true theater of the absurd, but since Kincade was the most absurd of all, he strode in as an equal.

The arena was starkly lighted with five double-mantled Coleman lamps, and the white glare made the trithalons cast long gaunt shadows across the court. The guitars went twangingly dissonant, then silent, while everybody stared at him.

"Wizard, mate!" the hairy-faced Alaric of the group suddenly shouted. "He's done a John Lennon! But a bit awkward on these chilly nights, eh, mate?"

The high priestess, a girl of nineteen whose face was impossible to discern under her blue makeup and whom everybody called Carrylyn, was standing by the Alaric, holding a rubber-bladed dirk in her hand. She had just performed a mock sacrifice on some spaced-out soul, and her white robe was stained with catsup. She looked properly gory. She pointed at Kincade's tassel and said, "Oh, Chukkers, buy me one of those!"

"While we're on the subject," Kincade said, "could one of you guys spare me an extra diaper? You know what happened to the brass monkey."

Chukkers leaned forward suspiciously. "Yank? You one o' those bloody imperialistic Yanks?"

"My name is Bear Paw," Kincade said haughtily. "And I am a Shoshoni Indian, come across the Great Water to visit with the spirits of my ancient blood brothers."

It went over big. Chukkers replied, "I say, mate, that's a bit o' dapper! A real live Indian? First one I ever met, save for the cinemas. Welcome to the Tommy Knockers. I would be Chukkers, and this one is Carrylyn. And you got writing on your chest."

Chukkers turned him to the light of a Coleman. It was almost impossible to read the legend upside down, so Chukkers translated: *"Go or die, spy!"* He peered. "And there's a type of keyhole down below, using your belly button for the slot."

"What the hell does that all mean?" Bear Paw asked indignantly.

"You've no idea?"

"Not a clue. The fact is, Chukkers, I have had a bummer trip. I have been coshed and rolled and robbed and stripped, and if I don't get a robe or a blanket or something, I won't even be worth a sacrifice to Dis. My blood is congealing. It won't even spill."

Chukkers got him a white sheet and an old army blanket, horsehairily itchy; somebody found some real tea, in a Thermos, and he drank it gratefully. The other Tommy Knockers were fascinated by his snake scar, and when he told them it was a tribal totem, that the Shoshonis were called colloquially Snake Indians, they were all enchanted. He was offered a puff on a roach, and a benny, and half a Green Heart to pick up his spirits, but he declined them all, explaining he had had too much to drink and been tuckered with Blue Heavens. He asked them about the ceremony.

"Moratorium day," Chukkers said. "We're up from Southampton, Bear Paw, to mourn the dead. We've got official permission."

"Make love, not war," Bear Paw said nobly.

"You realize," Chukkers said, his face no more than pale sunshades surrounded by an ellipse of uncombed, unshaven hair, "we had no part in your hugger-muggery. We don't freak out that way."

"It never entered my mind," Bear Paw said honestly. "Only thing is, dear friends and gentle people, how the hell do I get back to London? All I've got is your borrowed toggery and the gold watch the blackhearts left me."

Priestess Carrylyn said, "Gor! What a wristwatch! Never seen one so bitter thin!"

It was a beautiful watch, built inside a twenty-dollar American double-eagle, the hour marks shadowed with radium paint to glow in the dark. "You must be one of those Indians who found oil on the reservation," Chukkers said.

"Righto!" Bear Paw said. "And the truth is, I'll pay anybody a hundred quid to drive me to the nearest town and lend me the price of a London phone call."

"Crikey!" Chukkers said, overriding the other volunteers. "I'm your man. I've got thirty shillings. That should reach London." He peered suspiciously once more. "You're not sending me up?"

"On my honor as a Snake Indian." Bear Paw made ostentatious Indian sign, saying that his heart was pure and that he spoke with a straight tongue. It was most impressive. "You can remain with me until my friend drives down from London with the lolly."

"Good enough, Guv," Chukkers' hairy face said. "Amesbury is only two miles from here—"

"Don't be a bloody clot," Priestess Carrylyn said bawdily. Her pale shades slipped, and Bear Paw could see that her pupils were wide open, a certain sign of marijuana. "At this hour, Amesbury'll be shut up tighter than a virgin creel! You've got to go to Salisbury."

"Nine miles?"

"I'll be coming along," the priestess said. "I will keep our savage warm while you drive."

"Don't nobody show a tail," Chukkers warned the others. "We'll be back in a jiff for the sunrise!"

His automobile turned out to be a two-seater Sunbeam roadster, with its frayed top down and flapping. The wind-

screen was discolored from time and muck and was almost opaque. Since Kincade had taken to chattering his teeth again, Chukkers got him a greasy throw from the boot and wrapped it solicitously around his shoulders. Kincade sat on the left side in the bucket seat while Chukkers slid under the wheel. The stoned priestess happily melted into Kincade's lap. She wasn't very big or heavy and she did add warmth.

Chukkers lurched off. Kincade had no idea how the young hairy-faced man could see the dark road through the sunshades and the mottled windscreen, but somehow Chukkers kept the bouncing Sunbeam on the macadam. Kincade found he had other and more pressing problems. As soon as the sickly little roadster headed for Salisbury, the blue-faced priestess hugged a tight right arm around his shoulders to hold the decrepit shawl in place, and then cheerfully slipped her left under his blanket, where she blatantly took his icy testicles in her hand. "Gor, luv," she said in awe, "but they *are* cold!"

Her hand felt like a hot iron. Kincade decided not to object. He doubted, in his condition, that this aging Lolita could create a carnal stir, but aware of the fact that the genitals do not always obey the mind's command, he blotted out the intimacy utterly and tried to recall the circumstances which had made him an unwilling, and unknowing, tenant at Stonehenge.

He came up empty. His mind, except for the miserable headache in back of his head, was clear. But as he remembered everything, he realized that nothing had happened. He had no answers.

They were four miles out of town when the mists abruptly cleared, and the 404-foot spire of the Salisbury Cathedral burst out of the darkness, afire with moonlight. Two miles later they sped by Old Sarum and the ancient Roman earthworks.

"I'm fair famished," Chukkers said plaintively. "I could use some bubble-and-squeak about now, eh?"

"Divine," Priestess Carrylyn said with scorn, "but no bloody chance! All the caffs will be shut tight, and the bloody establishments wouldn't open a pantry of cold mutton for likes of us, now, would they? You'd better get cracking to the first blower."

"Right," Chukkers said gloomily.

Kincade was uncomfortable. The little witch had a dextrous hand, and he was becoming aware that his phallus

was in some incipient state of resurrection. All right, he thought hastily, let's try the memory route again. We left 23-A Hays Mews. The hackie picked us up as the commander prophesied. We went back to the Dorch. We had planned to return to the Montebank for supper, but I had to change my dinner jacket after Willy cut off the power button. The waiter came with drinks. I decided to grab a little ziz—wait a minute. Slight pause. *That* is it. The waiter knocked. Willy let him in. "The drinks you ordered, sir." Only we hadn't ordered any drinks. He showed us the slip. Two Frankfort bourbons from the old Kentucky Home. Willy said, "We just got back. We couldn't have ordered drinks. You've made a mistake, Murgatroyd." And the waiter said, "Whatever you say, sir, but my name is Max." And I said, "Hell, as long as they're here, let's tope," and I signed for them. Then we drank them, and I got out another jacket, but I told Willy I was still going to grab that catnap, and I stretched out for a mo. And that is all. Until Bossy.

The Sunbeam was racing into Salisbury. Priestess Carrylyn pulled her busy hand away from Kincade to point. "There's a blower!" she cried. "And right near the Rose and Crown. Your flatmate will have an easy time finding you, a piece of cake." And when she tried to get her hand back under the blanket, his legs were locked tight, his arm was down firmly on the blanket, and he was finally safe. She stared at him rather ruefully. "All better now?"

"Yes," he said. "Thanks awfully."

Chukkers pulled up by the scarlet public telephone with its brightly lighted pane-glass windows. Kincade shifted out from under Carrylyn's warm backside and waited on the curb while Chukkers broke a joint of grass, handed half to Carrylyn and lighted both. "Could I have the wampum-peag?" Kincade asked.

"The *what?*" Chukklers said, but instantly understood. "Sorry, mate." He dug under his white sheet and found a pocket and pulled out a clattering handful of English coin, all shapes and sizes; he poured them into Kincade's hand while the priestess inhissed noisily on her Sinaloa-green.

Kincade got an operator, surprised that he turned out to be male, and called London, Mayfair double-eight, double-eight, and when he finally got through to the Dorchester switchboard he asked for Littlesky. The suite did not answer. He let it ring until the Dorch operator said, "He doesn't seem to be in, sir."

"Hang on, just a second," Kincade said, thinking frantically. Where the hell was the Shoshoni? It was too late to be gaming at the Montebank. Damned near 2:00 A.M. He hoped earnestly that Littlesky was still alive. "Let me have Charles Ravensmith."

When the operator rang Ravensmith's suite, which was directly above his own, number 204/205, Charlie answered on the second ring.

"Bwana Charlie? This is Simon. I'm in trouble. I need your help."

"Of course, chum," Ravensmith said. "Where are you?"

"In a city called Salisbury."

Ravensmith said, "Cooee! What in the flaming hell are you doing down *there?*"

"Freezing my butt off waiting for you," Kincade said grimly. "I wouldn't bother you, amigo, but I can't seem to locate redbelly. I'm standing barefoot and drafty near a famous old inn called the Rose and Crown on the Avon River. I have been put upon by highwaymen, without a buck to my good name, and the longer you flapjaw the colder I'm going to get. Oh, by the way, you have any nacre?"

"Depends on how much."

"Hundred pounds."

"No problem. Hang in there, mate. I'll wing it as quickly as possible."

Ravensmith was a nerveless driver, proven by his covering the eighty-three miles, including London passage, in one hour and fifteen minutes, through heavy mists and fog holes. Meanwhile, Kincade stomped the sidewalks, avoiding the decrepit Sunbeam, where the Druids accomplished some acrobatic and succulent love-making to which he was invited and which—with some difficulty—he declined. By the time that Ravensmith's glistening black Bentley loomed out of the darkness and across the Avon bridge, it was past 3:30 A.M. and perishing cold. Kincade had to smile, grimly, at the thought that Scissor of Keyhole was rescuing him from a fate worse than death. The priestess, who smelled intermittently of marijuana musk, aged sweat and Chinese incense, was really quite aggressive, and he was relieved when he finally got to pay Chukkers the hundred quid, and the odd couple rattled on back to Stonehenge.

It was only after he was safely ensconced in Charlie's luxurious Bentley, with warm air permeating the interior, and easing his goose-pimply body, that he realized the blue-

faced bitch had stolen his watch right off his wrist. Even so, he was relieved. She had left him, at least, the family jewels.

10

"ANY TIME, *shenzi*."

Kincade glanced briefly at Charlie, who was driving surely and safely on the north road through Wiltshire toward London. "Sorry, Bwana Charlie. Thanks a million. You'll never know. I'll have Littlesky slip you the pesos when we get back."

"Damned silly beggar!" Ravensmith said, irked. "I wasn't diddling for your undying gratitude. But I do deserve to hear the ghoulish details, don't I? What in the flaming hell were you doing down here? And in that All Hallows' Eve masquerade? And with those mind-blown Arabs?"

Kincade sighed. "Charlie, could you hang it up for a few minutes? Somebody put a head on me. I'm still kind of mindless."

"Sorry, chum. There's a small vial of oxygen in the glove compartment. Try a few sniffs of it, do you good, but mind you, no smoking."

Kincade took out the tube of oxygen and inhaled deeply when he depressed the button valve. It was remarkable how much it helped. The knife pain in his skull eased. His body heat returned. He put the vial back in the compartment and leaned against the cushions, closing his eyes. "Give me fifteen minutes and then kick me awake, okay?"

"Sweet dreams." Ravensmith smiled. "You really are insane."

Simon did not sleep. He was trying to stitch everything together, to make sense out of the outrage. He respected Charlie's coolness, because he knew that Charlie knew more details of the episode than he did. He knew that Keyhole had committed the dosing and the body snatch. But why? He realized that on the morrow there would be no Max at the Dorchester on night shift and that no such waiter had ever existed. He wondered if he had finally met the elusive Harry Lambeth. He decided that he had.

All right. Let's take it from the top. Pull out only the logical stops and see how the organ plays. I am drugged. I am transported to Stonehenge and laid out like a Pendragon

warrior. Just so there is no mistake—*presuming I know what it means*—a legend is painted on my chest: *Go or die, spy!* There is a Keyhole signature. This means, flatly, that Keyhole has found out I am an NSA agent and that I am blown. The mission is terminated as far as I am concerned. I hike my tights, pack my parfleche and head for the hills of home.

Kincade sighed heavily without opening his eyes.

A slight pause, please, he thought. There is a clinker in this arioso. Because I am alive. Why didn't they eliminate *me* with prejudice, like Dan Gallagher and Claudine DuFond and Colonel Rick Condon and all the others who lost the throw? I am not kicking and screaming and breathing by the accidental muzzling of the genus Bos, or the good luck of the nethergod Dis. I am alive because it was planned that way. Why?

Because they are not sure.

They had given him the word. He was supposed to pick up his marbles and make dust. *If* he was an American agent. But if he wasn't, he represented millions of dollars' worth of income to the Keyhole cartel. That was why he was alive. Not that he mattered individually. His money did. If they had believed him to be a spy, he would be decaying right now. They were protecting their pigeon in case they were wrong.

Suppose, for instance, he was really Simon Kincade. He wouldn't know what the hell Keyhole meant; he would not understand one iota of the warning inscribed upon his fair form. What would Kincade do?

First, he would bellow like a fresh-branded maverick.

Then he would stand in his stirrups and bugle a brassy charge. He would skin out his .44 Magnum and start tossing its hot biscuits indiscriminately at the English world. He would scrouge the Metropolitan Police of London as a craven pack of virgin vigilantes, unable to offer a humble (!) visitor the protection of corpus and castle. He would unmask New Scotland Yard as an incompetent horde of dickless Tracys. He would scream in outrage to Ambassador Annenberg for Yankee justice; he would storm the American Embassy with the ardor of Santa Ana at the Alamo; he would demand mobilization of the armed forces of the United States for quick and Draconian reprisals. He would shrill about the invasion of his civil rights, bellow for the return of his purloined cowrie, condemn his denudation by an obviously sex-perverted society, and finally he would threaten to buy the

British Isles and give them back to the Romans to reintroduce Law once again into the shires.

He would be heard throughout the land, a trifle louder than the voice of the turtle.

11

KINCADE FELT someone tugging harshly at his shoulder, and without opening his eyes he snarled, "Yeah, yeah, already!" Then he heard the engine tick, and he remembered that he was in the Bentley with Ravensmith and asked, "Where are we, Charlie?"

"The garage at the Dorchester," Ravensmith said. "It seemed the only place. I'm going to take you up through the kitchen, by the service elevator, before some soul with a bad heart claps. Nelly Blyes on you in that outlandish costume. Give you half a chance to scrub off the sloke."

"The hell with that!" Kincade roared. "I'll be goddamned if you smuggle me off the truth. You wheel me over to Scotland Yard! I've got a large complaint to make! Why, you chicken-hearted wowser, you don't think I'm going to take this crap flat on my back? You don't know Bwana M'Cowboy! I'll get the white-livered bushwackers who dry-gulched me if it's the last thing I do! And if Scotland Yard can't do it, I'll offer a hundred thousand dollars for info leading to the arrest of! That kind of money'll tempt somebody's rotten conscience—"

"Simon, for the dear love of God, let's stop the flitter and fretting!" Ravensmith said. "I understand your ire, chum, and all that lot, but don't go lumbering about like a myopic rhino! Look at yourself! Something from an Outback privy! You walk into the Yard in that ghastly garb, and the press will have a field day, and you'll be outward bound within twenty-four hours. Who is going to believe you after your idiotic escapades? London has had enough of your chivvying. I mean it, chum, listen to me. They'll only think it's a bit more of your stickfinger. Now, *simama,* Simon!"

"Not me," Simon said harshly. "If you think I'm going to scratch-gravel like a buckshotted coyote—"

"The worst thing that could happen is that everybody would be delighted," Ravensmith said sternly. "You *do* deserve a Guy Fawkes bonfire, after all. Did you ever think

that some dedicated citizens just might have pranked you in revenge for your overbearing offer to purchase Stonehenge? What more fitting place to let you ride a rail! Damn it, Simon, get a grip on your dicky temper and keep your bloody voice down or I shall not be responsible!"

Kincade leaned back against the cushions of the Bentley, his jaw thrust out, his hard mouth curling sulkily, but he lowered his voice considerably. "Listen, Bwana Charlie. You realize I've been belly-dragged? I get slipped jimson weed in my own room. They skid me to Stonehenge, naked as a bare-assed jaybird. My loot is lifted—"

"I know, I know," Ravensmith said. "A prank—"

Simon snorted. "Did you see what's written on my chest?" He hauled the blanket aside and raised the sheet on his nudity. "How do you like them apples?"

Ravensmith read the legend. "Abracadabra," he said, shaking his head. "Mumbo-jumbo. Part of the pranking."

"But suppose it's for real? Then they got the wrong man, the wrong spy. I've *got* to report this to Scotland Yard in case. Maybe there's a spy ring loose in town. Maybe they got me by mistake or accident. You can't just let it go by—"

"They could blow up the whole world before I'd chance being the bloodiest fool *in* it," Ravensmith said. "Simon, don't step into the muck. Think of your own respect. If your money has really been stolen, then report that to the Yard, but my God, chum, never mention this other rot, cloaks and daggers and Druids and Stonehenge and such. You wouldn't have a prayer in Perth. Nobody would read it."

Simon Kincade was silent as he brooded. After a pent minute, he appeared to relax. "Well . . . Maybe you've got a point. If it turned out to be just a hazing—"

"—which is damned likely. Now, I suggest that we take the service lift up and scurry you into your suite. Get the mud-and-wattle off you. You smell abominably."

"The filly in my lap."

"Whatever. Let us *kwenda.* You can be angrier and louder in your own ruddy suite and on your own ruddy cognizance. Because I have no intention of admitting I even know you if you go through with this outrageous nonsense."

Kincade grumbled his way up through the kitchen and into the service lift. It was very early in the morning now, and the long carpeted halls showed no life. They made the suite without encounter. At the door, Ravensmith stared at him and sighed. "Cooee. No key, of course." He knocked

sharply and tried the door. It was off the lock catch. It opened easily, and they plunged into the security of the Tudor-style parlor, closing and locking the door firmly behind them.

There were still embers glowing on the log fire of the stone hearth, and the wall lights still shone badly in their gay red leather sconces. Kincade stared thankfully at the Old London prints and felt deeply relieved to be safely home. He noted quickly that the drinks he and Willy had imbibed and left at the bar with its petit-point doors had vanished.

He ran into his bedroom; it was cheerfully lighted and snugly pleasant with its Wedgewood-blue curtains, which had been drawn.

Nothing was wrong. His bed was turned down neatly, the sheets clean and fresh. His dinner clothes were hanging circumspectly, his polished boots standing primly beneath them. His keys and his wallet and his pinguid money roll were lying atop the dresser.

Kincade was flabbergasted. He grabbed the roll and counted the money. Particularly the crisp one-thousand-dollar bills which he had won so lately at the Montebank.

"Everything there?" Ravensmith asked.

"On the nose," Simon said, tossing the wad back on the dresser. "It doesn't make sense."

"It makes sense," Ravensmith said. "You were not robbed. You could have been. Therefore the whole escapade *is* a prank."

"I guess," Kincade said. But everything was *not* on the nose, and everything was *not* there. Missing were the ten one-thousand-dollar bills from the Falmouth National Bank of Boston. The ten new replacements were from a Federal Reserve bank in San Francisco. Somebody had pulled the border switch.

"Redbelly . . ." Kincade said. He turned unsteadily and lurched down the hall to the other bedroom, the Aussie following him. The room was dark. He switched on the lights.

Littlesky's bed might as well have been a catafalque. He made a somewhat overelegant corpse as he stretched out on the bed cover, flamboyant in his mink-collared silk purple pajamas, his hands folded prayerfully over his chest.

The inconsistency was that he was not dead. His breathing was slow and strong, and his dreams pleasant, for there was a sated smile on his full mouth. Kincade was so relieved, he felt irked. After the first call failed to revive Littlesky, he

slapped the Indian briskly on the cheeks twice. Littlesky struggled hastily out of the lethargy, saying, "Yeah, yeah, ready when you are, boss!"

When he was finally awake, he stared at Kincade and sniffed. "What ran into you?" he asked. "You stink like an old buffler wallow."

"Never mind that," Kincade said. "You okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Littlesky said. He frowned. He became aware of his purple pajamas. "Hey . . . How'd I get here? Who changed my didies? What's going on? Howdy, Bwana Charlie."

"Gently, chum," Ravensmith said, smiling. "I'm afraid you two types have been pranged."

Littlesky met Simon's eyes and caught the warning light. Kincade said, "I was going to grab a snooze, remember?"

"Sure. So I just stretched out to wait for you."

"We were jimsoned," Kincade said. "You've been out for six hours. It's five A.M." Littlesky frowned, trying to make sense of it. "That waiter was phony. The drinks were phonier."

"All right, I get it," Littlesky said, suddenly worried. He felt his headache. "But what happened to you?"

"Christ!" Kincade said heavily. "Let's not ride that trail again."

12

KINCADE AWAKENED, noting that it was past 1:00 P.M. He heard the rustle of Littlesky's daily copy of *Sporting World* in the parlor and heard Willy announcing his daily choice of the racing nags to his local Turf Associate, which was a very non-U title for bookie. A little surprised at his sense of well-being, Kincade jumped out of bed, naked, and strode into the other room. "Howdy," he said briefly, going to the desk and scribbling a terse note.

"Likewise," Littlesky replied, accepting the note. "How do you shine?"

"Better than I should," Kincade grunted. "You have breakfast yet?"

"Just coffee. Didn't want the crockery disturbing your sleep. You were used up."

"Yeah." Kincade pointed at the note, which said, "Con

me into going home." He yawned. "What do y'say we pull some liberty, blow this wigwam and ho for the tipple?"

Littlesky frowned heavily. Kincade wondered why. Littlesky said, "Aren't you going to tell me what really happened last night?" He made signs to remember the myriad mikes which studded the suite.

Kincade nodded. "Well, amigo, it seems like the local vigilantes had their fun. They slipped us the happy-jack-squirrel pills and put us away. They left you here, and they took me on a lynch party. Without a rope. Down to Stonehenge." He related in detail what had happened. Some of it made Littlesky chuckle, but he wasn't really amused. "Bwana Charlie was keyrect," he said. "If you had popped for the local fuzz last night, you'd really be a shining asshole this morning." He tossed aside the racing forms. "Hell, why don't we call it a Sand Creek and split out?"

"Meaning?"

"Let's make tracks. Sometimes it's smarter to haul your freight than throw your weight. These honkies figure you for a freak. And there's no point in trying to win the throw. Only a fool argues with a woman, the Bureau of Indian Affairs or an Englishman. Let's strike the lodge."

"Go home, you mean," Kincade said dubiously, nodding for Littlesky to continue the plea.

"What you need is rest and a change and to get the shit of civilization off your back. You're still not over that African caper. By the time we get back West, all the weapons will have arrived. You and me will take the three-seventy-five and the bellybuster and pack up into the Tetons. We'll hunt, fish and camp, back to the old ways, and then stumble down to Cheyenne and June around and raise some Jessie."

"I don't know, Willy."

"Boss, man's the only critter you can skin twice, right? Well, between Balshakkar blackmailing you and this Stonehenge frolic, you've about had your share. There are flies in the buttermilk, old buddy, so let's hit the owly-hoot. We can get reservations on one of the liners and lope back nice and easy and with lots of squaws to pass the time of night. When we hit New York, we'll grab the first bird for Jackson Hole. Next day, we'll be tracking Nasty Ned and having out-of-season pan-fried fresh rainbow trout for breakfast instead of having our peltries nailed high or sitting around like a pair of *kipitakkieks!*" He used the Blackfoot word for old crones.

"By God!" Kincade said suddenly. "You're making me homesick. You're right, redbelly. It's been a bad camp. Let's go up to American Express—on Mount or Brook Street or something—and book passage. Then we can grab some *wasna* at the Connaught Hotel—it's right nearby."

Littlesky leaped to his feet and shouted a Shoshoni war whoop which rattled the bird paintings on the left wall and all but shattered the monitors' headphones at the other end of the omnipresent microphones. He grinned knowingly at Kincade and made sign for sore ears.

"One thing," Kincade said thoughtfully. "I've got to make a quick trip to Ireland before we leave."

"What for, Chief?"

"I promised Pop. My great-grandmother is still kicking around over there. God only knows how ancient she is, but he does write to her, and he made me promise to be sure and stop off and see the old mare."

"Whereabouts?" Littlesky asked. He was thinking sharply, suddenly aware that Kincade was not ad-libbing. There actually was a cover in Ireland which NSA had provided. He had always shoved it back in a remote file of his mind, figuring it to be a hideout in case they got into trouble. Obviously, Admiral McCabe had meant it to be more than that. Charlie Ravensmith's many flights to Ireland, along with his jaunts to the Old Head of Kinsdale, and his diving with the *Lusitania* salvagers, had alerted canny McCabe to provide Kincade with legitimate reason to visit the spot.

"Blackrock Cottage, it says here," Kincade said, examining his address book. "Gillabey Road. Kinsale. No numbers or anything. It's a pain in the pucker, but I'd feel lousy if Pop found out I'd blown it. After all, she *is* my grandmother, even if I've never seen her. I remember now. She's ninety-seven. The Irish live longer than Indians."

"It's the whiskey," Littlesky said. "Okay, this is Thursday. We'll get the ticketing done, and then you'll have a whole weekend to get lost in, while I make final signal to my harem down in Chelsea."

Kincade showered briskly, and while wiping himself down with one of those huge heated towels which the Dorchester lushly provided, he thought that if his threat to depart these shores did not incur an instant reaction from Keyhole, then it would be just as well if they walked for the nearest exit, before they were shipped out of Southampton in a pair of handsome bronze urns.

13

CARNABY STREET had so inured the citizens of London to theatrics that passersby barely noticed Kincade as he and Littlesky strode up South Audley Street toward Grosvenor Square. They had thoroughly checked each other's clothes to ascertain that there were no eavesdrops in the clothes they wore, because they wanted to talk straight-tongue while they had the chance.

Kincade was wearing his Navajo-rug jacket. It was a handsome coat, basically dark-blue wool, but its back was armored with dyed-yellow porcupine gambeson in the shape of a huge diamond, and on the front the jacket's upper pockets were scarlet with interwoven black Navajo swastikas. The buttons were handcarved cottonwood; the belt was a Navajo concho of silver suns, inset with turquoise moons. Actually, the material *would* have wound up a rug. But Kincade had had it tailored expertly in Taos and had added the quill shield. Willy Littlesky, disdaining Kincade's display, wore his new navy-blue Aquascutum trench coat over an iridescent green corduroy sports jacket, under which could be seen a nutmeg turtleneck. He also donned a happy smile because they actually might be going home, and he was still alive and still the best-looking goddam Indian since Tony Quinn played Yellowhand in *Buffalo Bill.* (Hell with Jeff Chandler.)

"So what really happened?"

Kincade replied, "They branded me. Told me I was blown. Run-for-the-hills stuff."

"And if you were innocent and screamed for the law, that made you an honest man. Okay. But, boss, in a sense, *aren't* we running for the hills?"

"Yes. Except that Bwana Charlie had to talk me *out* of running to Scotland Yard. That makes a difference. Now, they'll either forget me or they'll tap me."

"*Or* bury *us.*"

"Don't be morbid."

"I wouldn't be, old buddy, but we are being discreetly followed. And for the sake of Wakan Tanka, *don't* turn around and grab a gander. There are two of them."

"Here is Purdey's," Kincade said cheerfully, as if he had not heard the warning.

"Which is what?"

"James and Sons. They happen to make the finest shotguns and rifles in the whole blooming world. We just overshot it. I turn back, get a glance at the followers, and you talk me out of going in to buy a new scattergun until after lunch. *Kwenda.*"

He wheeled abruptly and went back. When he started to open the doors to enter, Littlesky berated him and said to hang it up until they had broken bread. After a moment Kincade shrugged and assented, and they went on again.

Littlesky said, "You catchum?"

"Yeah," Kincade said grimly. "Francis Bane again, on this side of the street. God, that bastard has big hands, doesn't he?"

"The better to strangle you with, my dear."

"But the other one, across the street . . . Christ! Balshakkar!"

"Interesting, isn't it?" Littlesky shivered. "Are you getting the same chill I just had?"

Kincade nodded. The coincidence was too much. Bane, yes. The Polish intimate of Henry Dieu had plainly been assigned the task of tailing Kincade, which he managed discreetly and inconspicuously. Until Commander Sampson had informed him of the fact, Kincade had not even known that Bane was his shadow, and he had never been really close enough to the man to see his aspect tightly.

But Balshakkar was something else again. He had used his extortion money for a new suit, and it was jazzy, overcut, overlapeled, overshouldered and as garish as a Van Gogh pallette. He swung an ivory-headed cane as he clopped along. All he lacked was a secondhand pink Cadillac. He was a long way from inconspicuous in that same Sherlock Holmes deerstalker cap.

"That son of a Crow!" Littlesky muttered, eyes straight ahead. "That means that Keyhole infiltrated him into Fitz-Owen's safari reservation with Bwana One-Eye. He's no more Rendille tribesman than I am. There was always something oddball about that clown. Remember? Like he was always afraid of everything, like he wasn't up on it or used to it. Like the time he shat-pants when you chased the cheetahs. And when he overloaded the thirty-oh-six magazine and couldn't jam it home. Even his Swahili was crummy. Buddy boy, I don't like this."

"Easy, Willy."

"But look at it. He testifies for you at the Arusha inquest because Keyhole sure as hell doesn't want you hung up in Tanzania. Then, when you're clear, he comes and blackmails you for a thousand quahogs. Because Keyhole wanted to establish the fact that you were willing to pay the freight, which is like admitting you actually did collect Melisande. It's a sure thing, boss. And the hell of it is we can't collect *him* now or they'll know we know."

"What's the difference?" Kincade asked. "It still shines. Maybe even better. We did right paying him off. He can only confirm that I'm a pigeon."

Littlesky grunted angrily. "Just that this Injun reservation is getting damned unfriendly. There's American Express."

"One thing wrong," Kincade said as they paused at the door. "If he is tailing us, don't you think they would have dudded him without the neon lights?"

"Don't be a tenderfoot. They spotlight him so that we won't notice Francis Bane. It's an old Injun trick. Like the time that Red Cloud sent Crazy Horse and nine other guys in to lure Fetterman and his eighty troopers right into the whole Sioux Nation. Bingo. *Kufa.*"

When they entered the American Express office, Kincade noticed the girl who was just turning away from the counter with an envelope of tickets and trivia. He paled and stepped past her swiftly, turning his back and burying himself against the pamphlet rack on the wall, where he seized a clutch of travel folders.

Willy Littlesky was not so effaceable. He took one brief but gladsome ogle at the girl and turned on his full effulgency, lighting up like a nova, and managed to get in the way of her exit so that they did the hoary slapstick routine of trying to get out of each other's way.

"I'm so sorry," he said, flashing all of his teeth.

She was lovely. Tall, dark, full-bodied, with open, sparkling brown eyes. "My fault," she said.

"No, no, it was mine," Littlesky said.

She donated a warm smile. "I'm sure if you just stand still for a moment the crisis can be avoided."

"Cut off at the pass," he said, but he stood still and the girl went by him and closed the door behind her.

Littlesky sighed cheerfully. "Hey, boss, did you get a load of *that?*"

"You damned fool!" Kincade said angrily. His back was still turned. "Is she gone?"

"But not forgotten." Littlesky frowned. "What did *I* do?"

"Just for once you might keep your mind out of your pants," Kincade said harshly, astonishing the Shoshoni as he brushed rudely by him and went quickly to the clerk at the counter. "Mr.—"

"Chesterton is the name," the little clerk said. He looked up at Kincade's height with an odd quirky grin. "No relation to Father Brown's creator." Mr. Chesterton exuded a pseudo-Falstaffian sense of merriment when there was absolutely nothing to be merry about. He had bright-blue eyes and a bright-red nose and the faintly reformed accent of a street coster.

"Amigo," Kincade said with charm while Littlesky watched and listened in puzzlement, "I know it's not the usual fandangle to pass out inside info on your clients, but I'd like maybe a word on that young lady who just left."

"I couldn't do—"

"No, no, listen, amigo. Let me tell you, and if I'm right, then you know it's not just a pitch, *sabe?* I'm saying her moniker is Dulcy Quinn. She holds an American passport. She lives in Pasadena, California, and if you examined her passport you found a visa for Kenya and a visa for Tanzania."

Mr. Chesterton's bushy black brows danced.

"Full marks, sir!"

Kincade shot a hostile glance at Littlesky, whose ebullience perished the instant he heard Dulcy Quinn's name. Very quietly, he said, "All right, I got careless. But I'm not the only one. This morning, for those mikes, you mentioned 'pulling liberty' to go out for lunch. That's straight U.S. Navy lingo, and since Kincade was never in the gob group, I just hope to Holy they miss the slip." He took no satisfaction in Kincade's startled reaction and added, "Let's buckle down, baby."

Kincade nodded and returned to the counter and Mr. Chesterton. "Could you tell me where Miss Quinn is staying?" Chesterton studied him. "My name is—"

"No, no," Mr. Chesterton interrupted. "Let *me* do it this time. . . . You would be the American bloke everyone is talking about, the chap who tried to buy Stonehenge. Ah . . . Simon Kincade from Wyoming. Right, sir?"

"Right," Kincade said unhappily. "Listen, pard, she really is an old friend—"

"Oh, I'm sure of that. She's staying at the Park Lane Hotel. Telephone Grosvenor six, three, two, one. But I would hop to it if I were you, Mr. Kincade. She's flying to California on Saturday."

"You're sure?" Kincade was relieved.

"Quite, sir. Pan Am first-class President Special connecting with TWA flight eleven for Los Angeles at Kennedy International. I just ticketed her."

"Thanks, hoss," Kincade said. "Won't be able to spare the time, so I guess I'll pick up her trail when I get back on the range. We're heading West ourselves, me and the Red Man here, and we wondered if you could lend a hand—"

"Delighted!"

The S.S. *United States* was the vessel of closest departure, and that, including the fact that Mr. Chesterton hazarded that the grand old girl was being retired from oceangoing at the end of December, decided the issue. Kincade engaged the entire Presidential suite for Littlesky and himself and paid straight cash from the heavy roll, which set Mr. Chesterton agasp.

14

"JESUS," KINCADE breathed in relief as they crossed over to the Hotel Connaught on Carlos Place. "Now I know what a governor's reprieve feels like."

Littlesky nodded. "But she was a beautiful squash blossom, baby. How'd you ever let her get away?"

"I wasn't over Jenny at the time," Kincade said, remembering painfully. "But you're right. And she's as nice as she looks too. It was a different time and place, that's all. God, but I'm sweating. Redbelly, it'll be your job to keep an eye on her, make sure she goes home. We're in trouble until she splits."

"Where the hell is Tess Maddox?" Littlesky grimaced. "Dulcy Quinn was her *shauri*." He shook his head. "We should have had warning on this."

They entered the Connaught, one of the older hotels, frequented mostly by stage and cinema personalities. It had a real English character, integrity and spit-and-polish. They

crossed the small lobby and, skipping the bar, went right into the dining room. Lunch was long under way. When the maître d'hotel greeted them and looked dubious at their lack of reservation (although there were available tables), Dicky Dickerson's rasping voice cut across the stridency of the luncheon chitchat, some of which was reaction to the loud Navajo jacket.

"Kincade, you wandering bandersnatch! Over here!"

Kincade found them located near the windows. Dickerson and Lady Henley were seated at a table for four, which left two conveniently empty places. Dickerson beckoned vehemently for them to join up. "That was quick," Littlesky muttered. "I bet the carrier pigeon is still gasping."

"Watch for Bane. See if he comes this far."

"No chance."

They crossed over to the table as Dickerson struggled up from his chair to shake hands. "Whatever the hell happened to you, cowboy?" Dickerson asked scratchily. "We held supper until the cold bird got warm and the champagne went flat. You're a rotten guest." But Kincade barely saw or heard him for watching Dara, who looked up at him steadily, a faint warmth in her smile, as if to reassure him the doghouse was unoccupied.

"Howdy, my wayfaring galliwampus," Dara said broadly. "Belly up to the bar and name your pizen."

"Ah," he said, flopping heavily into the chair, "you're pulling my tail feathers." He looked up into the inquiring eyes of the waiter, who poised a pencil over his order blank. "Just don't stand there, hoss. Beat it to the barrel and spigot some Waes Hael for Powatan and me. I'll have a Bloody Mary."

"Make mine a bullshot," Littlesky said carefully.

Kincade stared at her as the astonished waiter vanished. She had been no illusion, after all. (Littlesky was staring too, but guardedly, his smile polite, his eyes smoky.) It was almost impossible to believe that man had begotten what God had forgotten in the forming of this female; and it was even more difficult to believe that she was the ruthless cacodemon which Sir Julian and Commander Sampson had described.

Only her glowing face could be seen from under the tight helmet which encased her hair and then wrapped tightly around her throat, to become an emerald velvet Pucci dress, with a brilliantly sparkling emerald brooch at her throat. She wore a Somali leopard jacket over her shoulders, open, to disclose the perfect, unbrassiered form of her breasts, the

nipples obviously chilled. Damn her, she knew how beautiful they looked as she let the jacket spread open more and leaned away against the back of her chair, mocking him with her steady eyes, now the color of shallow green seas. Contact lenses or no contact lenses, they were fascinating.

"How goes the tilting of windmills, friend Kincade?" she asked in gentle derision.

"Now you listen here, lady," he said with heavy sincerity, leaning closer to her and smelling the clean sharp scent of her perfume. "If you think even a Gila monster chomping on my cheeks, or anything less than a lynch mob, could have kept me from joining up for dinner with you, you're wrong." She smiled at him impudently. "As a matter of fact, that's just what happened. The boys with the tar and feathers caught up with me and wheel-staked me. In fact, if they'd *really* used tar and feathers, it would have been more nightshirt than they left on me."

Her smile faded; there was compassion in her voice. "We know what happened. I didn't mean to bait you."

"How do you know?"

"We broke fast with Charles Ravensmith this morning at the Dorchester. He gave us the horrid details."

"Oh, Bwana Charlie! He was true blue, old Charlie was. Don't know what I'd have done without him."

"It was a wicked thing," Dara said, her voice as low and rich as a cello's. (An actress's voice, and don't you forget it, Vaquero!) Her slanting pencil brows rose in admonition. "Not that you haven't been sending out engraved invitations to all the defenders of the realm for some revenge upon yourself."

"Me?"

"You, friend Kincade!"

"My handle's Simon."

"Fine. But don't start kicking pebbles in the barnyard with me, Old Paint. I'm an old-fashioned New England girl myself, and I have been duped before by the barefoot-boy-with-cheek-of-tan routine." She frowned faintly at him as the waiter brought the drinks. She and Dickerson were sipping Dubonnet cocktails with lemon twists. "Why do you do it, Simon?"

He took a long swig of the Bloody Mary while Littlesky stared at him emptily. "Do what, ma'am? And incidentally, what am I supposed to call you?"

"Anything but 'sweetie' or 'chickybaby' or 'pussycat,' " she said. "Why not Dara?"

"Dara."

"And don't avoid the answer. Why do you play the jingle-jangle-jingo? The chauvinist of Wyoming and points west?"

He grinned. "You don't fool around."

"I've *fooled* around."

Kincade glanced at Littlesky and wondered why the Indian's face had tautened. Littlesky was staring off across the room, since his back was to the windows. What had he seen? Had Francis Bane joined the *omelette aux fines herbes* sect? Had Balshakkar made the conservative Connaught a multiracial fact? Littlesky drank heavily of his bullshot, almost in a panic. Kincade looked away from Lady Dara's unrelenting stare for a quick survey of the dining room. Nothing.

"Don't make any mistake, Dara. It isn't all clowning either. The fact is I like the Old West. I like everything about it. It has a tongue of its own that's being forgotten, except for the Hollywood clichés. It was the first real anti-Establishment. It was a time when a man could really take the world on his own terms. He was free as an eagle and just as wild. He was only responsible to himself for his own survival. There was no permissiveness, no one to wipe his adolescent backside, no parental schisms he could blame his *own* shortcomings on. What's more, he managed to live without doing so at somebody else's expense, except maybe a few buffler and pronghorn and prairie chickens. All right, ma'am, maybe I overdo it, but I'm damned comfortable with the Old West."

She applauded soundlessly. "Spoken like a rip-roaring ringtail highbinder."

"Easy on the spurs, ma'am."

"Oh, I'm not trying to rag you," she said seriously. "But it's just too simple. I can understand, from what you just said, why you went to New Guinea and why you went to Africa—"

"How'd you know that?"

"Charles Ravensmith was clueing us in this morning at breakfast. *I* brought up the subject."

Kincade smiled. "That's encouraging."

"But you seem to be two men, almost pure schizophrenia. One, the self-made loner. Two, the man performing at being the self-made loner."

Littlesky shot a dark-eyed glance at him. (Watch it, Bear

Paw. We're getting down to the droppings. She's going to ring your chimes.)

"Ah hell," Kincade said. "Maybe I go overboard sometimes, Dara, but truth is, I don't get along with civilization much, and I don't have many friends, and when I come into a strange city or a strange country, I maybe draw attention to myself to let everybody know I'm here. It's worked with you."

Dickerson chuckled in his rasping way. "You've been outgunned there, Dara dear."

Her smile was cool as she looked at Kincade. "Have I, Simon?"

"Ma'am, we've got an old saying down in Laramie. Shoot a stranger and you'll never have the problem of making a friend. Well, I'm not armed. And the problem of making friends with you is one I've looked forward to ever since I nearly knocked you northern last night."

"La, sir, the maiden said," Dara murmured, not coyly. "Could we start at dinner tonight?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Tomorrow then?"

"I'm sorry, Simon. I'll be out of town."

He instantly was gloomy, his face hanging long. "Then I'm a dead wolf."

"You give up very easily," she said, noticing the waiter at Dickerson's side. "Dicky, I'll have a half a dozen Whitstables and the Dover sole." They all hastily ordered the same.

"You don't understand," Kincade said. "Redbelly and I are sailing Monday night."

Dickerson growled. "You're not letting a pack of pranksters scare you out of England?"

"No, amigo." Kincade glared at him. "Nobody scares me out of nothing. It's just the African safari wasn't exactly a hoedown, and England hasn't been exactly a jubilee, and Willy and I just got homesick."

"I'm truly sorry," Dara said.

"Not your fault."

"But it *would* be inhospitable of me to let you leave these shores without something pleasant to remember. Which means I would love to dine with you tonight."

She met his eyes steadily. He could find no meaning in them; they held none of the empathy of her voice. (He wondered why Littlesky persisted in staring across the room

with that strange awe in his eyes.) "But you said you had a previous—"

"No. You assumed it. Actually, I'm driving down to the country, to my villa in Newmarket, for the weekend. We take long holidays in London. Thursday to Monday. I thought you might like to join me."

"Join you?" Kincade strangled in elation. "You know that's the first nice thing—Christ, lady, I'll marry you to make it legal!"

Her eyebrows shot up. "I asked you as a guest, not a lover."

"You wouldn't want me to insult you by not trying?" She laughed soundly in that low voice. "Where is Newmarket?"

"A few miles northeast of Cambridge," she said. "I have a small place there—everyone calls them villas, but they're really rather suburban chalets—because of my stables. I dabble in thoroughbreds. I have nine at the moment, which are bred and trained at Newmarket in preparation for the major English tracks. Which reminds me, are you *really* a cowboy? I mean, *do* you ride?"

"Well . . . sure . . ." he said uncertainly.

"I mean," she added pleasantly, "we usually take a morning canter to steam out the martinis of yesterday. In which case, be sure and bring riding clothes. We dress for dinner, of course. Otherwise, just sports things. It's really informal."

Dickerson chuckled, but the sound of it was ugly and unfunny. Kincade frowned at him. "Something?"

"Nothing," Dickerson said, but added as afterthought, "If you can't ride real good, I mean, *real* good, don't try and fake it. She's just as likely to give you that nasty bastard Caliban and you'll go home flat on your back in sick bay, believe me."

"Don't mind Dicky," Dara said.

"Who is Caliban?"

"This two-year-old of mine. Colt."

"Stud," Dickerson said, warning.

"He's been giving the trainer a packet of trouble," Dara said. "I'm just not sure he's going to be controllable as a race horse, which is a pity. He has such a beautiful conformation. He's a gorgeous black—"

"Oh, he's just lovely," Dickerson said. "Already put two grooms in hospital."

Kincade smiled without enthusiasm, having decided to

hang them up a bit. "We had a brute like that back at Natrona. He was purely head-shy—"

"We've cured him of *that,*" Dara said, watching him. "But don't worry. I'll give you a nice safe mount."

Kincade did not object. Littlesky liked the style. It was good to keep the Gorgon uncertain, and he would have helped the boss except that he had his own hands full at the moment, watching the thready situation behind Kincade in the dining room.

"You won't need a car," Dara said. "You can drive down with me. I'll pick you up in front of the Dorchester at four o'clock."

Kincade said happily, "Ma'am, you sure have made my day!"

But his day was far from over, as he found out the next instant. He had been worrying about the sudden whitening and widening of Littlesky's black eyes, and he was still watching them when his own sight was blotted out by a pair of warm, friendly, female hands, and a loving, familiar voice said, close to his right ear, "Sam! Sam Carson! *Surprise!*"

15

LADY DARA HENLEY was an excellent driver. The jade Lamborghini Espada was an excellent automobile. Between the two of them they seemed to straighten London's roundabouts with utter ease, and when they reached the northern thruway she laid it out, sleek as a green mamba, and settled down to eighty miles per hour through the faintly misting darkness. Kincade had been mildly nervous at first, but soon sensed her cold control of the wheels, so he relaxed, spending long looks at her beautiful profile. He said once, "Lady, you handle this salty snake like a real bronc-snapper."

"Now, now," Dara said, her eyes riveted on the road ahead, "you know the ground rules. No conversation while driving. Unless you'd prefer a shorter life than you're fated for."

"Is it okay if I look and lust?"

"Expected, but not highly original."

After they left the thruway and took the two-lane highway for Cambridge, an unlucky bat loomed out of the night and smashed into the Espada's windscreen, directly in front

of Lady Henley, splattering the glass with bright-red blood and completely blotting out vision. She coolly leaned to her far right (the Espada had an American-type left-hand steering gear) and slowed the car until she reached a convenient layby, where she pulled over.

Kincade said, "His radar must have conked out."

He got a cloth from the boot and wiped off the copious splash of blood, grateful it wasn't his. The windscreen wasn't damaged. The gore failed to bother Lady Henley, whose only remark was "Thanks awfully. Good thing the flittermouse didn't break through. That could have been messy." Then they were off again, at the same grueling speed.

Kincade leaned his head back on the seat as he hunched down. He was deeply disturbed. Not by the demise of the bloody bat but by the cockup at the Connaught.

"Won't be long now, Simon. I'm taking a side road, south of Cambridge. Perhaps fifteen more miles."

"I'm just fine, girl. Don't you fret about me."

Then silence again, except for the high-speed roaring of the night wind against the slightly opened wings.

16

"SAM! Sam Carson! *Surprise!*"

It had been extremely difficult not to react. Littlesky had already fallen into that tender trap. Now Kincade knew why the Shoshoni had gaped. Only Kincade's basic anger saved him. Instant anger at Admiral John Jeremiah McCabe, at Sir Julian Keys, at Tess Maddox, at Commander Paul Sampson for permitting such an occurrence.

He knew the voice, of course, knew it was Dulcy Quinn, who had covered his eyes. He instinctively decided to play her for an oaf, to keep his seat, so that his height would not be familiar, to three-quarter his face to her, to make her unsure, and to deride her recognition with some rudeness, which would be quite unlike the Sam Carson she remembered.

"What the hell!" he growled.

She released his eyes and stepped to one side of him so that he could see her. Dickerson and Dara, puzzled, were regarding her with keen curiosity. Littlesky, who had but recently played tag with her at American Express, was trying

to cover his face with a nervous hand, a sickly smile seeping through the spread fingers.

"Sam?" she said.

She was still lovely; her huge brown eyes still had all of their wondrous luminosity. If anything, she had lost weight and fullness; her figure was splendid. That open smile still radiated affection. Her raven hair fell softly to her shoulders, framing her suntanned olive skin.

He stared at her, quizzically, without warmth.

"Sam, it's Dulcy! Have I changed that much?"

"Missy," he said dubiously, "I think maybe—"

"Dulcy Quinn!" she said. "Of course you remember! From Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwrndobwllllantysilogogogoch!"

"*Gesundheit,*" he said with a bald grin, glancing at Dickerson and Dara, and shrugged his shoulders. Pronouncing the Welsh town had made her seem silly.

"When did you get out of the Navy?" she asked. "And what's happened to your nose?"

(Jesus Christ, that was all he needed!) He said brusquely, "Missy, you've either saddled the wrong pinto, or you've been kicking the grog around."

Dulcy's black brows knitted in annoyance. "Sam, stop putting me on and give me a kiss and tell me where you've been all these years and what you're doing in that crazy quilt!" She smiled at the others. "He was always a terrible tease."

"Maybe *he* was," Kincade said. "But, so help me Hannah, missy, you got the wrong wrangler."

"Sam!" Suddenly she doubted herself. She peered at him. "You're not Sam Carson?"

"My handle's Kincade, Missy." He looked off her eyes so that she could not probe, and, in doing so, caught the tweedy figure of Tess Maddox fleeing from the dining room, her pale-gray hair an unfocused flash of color as she vanished, having seen the meeting. Her presence would have made the entire situation absolutely intractable; Kincade was glad she had realized it. For a woman who had been with the safari at the Olduvai Gorge to be found lunching with a girl who professed to know Kincade as another man would have ended the mission. Even so, it was still tighter than Dick's hat band.

Dulcy straightened, her eyes hurt, her face clouding. "I'm very sorry," she said. She hadn't believed a word of it. *She knew*. But the indulgent smirks of the others at the table

dissuaded her from pursuing the subject. She accepted the rejection in typical female reaction as a personal insult. "I seem to be mistaken. Please accept my apologies. I'm sorry." She turned proudly and strode back to her own table. They all watched her, two with interest, two with dread. Finding Tess Maddox missing from the table, Dulcy swept the room aimlessly, like a tiddly toper who doesn't know the way to go home.

"Spaced out," Littlesky said.

Dulcy caught their eyes measuring her and in acute humiliation picked up her suede jacket and ran from the dining room, her eyes misting into tears.

Kincade said casually, "Guess I kind of stomped her."

"Just what was that all about?" Dara asked.

"Beats me. I get a lot of it. When these broads know you own your own mint, they always manage to confuse you with Joe Available and Harry Hotpants. She was a pretty child, though. Prettier than most of the peso-grabbers."

"Yop," Littlesky said. "In fact, I was thinking it might not be half bad to actually be this Sam Whatchamacallhim—"

"Carson," Dickerson said flatly, his pig eyes faintly querulous as he committed the name to his mental file.

"She was out of her class at this table," Kincade said, touching Lady Henley's hand.

"La, kind sir, and thank you," she said, smiling indulgently.

17

EIGHT MILES southwest of Newmarket, the mists vanished, and the phalanx of trees on either side of the highway sparged the tarmac with silvery moonlight from the half-moon which rode the cloudless sky, that same moon at which Kincade had stared in disbelief at Stonehenge twenty-four hours earlier.

"American, I'd say. Wouldn't you?" Dara said suddenly.

"Who? . . . Oh, *her*. Irish, I thought. Although sometimes Californians have a horrible accent that sounds Irish. Broad r's. Funny you thought of her just then. She was beginning to burn my saddle."

Dara spared him a flashing glance.

"I mean, that crack about my bugle," he said very serious-

ly. He felt his nose. "What the hell's wrong with it? Next to my money, it's the prettiest thing I own. Even if it has been busted in two donnybrooks."

"It's *exquisite,*" she said sarcastically. "It was what first drew me to you."

"And that bit about the Navy! I was the greatest draft dodger of my time. Anybody with two hundred bucks and a fast-footed lawyer can keep out of the service forever. Besides, I get seasick on a skating pond."

"Then why sail home?" she asked.

Kincade chuckled grimly. She had a point. "The Red Man wants to stalk some squaws. He figured if I got the *mal* of the *mer,* I'd be too miserable to think. And if I didn't, I'd get a rest from thinking."

"About Africa, you mean."

"About Africa." He peered at her. "What about the no-conversation-with-the-driver ground rules?"

"We can afford the risk now," Dara said as she firmly slowed the Lamborghini and indicated a passing sign which announced that they were entering Newmarket. The place looked soft in the hard moonlight, a rural paradigm of gentlemen's estates and farms, all neatly stitched together into a quilt of gentle, rolling meadows and sudden tree-studded copses. They passed a grandstand and race course of surprising stature for such a remote dorp, and Kincade said so. "All horse racing here," she said. "Everything is horses. Down there—" she indicated—"is Noel Anglion's farm. That's where I keep my string. Noel is my trainer. We'll go out there tomorrow."

"If you say so."

"I was going to suggest that we bypass the villa and go down into town—which I am now doing, by the way—and take supper at one of the local pubs, the King's Arms."

Kincade said, "Never been in a pub in my life."

"Good," she said, pleased. "It's really a patch better than a regular mughouse, and the food is excellent. They serve fresh oysters from Colchester, only twenty some miles away, and they have excellent roast beef, and a jolly good Aylesbury duck, along with an excellent cellar of French wines—"

"Okay with me," he said. "But what about the house party? What about your other guests?"

She spent a long smile on him, looking feline as her canines glistened. "There are no other guests."

"Just you and me? And the baby makes three?"

"Hutchins makes three. My house steward in London. I sent him on ahead earlier. I'll ring him from the pub."

Kincade stared at her in disbelief. "Hold the phone, Dara. Are you on the level? You mean, really, you and I are spending this weekend alone?"

"Yes," she said. She looked rueful. "Of course, if you feel the assignation will besmirch your spotless character and leave you a fallen angel in the eyes of your friend, Littlesky, I could ring up London and ask some others—"

"He'll just have to forgive me, like a good heathen should," Kincade said, elated. "I'm putting myself in your hands, and the hell with the hangnails. Lead on, Macduff, and damned be the one who first cries 'Hold! Enough!' "

"I accept the challenge," she said quietly and looked him squarely in the eyes.

18

EARLIER, Littlesky had returned from the Montebank to the Dorchester in some elation. He stopped by ENQUIRIES to see if there were any messages from his chicks in Chelsea (there were two). He was on his way to the lift when G. A. Ronus, the managing director of the hotel, emerged from his office and beckoned. Littlesky joined him briefly. Mr. Ronus plucked an envelope from his inner pocket and passed it over. "For either you or Mr. Kincade," Mr. Ronus said. "It's important."

"Thanks," Littlesky said. The envelope had no address, just a wildly scrawled, "Through the courtesy of G. A. Ronus" on the face. Littlesky opened it, puzzled. The message read, "Fustigator powwow immediately lion." Littlesky looked up into Mr. Ronus's warm face. It was impossible that the gentleman was a Keyhole capture. He had been managing the Dorchester for well over seventeen years. Still . . .

"Did you recognize the man who gave you this?" Littlesky asked.

"I should say," Mr. Ronus replied cheerfully. "I've known Sir Julian for rather *more* than a fortnight."

That did it. "Appreciate it," Littlesky said and hastily left the lobby for the American Bar. He split through the little spa to the street exit, near the front, and hastily re-entered the hotel again, pausing by the doors to see if he was being

followed. He was. The tall figure of Francis Bane arrived on the corner of Park Lane, from the American Bar, a trifle frantic at having lost his man, and in haste headed for Curzon Street, where he turned left and disappeared.

Littlesky grinned, crossed the lobby, took the lift down to the garage, left the garage side entrance on South Audley and hurriedly strode to Farm Street.

19

AT THE DOOR of 23-A, he paused and waited, looking down the stairs for signs of pursuit and listening at the door for sounds of occupancy. Neither possibility evidenced itself. Littlesky sighed nervously. It was all so rinky-dinky. He touched the highest hinge bolt, heard the electronic bolts slide, and then, using the key which Commander Sampson had given him, snapped the latch and entered cautiously. He held the door half ajar, so that he could back out fast in case it was a dry gulch.

It wasn't. "Come in, come in, and shut the bloody thing!" Sir Julian Keys cricketed from the easy chair.

When Littlesky did, he found a man standing behind the door with a Browning automatic pistol of .38 caliber, aimed dead into his left ear. He saw this even before he saw the thin figure of Tess Maddox across the room. She looked like a widow.

"That will serve, Hackenbush," Sir Julian said squeakily. "You will check street security for Mr. Littlesky's departure. He shan't be overlong."

Mr. Hackenbush wore a black bowler, carried a black embassy case (into which he now dropped the Browning) and carried a black umbrella. He looked fresh from the Lutine bell, newly spewed from Lloyd's of London. Except that his eyes were hard and real and his smile was hard and unreal. "Righto, sir," he said and was instantly gone, as the electronic bolts sledded into place.

"Who was *that?*" Littlesky asked.

"Let us say a good fairy," Sir Julian replied.

"Whatever turns him on," Littlesky said irreverently and opened his arms to receive Tess Maddox, who had run to him with wet eyes, trembling, her firmer Olduvai strength drained out in deep emotion.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Willy!" Tess Maddox said. "It's all my fault, and yet, really it wasn't, not really. It wouldn't have happened if only—but I had no idea she would return—"

"Hey, lady, take it easy," Littlesky said tenderly.

"If anything ever happened to you and Simon because of this—"

"Nothing happens to us," Littlesky said. "We happen to other people. Ease up, Tess."

Her gray head tilted up as she looked up into his black eyes. Her long strong face seemed very adolescent suddenly. "Is he all right?"

"Supah," Littlesky said. "Not to worry, baby."

"He's right, y'know," Sir Julian said annoyed. "Actually, Mrs. Maddox, your lamentations—though expectedly female—are merely wasting time." Sir Julian nodded to her. "Ululate your sad tale, madam, and let's get on with it."

Tess was cowed by Sir Julian. She said briefly, "As soon as we returned to London from Africa, I got her out of town, as Commander Sampson ordered. We went to a place called Killaurus to look for Merlin's bones—and then some other neolith called Callanish in the Outer Hebrides, and that was it. Dulcy wasn't coming back to London. She was flying home from Glasgow. Then, yesterday, out of the blue, she popped in for a last farewell, and you know what happened."

"A coincidental flapdoodle," Littlesky said. "Forget it, Tess."

"But you will damned well make sure Miss Quinn boards the Pan Am flight before Kincade returns from Newmarket," Sir Julian said ominously.

"Yes, sir."

"Meanwhile," he continued, "despite the chink in our armor, it will take time for Keyhole to check out Sam Carson. A week at least." Sir Julian stared at Littlesky. "So you'd best use the time for your fall planting."

"It so happens," Willy said, grinning, "that I caught up with Buffy Pristine this post meridian at the club. I've got a big date with her tonight, which is nice work if you can get it, and I got it."

"I hardly envy you," Sir Julian said austerely. "My office has procured a history of this young woman. It might interest you."

Littlesky looked at him sharply.

"She is definitely Kykuyu, a child of rape. Her mother was

Benita Paisley, wife of farmer Donald Paisley of Nanyuki, Kenya. Her father was a black named Kidogo Kamau. After the rape, he was garroted on the spot. The child was raised half white, half black. When she was thirteen, she went through the circumcision rites with the other maidens—and without the Paisleys' knowledge. This was Mau-Mau time. Afraid that next she would be mouthing the oaths, they sent her out of Africa and educated her in France and England. The Paisleys were slain by Mau-Mau later on. The girl assumed her present name and went through various marriages and relations, apparently indulging in high extortion. Sooner or later, she joined Keyhole. I hope you like playing with cobras." Sir Julian sighed. "This meeting is terminated. You" —he meant Littlesky—"leave first."

Littlesky kissed Tess Maddox goodbye, and looked into her reddened eyes warmly. "I'll give him your love, Mama." The bolts slid, and he left the lair.

Sir Julian stared after him in utter disapproval. There were some things a white man just didn't do. Even if he *was* an Indian.

20

"SIMON, do be careful," she said. "Don't try to prove anything to me." Kincade smiled at her. Dara looked fresh as the crisp dawn dew which clung to the green grass of the meadows and soaked the railtops of the small paddock. She wore no hat, only an ancient, chic, slightly raveled wool turtleneck and stiff-pressed jodhpurs. A small riding crop completed her costume, along with a frown. She was a bit worried that he might get hurt acting out a pseudo-character for her benefit. In the event that he was foolishly grandstanding, there was little benefit to be derived from a brave dead multimillionaire. (An NSA agent would have declined the gambit.)

She was also puzzled. The previous night she had been the first to tell him that he was exhausted, but even so, she had not quite expected him to retire to his wing in the villa, after that pleasant dinner, without even attempting to kiss her, much less couple with her. She had never met a man *that* weary.

"Like they say, missy," Kincade replied, still looking un-

certain, still hanging her up, "never a horse that couldn't be rode. Never a rider that couldn't be throwed."

"The devil with the Wyoming homilies!" Dara said firmly. "Just don't do anything silly."

Caliban was quite an animal. Kincade reckoned him at sixteen hands high, jet black, hard-built, and with a pair of the most arrogantly wicked eyes he had ever seen, except maybe for one wild mustang stallion high on a plateau of the Rattlesnake Range. The colt looked older and heavier than his two years, and he bent those evil eyes on you as if challenging you to get within killing distance. He was already bridled and saddled, his rein held by an angel-faced fourteen-year-old girl named Cicely Jones, who had the flat vocabulary of a Yippie. Kincade had been surprised to find most of the Newmarket grooms were pre-nubile maidens, pink-skinned, large-bottomed, outdoor types, just waiting to grow up and win all the horse shows.

"How'd you get the tack aboard him?" Kincade asked, admiring her. She was only five feet tall and couldn't have weighed more than seven stone.

"It wasn't a piece of cake," Cicely said, wide-eyed. "Except the nasty bastard knows that I'm frightened pissless of him, and I should think he lets me dress him because he owns me completely." She rolled her bright blue eyes under her dark hair. "Mr. Kincade, sir, I shouldn't play tiddlys with him unless you want a broken arse."

Noel Anglion was standing at the rail, his long, tan, gentle face a pattern of deep-ditched wrinkles. He said indulgently, "Cicely, dear, do watch your language, eh? There's a nice child. . . . Y'see, Kincade, one of Caliban's faults is that he is absolutely unafraid. When he was a foal, he was spoiled filthy by everyone, and he grew so rapidly, after that, everybody got the wind up, particularly after he'd gnashed a rather ragged bite or two. He's more than a tick tyrannical, I'm afraid, and too old to be taught manners."

"Well, well," Kincade said. "A Sassy Sam, eh? Is that what I've got, you spavined crockhead? A real honest-to-God Sassy Sam . . ."

"He doesn't buck," Noel Anglion said. "It's just his scampy tricks. He'll try to clack you in the brains by throwing his head back when you're in saddle. And he'll always try to forward kick you when you're mounting. He adores to bite. And he twists and contorts considerably to lean you off. He also has a filthy habit of making a four-legged stop to pitch

you to the thyme where he can get a chance to stomp you some. Milady, I do have grave doubts that he'll ever race."

"A sunfisher, eh?" Kincade said. "Now, don't give up on this Oregon puddin'-foot yet, Dara. By the time I get through with him, he'll be so gentle, you can stake him to a clothespin." Caliban blinked insolently at him, daring him to come forward and touch the reins. Kincade just stared him in the eyes.

Lady Henley took his arm. "Simon, listen, I think we've had enough of this beast. It's my fault, really, so let's give it up. Last night, I got fond of you, and today I know you well enough to like you. There is nothing to prove."

"Sure there is," Kincade said with a note of intolerance creeping into his voice. "We've got to prove that this pot-gutted windbelly was born and bred to win horse races and not to be hunted with an elephant gun. That right, Sassy Sam? Just keep looking at me, that's the way. Can't wait to eat on me, eh? Noel, open the corral gate so's he can run when I'm aboard. Cicely, you just act like you're going to hand those reins to me."

"Simon, *please!*" Dara said earnestly.

He slid off the rail into the paddock. Caliban's eyes lighted lustfully at the prospect of combat. But instead of taking the reins from the girl groom, Kincade's left hand shot out and grabbed Caliban on the snout, his thumb and third finger digging cruelly deep into each nostril.

"Throw the reins over his neck, quick!"

Cicely tossed them over and scattered away for the top rail.

Caliban was momentarily flabbergasted. He was staring eyeball to eyeball with this phantasm in the white buckskin jacket, pale-blue Levis and bent-brim cavalry hat. He heard the tinkling of the bells on the spurs of the cowboy boots and cast his eyes down warily at the sound. But the thing that bothered him most was that this aggressive exotic with the strange-sounding words held absolutely no smell of fear in his sweat. Usually, when Caliban threatened, the odor spewed out ripe and heady. But now Caliban knew that if anybody was afraid, it was he. He tried to rear, but the cowboy just hung on the sensitive nose and grabbed the left ear for good measure. Hanging up one hundred and ninety pounds on those touchy points was painful. Caliban dropped his head and was astonished when the ding-a-linging stranger

leaned over and bit him sharply on the left ear. He whinnied wildly at the pain.

"Gorjesus!" young Cicely suddenly wailed in her adolescent soprano. "His tail—he's rising his tail—that means he's going truly bonkers! Hop it, sir, get away from him!"

Kincade moved to the colt's left side, shamming a mounting. The colt kicked forward at him. He avoided the crippling blow, and when the hoof dropped, he whacked the colt in the flat of the belly with the flat of his boot.

Caliban snorted in fear and hastily pinwheeled away from the left mounting side, blindly. (Where had the bloody Ear-Biter disappeared to?)

The Ear-Biter had ducked under Caliban's neck against the pinwheeling and vaulted up into the saddle, Indian-style, from the wrong (right) side. Outraged at the weight on his back, Caliban trembled and then danced wildly in a circle, trying to find some way of dislodging the rider. But no chance. Kincade gave him the wicked gnarr of the sunset rowels, razoring hair off his black belly. Caliban went to full gallop in three tremendous leaps and quickly disappeared with his bronc-buster into the fen-sucked morning fogs. Dara watched after them, pale. Young Cicely announced with authority, "That man is dead as whale shit."

Half a mile later, Caliban was still running all out. Kincade felt him pull against the bit as the colt tried to reach two quincunxes of copper beeches, connected by an austere rise. Kincade smiled and let Caliban have his head. The colt wafted up the slope like a crossbow bolt, but on the abrupt downhill side he locked all four feet and skidded down on the slippery sod. At the bottom, he threw his hard head back savagely, hoping to brain the face of his tormenter (who had presumably slipped far forward due to inertia). Instead, anticipating, Kincade had left the stirrups and canted far back, his legs sticking out far forward, so that when Caliban tossed his head back, he received a resounding clap on both ears from the stockings of the bellsonged boots.

The colt was completely undone. Panicked, he bounded off again, sunfishing, corkscrewing, but to no avail. Kincade let him run. When Caliban slowed, tiring, Kincade *made* him run, with mild gut hooks from the rowels.

After that, Caliban settled down to the good grace of a proper pony, awed and amenable, and did everything Kincade asked of him. Soon he was surprised to hear the monster

on his back cooing at him and telling him sweet things, ennobling him, no longer shaving him.

"Well, I'll tell you," Kincade said later when he rode a meek and exhausted Caliban back into the paddock, "I don't know what kind of plater this pile driver's going to be, but he'd sure make a helluva cow pony right now. Why, you can turn this child on a dime and still get eight cents change. Right, you old hammerhead?"

He rubbed Caliban's nose and head warmly. Caliban liked it and did not withdraw.

Dara looked into Kincade's eyes and shook her head. "Simon, you damned wonderful idiot!" she said with affection. "Let's go tuck some breakfast."

"I could eat a horse," Kincade said fervently, and then remembered Caliban. "Not you, old-timer. Not you."

21

THE OAK-FED fire snapped, crackled and popped like a string of mini-firecrackers. The burning logs threw the brilliant heat far out of the fieldstone fireplace across the big room. It was a good feeling, after the day's cold October air. The burning bark sustained the sparkling scent of autumn, indoors. As Simon watched the bright sparks plucked up into the chimney from the draft, he keenly recalled the roaring infernos of the *camp-i* in Tanzania: the safari huddling around the blaze as the high-altitude chill fell, the blacks preparing dinner or salting hides, the bwanas heartily drinking their second sundowners. He was weary, hyperventilated by the fresh air of the countryside; he was stiff and sore too. It had been many a month since he had horsed a hot-blooded pony, and though riding was like swimming—never to be forgotten once accomplished—still, his muscles had been rusty. He groaned faintly when he shifted position, but it wasn't all that bad, not with a snifter of old cognac in hand, a robust beef in his belly and a beautiful woman opposite him, watching him quizzically.

"Africa," she said.

He looked away from the fire into her green eyes.

"How did you know?"

"It was there. On your face. All the sadness."

"Not sadness," he said quickly. Sadness was not the tack

he wanted her to take. He stirred. "You ever been on safari?"

"No," she said softly.

"Well, it's the fire that you remember. You come back from the hunt bone-weary, and old Salehe will have had the boys build the fire. A helluva fire, a real two-alarm. You pull up your chairs and sit around, after your bath, and you have a few belts and blat about the day, and somehow the fire becomes the main business, you know?"

Milady looked urgently provocative. There was a trio of eight-foot divans horseshoed before the fireplace. He had stretched out on the center one, eying her across the huge leather coffee table as she stretched out lithely on the right one. Her lovely thighs were encased skin-tight in moss-green velvet pants, her small feet in bright, soft golden scuffs. She wore a white see-through blouse, fully transparent, without a brassiere under it. She never wore a brassiere. He wished, at the moment, she did. The vision of those breasts had made his phoenix rise out of its shorts.

She stared at him speculatively. "I've never been on safari. You must tell me all about it. Everything."

"Ah." He waved a hard hand. "It'd bore the ass off you."

"I don't think so," she said brightly.

He stared helplessly at her breasts. It was impossible not to keep reviewing the sharp pink points.

She rose from her divan with the easy grace of a cat and sidled around the coffee table to him, motioning him to make room for her. He gave way. She used up all the space he donated, then more, until the edge of her backside was tight against his chest as she sat next to him, intimately. He thought wryly that intimacy had sure changed from the old days of mingled body sweats. Today, you had to perfume your pecker, talcum your testicles, Binaca your breath, rosewater your rectum, dunk your beardless face in Old Spice, saturate your armpits with aluminum chlorhydrate, and spray your eyes with some red-vein eradicator before you were even fit to shake hands.

She took the empty glass from him and poured an overhospitable slosh into it, matching the dosage in her own snifter. The Armagnac was twenty years old and one hundred proof. Kincade eyed it and her with caution. She made a brief flat gesture, indicating she wanted to stretch out beside him, and curled under his left arm. She took a healthy dollop of the cognac, and then turned to him, her sparkling

lips no more than a snaking tongue's length from his own mouth. She looked at him steadily for a few seconds, then put her snifter on the table beside her. She said, "I have this wonderful feeling that I should like to have you kiss me."

"I don't think so," he said.

"You damned fool." She took his face strongly in her silken hands and kissed him fully.

Christ!

He had prayed that she would make the pass. He had planned on it, even provoked it. But still it was too much. He was not prepared for the frenzied, feverish taste of her swollen mouth, nor for her nomadic tongue, which explored him fitfully and frantically, nor for the steamy grip of her wild sucking. She crushed her breasts against him; no silicone-stuffed falsies these, but soft and deeply exciting realities which he could not resist grasping, titillating the nipples with his fingers. He sensed a rabid downsurging in his groin. Gasping for breath, she retreated momentarily, a mere two inches from his mouth, and as she did so, and before she could reapply her gleaming mouth to his again, he jerked erect harshly. *"No, God damn it, no!* Knock it off!"

Somehow, he escaped from the divan, leaping over her out-stretched legs, panting like a spent cheetah, aware of the swift hostility in her eyes.

He grabbed his snifter, swallowed off the rest of his Armagnac, set down the glass, strode to the fire. He stared at it a moment moodily. (I hope to God I haven't overplayed Virtue Triumphant.) A look at the anger in her face told him he had. He turned and scurried back to her.

"Dara, listen to me!" He knelt at her feet, boyishly penitent. "It's not you, not you at all. *It's me!* I can't, I can't, don't you understand?"

"Not an iota." But she was less cold.

"Dara, you are the kind of a woman I have searched for all of my life and never found: (Easy does it, Brando. Stanislavski is watching.) "My God, Dara, but I've wanted to hold you and kiss you and make love to you since I first laid eyes on you!"

She looked solemn but unsurprised.

"But what the hell kind of man would I be if I gave in to this feeling? You'd wash out every bit of respect you have for me, you'd be lost to me forever. With the hoocheroo we've drunk, things seem natural, but they aren't. The fact is, I'm the guy who buried his wife in an African grave a few weeks

back. I'm the guy who put a three-seventy-five Magnum into her head and blew her brains out. I'm the brand-new widower. What would you think of me if I started snapping at your ass like a boor coon in the mating season? I've got far too much respect for you. I want you, God help me, but I want you for a long time. I don't want your contempt when you started to think it all over . . ." His voice broke. "I'm sorry, Dara—"

"Shh," she said gently. She took his face in her hands again and looked down into it with a compassion that seemed very real. "Poor dear Simon. Were you very much in love with her?"

Kincade's eyes flashed up angrily. "In love with that slut? I hated her goddam guts! She'd put the horns on me a dozen times before she shacked up with the great white hunter in Tanzania! We were going to get a divorce when I got back to Natrona—it was all settled. I couldn't wait to get rid of her—but Jesus, not that way, unless—"

"Unless your subconscious took over?"

He looked up, startled. "That's what I wonder. That's what scares me." His voice choked harshly. "I mean—I really didn't plan it that way. She just seemed to get in the way." He stopped suddenly and rose slowly to his feet. "I talk too much. The cognac—"

"It will never go beyond here," Dara said in the mellow voice of a euphonium.

"I think we had better call it a day," he said remotely. He walked to the hall archway and paused. "Thanks for a wonderful time. Sorry I spoiled it for you." He did not wait for her response, but skipped up the staircase to his bedroom in the south wing. He had the distinct feeling that this would not be the last time he saw her on this night.

22

AT THE SAME TIME, which was 4:00 P.M. Eastern Standard Time, Washington, D.C., the secondhand Qantas plane, brightly refurbished and re-engined, had landed safely at Dulles Airport and been taxied to a special hanger where the National Security Agency could provide it with maximum secrecy. The jet aircraft was owned and operated by Charles Ravensmith Sr., under the aegis of his corporate

structure, Blackbirds Limited, a holding company in which nested all of Ravensmith Sr.'s western Australian assets. It had just flown in and its path had been thoroughly cleared by Admiral John Jeremiah McCabe. Ostentation was the last thing McCabe needed for the Perth-based aircraft. In fact, he had wanted Ravensmith Senior to leave it behind and take a commercial flight. He hoped fervently that Keyhole was still unaware that Ravensmith Sr. had left hearth and home, bauxite and uranium mines, wheat and oil fields, to fly east. The *Blackbird* had made a fast voyage, via Fiji, Honolulu and Los Angeles, all because Admiral McCabe had suggested to the Secretary of Defense that it was time for NSA to get off the pot. Ravensmith Senior was the one man in the world who could establish the fact that Charles Ravensmith Jr. was a Canadian assassin named Monty Wyndham and not his kin at all.

McCabe had reserved the bridal suite at the Wardman Park Hotel for Ravensmith. He did not want the Aussie haunting the plant at Fort Meade, which was always under the watchful eye of some espying agency. He had sent his own staff car for transportation, along with Rufus, and he had assigned one of his best security men to guard Ravensmith during the—he hoped—brief stopover. This man was Master Sergeant Ogden Cheever, an oft-decorated combat veteran in Vietnam, assigned to NSA as part of the Army Security Service. Sergeant Cheever was a plump hedonist of thirty, ribald, rough, tough and highly cleared in security. The moment Sergeant Cheever told him the *Blackbird* was safely down (via scrambled telephone call), Admiral McCabe left his office and motored speedily to the Wardman Park.

He was mildly disturbed. He didn't know where he had gotten the impression that old Ravensmith was a doddering arthritic last-legger. But Sergeant Cheever's telephone call had burst that balloon. Mr. Ravensmith Sr., it appeared, was traveling on his plane with a pilot, co-pilot, flight engineer and radio operator, plus the services of eight—count 'em—Charlie Wheelers, all tall, busty and beautiful Australian stewardesses, fribbles and crumpets.

"My God!" McCabe said. "Don't let all those Sheilas into the city or we might as well advertise in the Keyhole *Bugle*. That's an order, Cheever. Just the old man and Rufus!"

"Sir, he's not exactly an *old* man," Sergeant Cheever said. "As I said, the wombat has *eight* buxom bunnies aboard, and they are *all* smiling."

"Another whiz-bang out of you," McCabe said coldly, "and you'll be walking watch on a radome up in Thule. Handle your freight, Cheever, and shoot the subject into town."

Cheever had been right. Admiral McCabe was flabbergasted at the sight of Ravensmith. The Australian was six feet four inches tall, fifty-eight years of age, his skin darkly tanned, his hair dark without silver, his moustache black and wicked, and he walked with the spring of a kangaroo. He wore an old Aussie campaign hat, the right brim curled high, a weatherbeaten bush jacket, rinky-dinky khakis, patched at the knees, and he carried a ditty bag from which—ignoring the bottles on the bar that McCabe had provided—he pulled a quart of native juniper-and-gin and proceeded to make a pair of pinkers for them.

"Cheers, mate," Ravensmith said heartily as he downed the drink. "Pop it in the north-and-south, and don't let it get cold. Now, what's all this mucky business about? Silly bloody bash if I ever heard one. Of course Charlie is my boy! Just because the lad's been raising dust among the dingoes doesn't make him a Tasmanian devil. Fact of the matter is, the lad was too nonfucking quiet for my tastes, which is why I sent him off to stone the crows three years ago, and from what you say, he's done a flipping fine job of it, and I'm *that* proud of him."

"You haven't seen him in three years?"

"That's right, mate."

"Mr. Ravensmith—"

"Charlie will do nicely, mate."

"—I have pretty hard evidence that your son is dead and that this imposter has assumed his identity in every way. I think your son was studied infinitely—under torture—before this imposter dumped him in the Sahara Desert. That means his voice, his handwriting, his accounts, his history, your history—the lot, as you'd say."

Ravensmith frowned and grew quiet. "I've chatted with him on the blower many times. I'm sure it was the lad. And his letters—they couldn't be faked. And his accounts—all in order. No offense, Admiral, but I think you're yapping like a barking lizard."

McCabe nodded. "We'll soon find out, won't we?"

Ravensmith said, pouring, "We'll drink to that."

As the Aussie downed his, McCabe held off. "Now sup-

pose, Mr.—pardon me—Charlie, that something happened to you. Your estate, I mean."

"Why, it'd be all young Charlie's, of course! And damned glad to give it to him, now that he's found his oysters."

"But if it is not Charlie, and you are dead, who's to prove otherwise?"

"That'd be a bit of mottle-and-mud." The Aussie brooded briefly. "You serious, chum?"

McCabe nodded grimly.

"Meaning, if this lad is a faker, I could easily clap into bad health."

"Terminal."

"Righto," Ravensmith said. "I shall follow your security precautions, then, until I lay my Nelly Blyes on the digger. But if you're wrong, Admiral, you'll owe my boy a personal apology. Or I'll owe *you* a cock-eyed Bob!"

"If I'm wrong, I'll kiss his ass," McCabe said.

"Let's drink to that!"

But McCabe held up a hand, not yet having started his second, and laid out the flight plan, also the security arrangements in London.

By the time the *Blackbird* took off from Dulles at 6:00 P.M., Admiral McCabe was relieved to see Ravensmith Sr's. tail disappear into the overcast. He himself was buzzy of head and depressed in spirit. When he returned to Fort Meade, he took a whopping Bromo.

He was still sitting in his office when the bad news came in. If the TWA flight to Madrid had not been above and behind the ex-Qantas jet at the time it happened, there would never have been any evidence whatsoever, just the grimly vague, "overdue, missing, presumed lost" bulletin. However, the TWA pilot had been in visual communication with the *Blackbird* and, being stacked two thousand feet above the Australian aircraft, had a loge seat for the disaster in the turgid twilight. He reported the 707 exploded like a fiery bolide. It rained flame and debris all over the darkening ocean. TWA radioed the position and confirmed an unnatural tragedy: a time bomb set for the north Atlantic. By chance, a Coast Guard cutter, en route from New York to Newport News, was in the area and was instantly diverted to the scene. By morning, it had recovered wreckage and five bodies, four of them still identifiable as females, and the fifth, the dynamite-infested corpse of Charles Ravensmith, Sr.

23

AT THE SAME TIME as Ravensmith Sr.'s gin-soaked body was curving into the sea like an incandescent micrometeorite, Kincade's bedroom door latch clicked ever so faintly.

It was 2:23 A.M. in Newmarket; he had long since given up waiting, figuring that the night was a dead issue, that his timing and intuition were way off.

When he first retired, he had walked the floor heavily, so that milady might hear the floor-squeaking tromp of a guilt-ridden man, the better to attract her probing sympathy. But nothing happened. Time ticked on eerily, as he gave up the tread and read grisly little tales by Saki and John Collier which lay bedside. Still, nothing happened. The villa was silent. He flicked off the lights and stared at the silvery ceiling. Finally, Caliban, cognac and cessation pulled down his unwilling eyes sandily.

The latch didn't waken him fully. It was just a sound in the night, different enough to stir his senses. But before he could dismiss it as a cracking branch, a mouse mewl or a house creak, the pervading scent of jasmine reached him, musky as a bitch in estrus. He opened his eyes and looked across the moon-struck chamber. She was there. She was framed in the moonlight, which was hard enough to show her naked body softly through her transparent caftan, a gown of frosted tulle which reflected the moonlight like fresh-fallen snow.

She was utterly beautiful as she wafted across the pallid darkness like an affectionate ghost, opening the caftan as she came, disclosing that unbelievable body, stirringly hairless at her pube. His tassel instantly swelled large in anticipation, and he plucked frantically for the pinhead transmitter.

The transmitter had been a problem. He had first thought of holding it in his mouth, but if she kissed him with the same fervor as before, it could have been displaced and lost. He dared not put it in place beneath his prepuce in case she primarily attacked him in fellatio. In the end, he had taken a fragment of tape from a Band-aid in the bathroom and gently taped it in the hollow behind his left ear, ready for application when the first ploys of foreplay had cleared.

He had been damned right, he thought (and after that, it was hard to think).

The first thing she did was to let the frail caftan slide off her and away, billowing wraithlike to the floor as she bent over him, threw back his covers and seized his penis with two firm hands before she thrust it deep into her mouth. There was no escaping the surging wildness she created. She nibbled and sucked and tongued hotly, but gently, like a brutal butterfly beating wings against him. Abruptly, she thrust some of his swollen length into her throat cavity itself, without gagging, and constricted the soft membranes to gum his glans rhythmically. It was unlike anything he had ever felt before. Kincade knew, no matter how thinking a man he might be, he would never endure through these sensations. He was no amateur recipient in oral-genital techniques, but this was something else. Still holding him, she swiveled around in horizontal *soixante-neuf*, until she lay on top of his body, head down, while she presented her hairless vulva for his caress.

He had a momentary glimpse of the incredible neatness of her sex. Then he parted her and kissed the fragile lips of her labia minora, while she moaned, never releasing him. Presently he found her prosperous clitoris, large as a coxcomb, stiff with passion, and mouthed it diligently and tenderly. Surprisingly soon, he felt the cockle quiver; she cried out harshly, beat and scratched his thighs in lovely agony, and returned to sucking him, deeply now, until he too went up in his own explosion.

The pinhead body tag still nestled behind his left ear, unplanted.

Kincade's momentary gloominess evaporated when he realized that there was to be no post-crisis relapse. Milady was still adamant, and he himself was still a rigid two spans, despite the orgasm. She was remarkable, even miraculous. When she was sure that he was constant, she unmouthed him to climb up on top of him, dominantly, squatting directly over his loins. Kincade had barely a second or two to filch the pinhead body tag from its roost, slip it against his glans and pull the protective foreskin over it. By then she had grabbed his penis again and stabbed it firmly into her body, after which, groaning and crying out at the pain, she began a slow horizontal rotary motion which rapidly achieved the rpm of a mixmaster. He was astounded. He had never entered so tight a vagina, nor one with such muscular tics and

controls. It was as if its walls were snake-scaly, running ribs up and down the length of his unconsciously steely spout. More than that, the mouth of the vestibule was strong, demanding. It was impossible to withdraw, even slightly, for thrust. She held him firmly within her, deep as possible, and spun his length within her, grunting and wailing and sometimes cooing as her tempo became savage.

For a while, he held her breasts, reaching up for them, tickling the nipples to add to the impossible burden of sensations, switching, as the climaxes approached, to feel her clit. He overshot it and, to his astonishment, found her vagina empty, warmly wet, open, ready, but unfulfilled.

He tried to pull out and change over; no chance. Her sphincter locked and held him, aided by her body weight.

"No, no!" she cried wildly. "I'm saving that for my babies!"

It was impossible to think sanely in the final frenzies of the coupling, but he could not help the fleeting personal question: What's a nice clean-cut heterosexual half-breed like me doing in a place like Sodom?

For it was obvious now that Dara had thrust him up her anus, deep into her large colon, and not her vagina at all. It was also obvious that in the natural course of functions, the pinhead body tag, with no metal IUD to lock on, would be evacuated and spend its radiative life in some Newmarket cesspool. The operation was a catastrophe.

This did not, however, prevent him from detonating into the sweet destruction. She exploded too, frenzied, and fell forward on his chest, shrilling in the pleasureful pain, biting and scratching him, as her sphincter drained him dry, their body sweats mingling in the jasmine scent.

Then it was over, and Kincade remembered he had brought no more pinheads with him.

Oh well. He just hoped Littlesky had found a more fertile field to plant in. Meanwhile, there was still some work to do. In the blabbermouth arms of love.

Kincade held her tightly in his arms. When her gasping had eased and his own panting had softened and once again she started those probing questions, interlaced with protestations of love, he admitted that he had actually meant to murder Gray Fitz-Owens, old Bwana One-Eye. Melisande had been unfortunate to get in the way. He also confessed that the death of Byron Hoskins, years before, had been no accident. He had intentionally blown out Hoskins's brains with an elephant slug. "I was very hot-tempered in those

days. . . . But, Dara, you must swear never to tell anyone what I have just told you."

"Of course not, my darling," Dara whispered, kissing his mouth gently while she spoke. "Never, my wonderful darling. No one will ever hear these things from my lips."

By then, it was pre-dawn, even though the moon was still up. Despite his protests, she rose and donned her airy caftan again. "Sleep late, Simon my love. I really must leave now. *Au 'voir,* my darling."

As soon as the door closed, Kincade rose and followed her. He was scratched, bitten and bleeding, his penis was raw and sore, and his thighs still ached from Caliban's ride. At the head of the stairs he watched her move down and turn into the living room, her white caftan floating out behind her like ectoplasm. He had noted the steps on the staircase which squeaked, and when he descended, naked and barefoot, to follow her, he avoided them. He approached the living room and peered in, cautiously, around the edge of the archway.

There was no sign of her.

Which was ridiculous and impossible. The room had no other entrance or exit. He knew. He had cased it. He had spent most of the previous evening casing it.

Then he heard a sound, perhaps a voice. He could not tell where it came from. Thinking it might be the steward, Hutchins, he hastily beat retreat and returned to his chamber, again avoiding the second and seventh squeaky steps.

Wearily, he climbed into bed and pulled the covers over him, against the dawn chill which was outweighing the room's heat. He was depressed. He was drained empty, in every sense of the word. And the only thing he had learned was that Lady Henley was a very odd stitch indeed.

24

WHEN CASUAL lovers are unfortunate enough to inherit a morning-after-the-orgy, it is always a ridiculous crisis in which they—sparklingly clean from hot shower and castille soap and nards—brightly sit and chat as if nothing had ever happened. Kincade chuckled silently at the charade as he sat opposite Lady Dara in the dining room with a very proper Hutchins serving very proper kippers.

She looked, as always, pristine, a golden satin scarf around her head, a sea-green satin negligee form-fitted around her breasts. Her eyes were living jade. Her mouth gleamed with innocence, as if those lips had recently kissed only prayer-books.

She passed him the hard-boiled plover eggs, which she said were quite a delicacy in England, and Hutchins poured a glass of Dom Perignon champagne to restore humor and health. It was an elegant little brunch, all things considered.

"Did you sleep well, darling?" she asked. She had no note of double entendre.

"Like a plumber on golden-time."

"It happens up here. The fresh air. The open fire. And then, too, that was a hard ride you made yesterday." There was still no note of double entendre in her voice, although she suddenly realized the sound of herself and smiled ruefully.

"Uh-huh," he said. "I wasn't used to the saddle. New saddles take it out of you."

The unintentionally scatologic remark flushed her cheeks lightly. For a time, they ate in silence, but when it grew too deep, she said, "Today I think we should lie beside the still waters and you must tell me more about yourself."

"Africa again?"

"Not Africa. Everything. Natrona, and your adventures in New Guinea. And just everything that's ever happened to you. Even your romances."

Kincade knew he would never be able to endure the day playing the inane lover, and a desperation grew in him. He was saved by the telephone bell. Hutchins answered it in his hard, clipped politeness. Kincade hadn't noticed Hutchins much before. Warily, now, he saw a well-built, muscular man of forty, with the scarred eyes of a boxer and the remoteness of a presidential bodyguard, a type who looks ahead for the worst that may be coming. Milady's buckler without a doubt.

"Beg your pardon, sir," Hutchins said when he finished the call and returned to the table. "That was a message for you, sir."

"For me? Up here?" He looked at Dara and shrugged vacantly. "Only one who knows I'm up here is Kemo Sabe."

"Exactly, sir," Hutchins said.

"You mean that was the Red Man?"

"Mr. *Littlesky,* sir. He asked if you could spare him ten

minutes of the day. He's in room one-oh-two at the King's Arms down in the village, sir."

"Why didn't he come out here?" Dara said, puzzled.

"He did not wish to intrude, madam."

"That crazy Injun!" Kincade said, sounding light, but wondering darkly if the fox was in the chicken coop.

Hutchins added, urgently, "He did say it was *most* important, sir."

Kincade signed. "Dara darling, I'm awfully sorry—"

"Not at all. You can take the Lamborghini—it's right in the driveway. You remember the way to the village."

He kissed her gently on the cheek like a casual husband before he wheeled the Espada swiftly into the village, brusquely reminding himself to drive on the left-hand side, while he wondered wanly what had gone wrong with Littlesky.

25

WHEN KINCADE had left for Newmarket at 4:00 P.M. Thursday with Lady Dara, Willy Littlesky was still shaken by the confrontation with Dulcy Quinn at the Connaught. For a while, he lolled in the suite at the Dorchester, shivering at the breath of death which had touched them, not liking its chill. He wished glumly that the joyless job was finished; he was getting very hard-gut about it now. After a shower and a change of clothes, he hiked up his breechclout and strolled over to the Montebank to begin his part of the pinhead-implant mission.

Littlesky took the lift up to the casino, and after carelessly sweeping the room for some sign of Buffy Pristine, he went to the bar, took a lonely stool and ordered a straight orange juice. He didn't want to start loading up this early; it might be a long night, even though booze had never much affected his love machine.

Presently a voice said, "Greetings, chum." It was Charlie Ravensmith by his side, staring at the juice. "How can you drink those filthy things—what do you call them?—screwdrivers!"

"*Washte,* Bwana Charlie, have a seat." Littlesky grinned self-consciously. "There's no glogg in it. Just straight Vitamin C."

"That's even worse." Ravensmith stooled beside him and ordered a sidecar. "Where's Simon?"

"On the warpath with Dara up in Newmarket."

Ravensmith snickered. "Always rather thought milady a bit too much. But this is one time she'll need all her resources. The cowboy makes a very large scene."

"Particularly when it's a swan song."

"He's taking the pledge against coition?"

Willy said, "He's going home."

"When did *this* happen?"

"We just bought the tickets." Littlesky sipped his orange juice thoughtfully. "Straight tongue, Bwana Charlie. Monday departure."

"Bloody blow," Ravensmith said. It was difficult to know when he was sincere, even though he sounded that way. "I've grown flaming fond of you two madmen. But I suppose that is the way the polly woggles. It's not like forever. I have every intention of visiting Simon in the States."

"That's nice of you, Bwana Charlie," Littlesky said. "I'd keep Sunday night free. For the farewell donnybrook."

"Sorry, chum. Not possible. I'll be in Ireland. On the *Lusitania* salvage." Ravensmith shrugged. "Can't be helped. But you and I might pop a stopper later."

"Thanks." Littlesky was not enthusiastic. "Only thing is, she's prettier."

"Oh?"

"Bluetop. I saw in the lobby she's due to open at the Montebank tonight. Buffy Pristine. The *café-au-lait* the boss flipped over down in Nairobi."

Ravensmith smiled. Not pleasantly.

He doesn't like her, Littlesky thought. "I never did get a chance to meet her. She looks like a flaps-up high-speed landing. You wouldn't happen to knew her personally, would you?"

Ravensmith was reluctant. "You can do better."

"I'll settle."

"She's a bit of a bonebreaker."

"I only get green-stick fractures," Willy said. "And I heal fast. Come on, Charlie, do me the boon."

Ravensmith shrugged indulgently. "Your funeral, chum. *Kwenda.* I see the man-eater now. She's practicing two of her three favorite vices: brandy and blackjack."

"What's her third?" Littlesky asked.

"What's *your* first?" Ravensmith asked.

Littlesky followed Ravensmith across the elegant casino. The room was quite uncrowded at this early hour, with light play at the roulette and blackjack tables, mostly American and West German tourists using their guest cards, cautiously spending the late afternoon in cowardly wagers while they gaped at the casino's Oriental panache. The chemin-de-fer and baccarat tables were shut down until evening, when the high rollers would arrive.

It was, therefore, no problem at all to isolate Miss Buffy Pristine in a far corner at a remote blackjack table. Not beneath that astonishing teal-blue hairdo, styled in the wild eruption of pseudo-Afro, emulating the militant Black Panthers of the United States. (True Kykuyu hair styles were quite different, either clean-shaven pates, or pulled-back hair, plaited.) Even without the blue crown it would have been difficult not to notice the dazzling beauty of her shining topaz skin as she sat in a magnificent short mink coat, spectacularly dyed the color of Concord grapes to match her pantsuit. A huge, deep amethyst ring adorned the third finger of her left hand.

She was sitting to the dealer's left so as to receive first cards after the shuffle, and she seemed to be winning. She sipped steadily on a brandy-and-soda.

"Buffy m'love," Ravensmith said with false warmth. "Mind the *tembo* now! We shouldn't want you to do a Molly-the-Monk before your London reopening, now, would we?"

"I have never been squiffed in my life." Buffy turned up an ace and a king for a twenty-one. "And it'll be a frosty Friday before I tiddle off, sweet Charles. *Dear* sweet Charles." With arrogance, she turned and raised her wide full mouth for a kiss. Somehow, Ravensmith overshot the lips and brushed politely against her chocolate cheek. Her eyes smoked momentarily like a hunting lioness's, then brightened with brandy once more. She said, "It won't rub off, you know."

"Now, now," Ravensmith said. He was wary. "I want you to meet a friend of mine. Willy Littlesky."

"Jambo, bibi," Buffy said, turning to Littlesky and raising her face. "You want to try?"

Littlesky glowed. "Heap much," he said. He bussed her solidly, loving the slow way her full lips collapsed under his enthusiasm. Her jasper eyes opened wide, surprised. For the first time, she really looked at him.

"Howdy, memsahib," Willy said, grinning.

She smiled. "What tribe are you, Bwana—yellow, brown, or polka dot?"

"Red," Willy said. "And I don't mean Pinsk. Although I've probably got some Mongolian traces from the days of the immigration. A little bit before Columbus. I'm a Shoshoni Indian."

She pointed a beautifully manicured hand at him, the nails blue to match her hair. "The cowboy! You are his number one!"

Willy nodded. "I've been perishing to meet you ever since Nairobi, after what the boss said about you. You spun him, ma'am, like cartwheels. I didn't get a chance to go to the Boma Club that night. I was baby-sitting the baggage. Now that I've seen you, Bwana M'Cowboy didn't do you justice, not 'alf, and he went on considerable."

Buffy patted his cheek gently. "Stand still. Don't you go away, *bibi.*" To the dealer, she said, "Cash me in."

As he counted her chips, she spared Ravensmith a glance of honest contempt. "Roll on, sweet Charles. Climb your gum tree and doggo down. I like your friend."

"As I said," Ravensmith replied quietly, "mind the *tembo.* And mind the *ulimi* too." (*Ulimi* meant tongue in Swahili.) There seemed to be mild threat in the caution. Ravensmith smiled lightly at Littlesky, winked and strolled off. Willy knew that Bwana Charlie was seething under the mask.

"Back to the bigot belt," Buffy murmured, watching Ravensmith depart. "You must be careful, Mr. Littlesky—"

"Willy."

"Willy, never to run around with Caucasian *cho*-boys." She gulped a long swallow of the drink as she accepted her money from the dealer. "It'll give you a rotten name in the integrated circles of the world." Willy was glad Ravensmith hadn't heard *that* one. A *cho*-boy took care of the sanitary tent on safari. Although he was fascinated by this schism within the indivisible framework of Keyhole, he could not show it.

"You kind of stuck it in and broke it off."

"He doesn't bleed," Buffy said. And then, remotely, with a sign, "None of us bleed." It was a sad statement. She looked at him again, measured him up and down. "You will buy me a Bisquit-and-soda."

"*And* the Taj Mahal."

They went to the golden-crystal bar and took two stools. The bar was empty, except for one barkeep and one listless

waiter at the far end. He ordered her brandy and a double martini for himself. It was time to get loose. They tipped glasses and drank.

"Now then," Buffy said, "do you find me beautiful?"

"Heap much smashing," Willy said.

"And I suppose you would like to try me on for size?"

"Your place or my place?" He smiled nicely. "I did think we might beat around the bush a bit with some tête-à-têteing and dinner and foggy violins and sweet nothings and all that there sort of middle-class make-believe."

"My place," she said laughing. "But not quite your way. I have two shows in the big room tonight. Pick me up at midnight. You will see only the second show when I am *hot*. We will have supper at the Colony. Or Quaglino's. Violins would be nice. But not here. Anyplace but this Halicarnassus. Then we will go to my suite at the Savoy and we will pitch the do. Meanwhile, you will not drink too much and you will take a nap, and you will conserve your energy."

Willy said, "I thought I'd work out at the gym."

"Save it, *bibi*. You'll need it. All of it."

(Afterward, he had visited the Hays Mews hideout.)

She opened smashingly in the dining room upstairs, a bolt of summer lightning in an orange satin sheath, held on by gravity and one diamond strap. Willy did not sleep. He saw both shows, careful to blot his drooling as the night passed. They didn't waste much time with the Piper-Hiedsieck and the Malisol at the Colony. They were both anxious for the meet.

Buffy had a spacious suite at the Savoy, but later Willy would not remember much of it, except the chamber. When they were finally alone in it and she peeled out of the orange gown, he was utterly slain by her tight fine form.

"Open that door just so," she ordered him as she stretched on the king-size bed to measure out angles. There was a mirror on the back of the door and when she could see herself fully she said, "Lock it right there."

He did as she asked.

"Now the dresser mirror," she said. "Just tip it down this way—that's perfect! And don't look so puzzled, *bibi*. You ought to see my cache in Marrakesh. All mirrors, everywhere. I like to see it all, *bibi*."

Naked, he finally turned out the lights. "Leave one lamp on, by the side table, just enough, not too much." He obeyed.

Then, as he hand-held her and started kissing her sharply, she reached down and gently took his swollen stem. "Ah, beautiful, a beautiful *simi,*" she murmured, pulling away from his mouth to stare at it. A *simi* was a stabbing word. "But not Kykuyu." (Kykuyus were circumcised in a rite at the age of fourteen.) Willy wasn't talking. His mouth was filled now with her left breast. She was extremely sensitive there. She began to writhe around him like a rock python, moaning and panting. *"Bibi,* I am ready! *Allons,* let's *go!"*

He went down on her bulging mount for normal clitoral foreplay, but she reached for his cheeks and held him. *"Ça ne me fait rien."* His college French didn't grasp it quite, but he could see what she meant. Not only wasn't there any hair on her vulva; there damn near *was* no vulva. Where it should have been, replete with cockerel, there was a huge mesa of gleaming scar tissue.

"Kwenda, bibi, come into me," Buffy panted frantically.

Willy filched the pinhead body tag from its hiding place in his deep navel, tucked it against his glans, covered it with his prepuce and pistoned it home.

Piga. That was that.

Mission accomplished, he and Buffy spent the rest of the short night in every imaginative play of sex. And though they never exhausted the hundred ways, they exhausted themselves to a point where he barely made the bathroom in a sudden nausea of dangerous fatigue. After that, they slept deeply until brunch time.

Later in the day Littlesky finally threw off Francis Bane's persistent pursuit and made it safely to Hays Mews again, from where he alerted Sir Julian Keys at a Bayswater number.

"Nothing important," Willy said on the telephone in wry understatement. "It's just I think Commander Sampson ought to keep his radio direction finders on Bluetop. She ought to be putting out a good signal."

"Quite, quite," Sir Julian cheeped. "We are reading the young woman five square. She is under constant trace now. Did you—ah—have any problems?"

"Nothing, outside of a mild heart attack," Littlesky said. "How is the boss doing?"

"He is alive. That's all we know. We don't think he has posted his follower yet."

"Well, after all, he *is* older," Littlesky said.

"Don't be a bloody sod!" Sir Julian sniffed noisily to indicate Littlesky's social standing. "Your orders direct from

Sampson: You are to continue your—ah—attentions to Miss Pristine to allay any suspicions, even if it kills you."

"Roger that information," Littlesky said. "And believe me, Sir Julian, it *will.*"

That night, Friday, the RDF teams monitored Buffy Pristine with extreme Hertzian care, and by the time her second show was finished, they confirmed to MI 6 and the NSA team that twice during the evening Miss Pristine had taken the lift to the top—fourth—story, Tarantella's office, and instantly descended in the lift again. They lost her signal at the first floor, ground level. Yet one of the NSA operatives, a man named Pliny Martin who was maintaining surveillance at the lift area in the club, confirmed the fact that, at the time, she never left the lift there.

Conclusion: She had descended deeper than the first floor, into the earth, where her radio emission was lost.

Therefore, Keyhole had a headquarters in the sub-basement of the Montebank, undoubtedly the rebuilt old air-raid shelter which the Defense Ministry and Lord Robert Henley had had constructed before the war in 1938.

So, on Saturday noonish, when Kincade drove into the village of Newmarket, wondering what had gone wrong with Littlesky, he could not have been more in error.

Nothing had gone wrong with Littlesky. Nor was he—despite Hutchins' relay of the telephone message—in Newmarket or the King's Arms at all. He lay in the Savoy, sated and savagely spent in the pagan arms of an adoring Bluetop, with a simultaneous view of her left purple nipple and the slate Thames River.

26

A STRANGE THING happened just outside the King's Arms when Kincade parked the Lamborghini Espada. The body tag behind his left ear, planted there by Dr. Jason Burnside during the surgery in the Fijis, suddenly tingled out his signal call—Datdit . . . dah . . . ditditditdit. He froze as if slapped. It was the first time the tag had come alive since Africa.

Kincade flicked his eyes all around the area of the public house, but he saw nobody. Still the signal continued, and he felt he was being watched. Finally the body tag went silent.

He went into the King's Arms. It was a gracious mug-

house. A roaring fire at the roughstone fireplace instantly killed the nippy chill. Townsfolk were sitting around it, munching bangers and drinking half-pints and tossing darts. The ceiling was studded with spears from the Khartoum campaign, rusty now with their eighty-year-old patina. There was a pink-skinned maiden behind the bar who said, "Good afternoon, sir."

"Room one-oh-two, please."

"Up the steps, to the right, last door."

As he went upstairs, he wondered why Littlesky was pulling this cloak-and-dagger routine. He found the proper door and knocked. A voice, not Littlesky's, bade him enter.

Cautiously, he opened the door and peered in.

A miracle had come to pass. Across the scruffy chamber the green-faced Lazarus of Chutney-on-Thames stood boldly, in full resurrection. Kincade knew him instantly, though he had never seen him before. Henry Lambeth, with his rugged mariner's beard, a black eyepatch over one eye, the other leering wickedly.

"Full-and-bye, matey!" Lambeth said, beckoning cheerfully. "Come into the fleapit and be fleeced, but let's be menseful, shall we? Now, now, don't hang back, sir. I shan't hurt you, I promise."

Lambeth now sported a wooden peg leg, which he clicked on the stained oaken floor like a tap-dance slipper. His filthy smile, the arch, wild brows, the smelly pipe, not to mention the horned and callused hands of a deep-water sailor, were perfectly staged. Kincade had to remember to maintain a sense of outrage instead of admiration. He edged into the room and closed the door carefully.

"As I said, mate," Henry Lambeth continued unctuously, "I shan't hurt you. But I am not speaking for *her.*"

Behind the door in a torn leather chair, the weird albino maiden sat, pink-eyed, eerie. She was holding a Walthers 9 mm. automatic pistol on him, pointed at his chest. It had no front sight. Instead, where the sight had been removed, the barrel had been threaded to receive an illegal silencer, ugly and blunt. What disturbed Kincade was the fact that the P-38 had an open hammer, and the hammer was cocked.

"That would be Lavinia," Henry Lambeth said. "A very unpleasant poor soul, sir. I shouldn't juggle her up. She is a nervous type, and that is a nervous bloody big pistol. And if you get nervous and I get nervous, then she gets ghastly nervous, right, ducks?"

"Fash it!" Lavinia grunted, peering at Kincade's face through her enormously thick lenses. She was awful to look at.

"What the hell is all this about?" Kincade said. "And turn that goddam gun off me before I break it over your head."

"Gently, Guv, gently!" Henry Lambeth said quickly. "She's that touchy. Please settle down, sir. It won't take long. Don't pay him a mind, Lavinia, dear. You know how impatient the ruddy Yanks are. Now, Mr. Kincade, if you'll rest your bum over there, that's a good lad, and put your hands behind your neck unless they are to be used, that's *very* good, sir. I can see we are going to spend no trouble here. Now then . . ." He tapped the peg leg on the floor gaily. "I would be Henry Lambeth of Chutney-on-Thames, which is all bloody nonsense. No such place, you see."

"Stop your bleating and fash it to the bastard," Lavinia said unpleasantly. "This popgun is beginning to weigh a stone."

"Righto, Lavinia, but mind your manners, eh? Wouldn't want the Yank to think a nice British girl like you lacked the Queen's grace, eh?"

Kincade abruptly lost his admiration for their performances. He said sourly, "I presume this is a dry-gulch."

"Dry-gulch?" Lavinia said, peering.

Lambeth explained, "Armed robbery. It's cowboy argot, I believe. They pick it up, watching the telly."

She was disgusted. "Get on with it."

"Here you go, Guv," Lambeth said. He extended his peg leg toward Kincade. "That's for you, sir. Your very own. You may take it, *carefully*."

Kincade reached forward and plucked a scarlet plastic card from the end of the peg leg.

"Your card to the club, Guv. You are now a member of Keyhole."

Kincade said coldly, "This conversation is going to stop right here if she doesn't thumb down that damned hammer."

"Thumb it down, ducks," Lambeth said. "Bleeding thing makes me jelly myself."

"Very well." Lavinia thumbed it down. Without warning she fired a live round at Kincade, about three feet over his head. The gun didn't make much noise, just a thudding hissy chug. The bullet rapped the wall above him. He could not restrain his reaction, ducking from the flash of the gun. Then he froze. "All rightie," said Lavinia. She thumbed the hammer down a second time. "Just so you remember the P-thirty-eight also operates double-action."

Kincade straightened up very slowly. He could not tell if these dank creatures were coked out or not. But he felt cold at his stomach.

"She really *would,* sir," Henry Lambeth said hollowly. "And that would be a nasty loss of lolly to us and life to you. Look alive, matey. The tide's run out. Why not go aground?"

After a steadying breath, Kincade held up the card. "So I'm a club member."

"That there is electronic, sir. At the proper time, it will open a proper door for you. You will be told about that later. Meanwhile, there is no gain in time-wasting. This is a matter of *quid pro quo.*" (How familiar that sounded.) "You are going to share your wealth with us, since we already share your secrets."

"Is this a snatch?"

"Snatch?" Lavinia peered at him again.

"Gangster talk from the telly," Lambeth explained. "No, Mr. Kincade. This is not a snatch. This is extortion. We can easily prove that you murdered your wife in Tanzania. We can also prove that you murdered your friend Byron Hoskins. We have all the witnesses to run through trial, and we know the proper authorities to inform to."

"You're bluffing. I've just been cleared."

"But only because you threatened the laddybucks from the truth. And you did pay off one of them, didn't you, Guv? Bloody black bugger named Balshakkar? Oh, we really *know.* Shall I mention Githiri? Njogu? Katinia? Or if you wish to bring up the first safari when you clapped out poor Hoskins, we have all those names, including the white hunter, chap named Farnsworth, who is down on his luck and would not be above accepting some sterling in hand to remember the truth. Oh, we are *quite* serious, Mr. Kincade. We have taken the liberty of canceling your reservations on the *United States.* If you departed on Monday, you would have no time for your first installment. After that, you can leave as you wish. We can get in touch with you anywhere, even in Natrona, Wyoming. But we did have to have this first packet of—how do you put it so quaintly?—spondulicks. As a sign of good faith."

Kincade was silent but not impressed. "Suppose I decline your kind offer?"

"That's not your book, Guv."

"Suppose I call the police in?"

Lambeth smiled snaggle-toothily at Kincade. "I'm that

sorry to have to threaten you, sir, but actually, if you lost your head and squeaked to the Yard, you would not live much more of the good life."

"The cost?" Kincade asked, having stalled it out long enough.

"You have exactly two hundred and nine thousand dollars on deposit at the Mayfair branch of the Bank of America," Lambeth replied. "You will keep the nine thousand for your own necessaries, and you will withdraw the two hundred thousand dollars." He tossed a black attaché case over to Kincade, who caught it. "You will pack the lolly in there. No radioactives. Nothing marked. Nothing dusty. No hidden petards, eh? I mean, sir, you might blow up the primary handler, and then the club would have to blow up you, and that would be a total deficit."

"That's the whole ball of wax?"

"Ah, how amenable of you!" Lambeth rubbed his hands happily. "No, Guv luv, that is not. Your membership fee will amount to one million dollars a year—now, now, don't look pained. You can more than afford it on your annual income. And you *have* had a long free ride, all things considered."

"If you think I'm falling for—"

"I do think *so*," Lambeth said.

Kincade was silent.

"It's more comfortable than an African hanging," Lambeth said. He added thoughtfully, "By the way, sir, I'd suggest in future payments that you use capital instead of income, particularly if you remain in England. Otherwise, Inland Revenue will clap an enormous tax on the money. We shouldn't want you to have the indignity of burdensome income taxes added to a nondeductible expense."

"Very thoughtful, you sonofabitch."

The P-38 spoke again with its nasty thud, and this time the bullet missed his right ear by less than ten inches, spilling plaster off the wall behind him. The performance had become much too realistic.

"You're out of court," Lambeth said, croaking. "There's a lady present." He eyed Lavinia's ugly mouth as she thumbed down the hammer for a third time. Kincade watched her sharply, aware that the pink-eyed albino had to be deeply narcotic-laden to shade him that tightly. Finally, Lambeth regained his smile, but it was only a pale reprise of his former smarm.

"On Monday you will make your withdrawal from the

bank. You will keep the lolly with you at the hotel. On Tuesday we shall be in touch with instructions for its delivery. Matey, *don't* do anything foolish. We will spend your friends first. Lady Dara Henley. Charles Ravensmith. No point twigging them into peril, eh?" (Beautiful, Kincade thought. Protecting my dearest friends who are my worst enemies.) "I think that's all, Mr. Kincade. I think we have had our tuppence worth of you this day."

After a moment, Kincade pulled out his wallet and carefully placed the Keyhole card in one of the plastic windows. Then he stowed the wallet and rose. Lavinia's magnified eyes and steady pistol followed him expertly. He picked up the attaché case and carefully left the room, closing the door gently.

In the hall, he paused. They were so near and yet so far away. If he jumped them, right now, would Lavinia actually shoot him? He decided she would and he stopped conjecturing.

27

DARA WAS maintaining a steady seventy miles an hour on the thruway southward toward London when Kincade saw the scarlet glow of a public telephone booth far ahead. He said quickly, "Could you disc down, girl? I'd like to use the blooming blower, if you don't mind. Must call London."

She braked expertly and swerved into the layby with room to spare. Her face was shadowed softly in the murky twilight. It was 4:45 P.M., drizzling invisibly. The wipers had been going ever since they departed from Newmarket, yet you could not actually see the mute mistfall.

"Something is wrong, then?"

"Not to worry. Nothing I can't handle." He grinned falsely at her as he opened the door.

"Do you have enough change?"

"I think so. Thanks."

Now, as he approached the telephone booth, brightly lighted in the gloom, he felt strangely split. It had been a day of unpleasant surprises. The meeting with Henry Lambeth and Lavinia was the end of a long road. This was the whole meaning of the mission, to revive these nonexistent characters, to be initiated into the Keyhole fraternity. Everything and everyone had been expended for this fact. He should have been elated. He was, on the contrary, angrily empty.

When he arrived back at the villa, after the confrontation in the King's Arms, he found Dara waiting for him urgently. Hutchins had already gone on into London in the other car. "I had Hutchins pack your things, Simon," she said. "Are you all right?"

"Why?"

"You look upset."

Kincade smothered a sigh. "Nothing at all, chiquita." He was weary of explaining things to people who already knew the details better than himself. "Except you. You're sure you're not tuning me out and turning me off?"

She frowned. "I don't know what you mean—"

"Was I that bad? I mean, if it gets out in my circles that I made only one night of a four-day sack-in it's going to ruin my orgy image."

Dara put her hand impatiently over his mouth. Then she kissed him briefly. Her mouth was cold; her tongue stayed home. "I don't know what you mean. I'm doing exactly as you said."

"I said?"

"Your message from the King's Arms. That you had to get right back to town."

So that was the crummy little switch-hit. "I'm putting you on, Dara. Sure. My message. Let's saddle up."

"By the way," she said as they climbed into the Lamborghini, "what on earth did Littlesky want, driving all the way out to Suffolk?"

"A raise in screw," he said with asperity. She did not persist but spared him an arch eye-lifting.

He stood now in the telephone booth, watching her through the paned glass as he placed a call to Hays Mews, a number he had long since committed to memory. Milady, he saw, was cheerfully drumming fingers on the steering wheel. She was smiling faintly, satedly happy, very self-satisfied. Then a man's voice said crisply, "Harkney and Sons."

For a moment he thought he had gotten the wrong number, but then he recalled that the Hays Mews number was really only an extension of the MI 6 team headquarters, somewhere in the Bayswater section across Hyde Park. "This is Bear Paw. Let me have Lion."

"One moment, sir." It didn't take much longer than that. "Lion here. Go ahead, Bear Paw. We are recording."

"What the hell is this Harkney and Sons bit?"

"It would appear to be an ironmonger's mart," Lion said

crisply. "My present station occupies the offices above it. Go ahead with your report."

"The squirrelheaded jaybirds rectified me."

"Begging yours?" Lion said, mystified.

"Henry Lambeth and the fair Lavinia hoorawed me."

"Blast!" Lion squealed. "Can't you speak *even* colonial English?"

"I've been elected, red card and all. First payment: forty James Madisons on Tuesday. Which, in sterling, comes to something like eighty-three thousand three hundred and thirty-four pounds and one shilling. Roughly. They canceled my Monday sailing too. Of course, we only used that to turn them on."

"Really round the bend," Lion murmured wearily. "HMG requires a conference with you at once."

"What's HMG?"

"Her Majesty's Government, you clod! Where the devil are you calling from?"

"Northern thruway, on the way back. The lady known as Lou is just outside. Figured this was the only safe way to get a toot at you. They'll have me bugged tighter than a corn-liquored Comanche from now on."

Lion was silent while he fought for control of his former phlegm. "Let her drop you off at Marble Arch. Take the second, not the first, taxi to Berkeley Square. Walk the rest of the way to the Mews."

"Don't mind if I do."

He hung up and stepped out into the dank drizzle. Dara, seeing him, started her engine. He climbed into the warmth of the Lamborghini. She said, faintly dicky, "That certainly took you long enough."

"Just long enough," Kincade said.

28

IT OCCURRED to Kincade after he touched the top bolt of the upper hinge of 23-A Hays Mews that Littlesky still had the key given him by Commander Paul Sampson and that although he had heard the interior bolts skid over, he would have to knock. He tapped out a rhythm like "Shave and a haircut—sham*poo!*"

Kincade had not met Hackenbush, who now opened the door, nor the blackmouthed Browning which was aimed at

his brisket. "Secret Agent X reporting for duty," he said solemnly. Hackenbush's concrete face remained solid. He waved Kincade in with the pistol, and then buried it into a clip-belt holster, stepping aside to reveal Sir Julian Keys, standing spread-legged, hands clasped behind his back, dour as a black-hooded justice on a day of sentence at Old Bailey. Hackenbush quietly closed the door and locked it. There was no one else present.

"Hidy, amigo," Kincade said, trying to warm up the lackluster deadness in Sir Julian's face. "Where's Uncle Tom-Tom?"

"At his station."

"Commander Sampson?"

"At *his* station. Get on with it, old man, and for good God's sake, be brief!"

"Whoa up, hoss," Kincade said. "Where's all that Yorkshire pudding British hospitality you read about in the BOAC folders? Can't we suck a cork and belt some busthead before we get down to business?" He smiled disarmingly.

Sir Julian sighed, but he went to the side bar and poured off two glasses of Courvoisier. Hackenbush coughed to show he was alive. Sir Julian dismissed him with a glare. "Outside. Cover the Mews. Have a hack ready for whistling at Farm Street."

"One of your wranglers?" Kincade asked when Hackenbush had dutifully unlocked, departed and relocked from the outside. Sir Julian nodded parsimoniously and sat down, since Kincade was already lolling in the decrepit easy chair.

"Did you post your pinhead follower?"

"Not where it counts," Kincade said. He sipped the cognac. "Things got kind of fouled up—"

"No matter. The aborigine seems to have managed that chore very well. The truth is, we had an excellent signal on Miss Pristine."

Kincade smiled. "So that's why you're edgier than a blind rattler. My guess was as good as gold."

"As it happened, yes. Pretty definitely, there is some sort of Keyhole complex in the Montebank bowel. Not your problem. We are making certain tonight."

"Don't see what you're so techy about, just because I thought of it and you didn't." Sir Julian's eyes flickered at the truth. "Am I in on this show tonight?"

"No. Tell me about Henry Lambeth and Lavinia."

"Are you taping this confabulation?"

"Affirmative."

"Well," Kincade said succinctly, "it was a rerun of the

Patrick Henry Duffy thing. Put up or shut up. Otherwise, I'd hang in Arusha. *Or* my friends would be bushwhacked. Nothing new. Wait—one idea." He sipped his drink. Sir Julian's was already nervously empty. "This Lambeth or whatever has got to be a first-rate hambone. As you recall, there was an actor on safari some years ago—"

Sir Julian nodded. "We know all that. Gerald Hywel. Wife Rachel Derry. They reside at an address on Hill Street. No point in entrapping them without their Frankenstein, is there? I *do* have an organization, you know. We're not an inept band of commandos splashing about. Hywel and Miss Derry are both narcotic addicts, and there's little doubt Keyhole locked onto them when they conspired to murder the former Mrs. Hywel in Paris. Taking them in now would only force Keyhole to reorganize the collection team with new talent and we'd rather keep the old hands until the entire play is over, not just a scene."

"You restoreth my soul," Kincade said. "Then I'm to go through with the delivery."

"Rather!"

"Long John Silver specifically mentioned no radioactive bills, no fluorescent powders and no hand grenades."

"The money will be clean," Sir Julian said. "We have no intention of imperiling you. As it is, things are rapidly coming to a nasty head. Which is to say, from Lady Henley's point of view, smashing. I trust you found the bloody burke happy as dammit?"

Kincade frowned. "Something on your mind?"

"My word yes."

"She was—happy isn't the word—swallowing the canary. Pretty cloy-cloy. You're saying it isn't just that she screwed the awful 'truth' out of me and turned me over to Lambeth for collection?"

"Have another nip." Sir Julian took his glass and poured a further dollop of cognac. Kincade was alarmed by the politeness. Something rotten must have happened. Sir Julian paced the squeaking floor, which often mimicked the tone of his own voice. "GWIFA had sent to Australia for the real Charles Ravensmith's father to come east and identify the bloke who calls himself Ravensmith Junior."

Kincade looked dark. "Jesus," he said in anticipation.

"Quite. After a meet in Washington, his plane was blown to atoms over the sea."

"Jesus," Kincade repeated. He felt sick. He swallowed off

the entire drink. "That means somebody in Washington rigged the jet—"

"Yes, quite. Very hard nut. That puts many, many million dollars of the estate into the Keyhole coffers, of course, and forever frees your Bwana Charlie from a hard identification. My point is, do you think your lady was aware of this news?"

Kincade said, remembering, "I can guaranfuckingtee it. That explains her border switch. She was the ever-loving mother one moment, and the next she handed me my Stetson and what's your hurry, pard? She knew. She damned well knew. But what's so odd about that?"

"Simply that GWIFA has clamped hard censorship over the event. There has been no release of the tragedy. The pilot and co-pilot of the plane who witnessed it have been sworn under Official Secrets. The event was described to the passengers as a fireball meteor in the dark."

"Keyhole has an inside man in Washington."

"I should say," Sir Julian said.

Kincade was silent as his stomach began to knot like a ball of hibernating snakes. He grew quickly cold and afraid. He asked sharply, "Did Dulcy catch—"

"Never mind *her,*" Sir Julian interrupted harshly. "Here are your orders. Ravensmith is leaving for Cook on the dawn flight plane, Aer Lingus, at seven A.M. You will return to the hotel and be invited to join him. If he is reluctant, you will go anyway, even to his annoyance, to visit your great-grandmother." He could not resist adding a practical note. "The fare is twelve pounds twelve shillings."

"Has the *Poseidon* arrived?"

"Tomorrow morning. Let's talk about that." Sir Julian finally sat down. "We have guessed for some time—as you probably did instantly with that *mastermind* of yours"—the sarcasm was heavy— "that Keyhole transports its extortion collection to Hong Kong free port by way of the *Poseidon.*"

Kincade nodded. "For certain, amigo. Ravensmith joined up with the *Lusitania* salvage job as a pure cover."

"Righto."

"But then he started diving inshore on the ten-fathom shelf, sixty feet."

"Quite."

"I figure they have a caisson down there. What he's doing is loading it with the cash, waterproofed, in whatever currency, and the *Poseidon* cherry-picks it out of the sea and takes it back to the Orient." He leaned back smugly.

Sir Julian smiled.

"Am I right?"

"No," Sir Julian said.

"I'm *not?*"

"No," Sir Julian said.

Kincade was embarrassed and agape. "It's got to be that! What the hell else would he do down there?"

"Harpoon sharks," Sir Julian said.

"Oh, back off, hoss—"

Sir Julian was enjoying Kincade's loss of omniscience. "Oh, quite, really. Kinsale is something of an international sport-fishing center. The sharks of that area are quite good game fish on heavy tackle. Sportsmen and sport-fishing yachts, all the impedimenta."

"Don't tell me he stuffs hammerheads with cash and let's them fin home to Hong Kong!"

"I'm really not flattered with your underestimation of my Service," Sir Julian said plaintively. "Great Britain had some of the finest underwater demolition teams of *the* war. Didn't you think I would send UDTs down there to check out your own less than brilliant surmise? They found nothing. The whole activity was feigned. A red herring. And it's worked damned well. They have used my time, my teams and most of my patience. I can't afford not to cover Ravensmith during these charades, but I assure you, there is nothing below but the mako and the porbeagle. No caissons, no secret sonar stations, no plunder and no clues. The whole operation is pure diversion."

"But you're quite sure the bread goes back by the *Poseidon?*" Sir Julian nodded. "Then how do they get it aboard?"

"I really haven't the foggiest. I hope you will be able to tell me when you return from Ireland. *If* you return from Ireland, which is a doubt if you get careless."

"I'll be alone?"

"No. You've been assigned a watchdog, some chap from Los Angeles named Pliny Martin, I believe." Kincade looked blank. "You don't know him?"

"Never heard of him." He rose and went to the sidebar and poured a small drink. "Tell me about the *Poseidon.* What's her reason for putting in at Kinsale?"

"Delivery of goods. Since she doesn't moor landside, the anchorage qualifies as a roadstead. Saves port taxes. She uses lighters to ferry her cargo for Ireland ashore."

"The cargo?"

"Cheap wireless sets, radios, made in Hong Kong. Stereo players. Small amplifiers. All on the tinsel side. She then proceeds to Southampton roadstead and does the same thing. The French Line does it too. Quite a saving."

"Cheap electronic stuff, eh? All legitimate?"

"My word, *no.*" Sir Julian said blandly. "But that part of it is none of your ruddy affair."

Kincade brought up short. "You won't tell me."

"I don't mind, if you keep your nose out of it and your hands clean. This will come under the Act."

"Okay, pard."

"It's a narcotics smuggle. Keenly conceived. Of course, with your electronic *genius,* we might have broken through much sooner than we did." Kincade did not wince. "The sets all function, but they have rather a thready character, considering their inner works. They are built super but they sound thruppence. You see, there are sometimes double circuits in parallel with the intrinsic one. Transistors, resistors, extra batteries. All of these extraneous parts are pure sham. They are loaded with cocaine and heroin."

"Brilliant! When did you tumble to this?"

"Two months ago."

"Why no sashay? Why didn't you seize?"

"It would have ruined the Keyhole thing. Thought we'd diddle both at the same time. So we held off Customs."

Kincade nodded. "So they ship money to the East, buy horse and coke and ship back the merchandise for a three hundred percent return on the investment, always adding to the capital with more extortion. And I'm supposed to make one tourist jaunt to the shamrock and figure out how they pass the loot, all in my little pointed brain, is that it?"

"Fresh mind," Sir Julian said. "Something might occur to you."

"Oh, sure."

"You are running very late."

"Yeah, yeah." He went to the door and slid the bolts. He paused there, uneasy, and looked back. "*Did* Dulcy Quinn get on that Pan Am flight this morning?"

Sir Julian's blue eyes flickered in anticipation of a lie. Then he buried the lie and shrugged. "She is still registered at the Park Lane Hotel."

"And Tess Maddox?"

"Ditto."

"Get them out of England before I return," Kincade said in a tight voice.

"We'll try. Good luck, Simon. The best of it."

29

SIR JULIAN KEYS was a wise old spy. In his opinion, the National Security Agency of the United States was leaking like a split-seamed sea skiff; ergo, it was not impossible his own organization had a hole in the dike.

Therefore, he forwent use of his own scrambled ciphony instruments and avoided the United States' KG-13 system.

There was a far more inviolable instrument for communication called KY-9, a fantastic product of the Research and Development Section of NSA. Just one existed in London, at the United States Embassy on Grosvenor Square. After a desultory evasion tour of Hyde Park in the gloom, Sir Julian Keys popped by the Embassy and was fortunate to catch Ambassador Annenberg still at the plant. Since the KY-9 was absolutely top secret, Sir Julian had to muscle his full classified power to get the complicated permission to use it, but it was granted finally, with the Ambassador standing by.

KY-9 was a ciphonic instrument which scrambled its conversations through the use of pulse code modulations. Human-voice frequencies varied the pulses up to eight thousand jots per second. These jots were stored magnetically on metallized tape. They were disenciphered, on reception, back into human-voice frequencies by PCM reconversion units. The system was highly secured scramble-telephony; indeed, it was carried airborne in the Air Force command posts, in case of utter ground destruction from hydrogen bombs. Sir Julian called the Crisis Center at the Department of State in Washington and was then patched through to Admiral McCabe at Fort Meade.

"I'm glad you took the long way around," Admiral McCabe said in a grizzly's growl. "It's been heavy weather here."

Sir Julian played him back the tape of Kincade calling from the thruway and then the dialogue in the Mews, not thirty minutes after it had been recorded.

"She knows all right," McCabe said. "She damn well knows that the Old Digger is hamburger. And there goes my ace in the hole. Nobody can pinpoint Charlie Ravensmith

now. What I'm afraid of—terrified of, frankly—is this security breach. It could blow the operation sky-high and get my two pagans dropped into the Sahara, out of season. They okay?"

"Quite, at the moment," Sir Julian replied. "Fustigator is aiding us tonight in a trace operation of the Keyhole HQ. Bear Paw is off to Ireland to try and breach the Keyhole transfer system. Bear Paw is protected."

"Keep a weather eye on both," McCabe said tightly. "I don't like any of it. We could be going up. I can smell a lighted fuse at the end of my nose. It may be necessary to eject instantly, so be prepared. Have you got any *good* news?"

"Negative," Sir Julian said. "Rather the other end of the rope. Dulcy Quinn failed to board her aircraft this morning."

"What the hell!"

"I presume her missing, even though she is still registered at the Park Lane Hotel."

"Christ! What about—"

"Mrs. Maddox is still registered at the hotel, too. But she has not been seen there—nor Miss Quinn—since Thursday afternoon after the debacle at the Connaught. I'm afraid we may be holding an empty bag here."

McCabe was tense. "Does Bear Paw know yet?"

"Negative. I thought it wiser—"

"Listen, friend. Keep it from him. If he finds out—my God, after his wife's murder and the accident with Mrs. Kincade—he could blow his mind and go on the prod. There's too much pattern. Keep it away from him. You're doing your best to locate them, of course."

"Everything we have is on the job."

"Okay. Let me get to work. I'll reach you through KY-nine, the same way, patching through Grosvenor Square. End send."

"Ta."

Admiral John Jeremiah McCabe was not a wise old spy. He had never been a spy in his life. But he was a tough old skipper who had commanded many a Bristol ship sailing in harm's way and come out of battle unscathed owing to his keen survival instinct. That instinct had shrieked at him from the moment he received the report of the plane explosion over the Atlantic.

Keyhole had been aware of Ravensmith Sr.'s departure from Perth. Keyhole had known that the 707 would be NSA-protected in Washington. Keyhole had called upon its Washington agent to plant the bomb that destroyed it eventually. The hangar had been under heavy security, no way for an

outsider to penetrate it. One of the security team was a traitor.

That was a damned unlikely possibility, but it was the only possibility, and McCabe bit into the filthy prospect like an obdurate pit bull. The previous night—after the disaster—he had commandeered all personnel data on the security team which had guarded the jet. After discarding the minor guards, who had held the perimeter around the aircraft, he came down to the nitty-grits: four borrowed Central Intelligence Agency operatives (whose dossiers made them purer than God Almighty) and his own security chief, Sergeant Ogden Cheever. He had the CIA check its own men once more, rigidly, while he explored Cheever himself.

Then he learned a curious fact. All NSA personnel underwent extensive, exhaustive inquisitions and National Security checks, instigated by the Defense Department. These researches proved not only birth and background, education, race and creeds, but included verifications of character by friends, neighbors, enemies, employment histories and national credit data. There were also in-depth penetrations of loyalties and explorations which invaded the sexual proclivities of the individual. All personnel were also examined by a Torquemadian lie detector at the original examination, with further application of the polygraph every four years, to modernize the findings.

But not Master Sergeant Cheever.

He had been assigned to NSA as part of the Army Security Service. *Such service personnel were not required to submit to lie-detector tests.*

The possibilities awed McCabe. Cheever was highly classified. He had access to the max-sec files in IDENT, as a security guard for that section! He was even cleared to protect top-sec personnel in the sanctum sanctorum of the agency, CODE, an area protected by solid steel doors three and a half inches thick, with ultrasonic ray alarm systems and other classified man traps. Cheever was, in fact, cognizant of most of NSA's defensive instruments. He had been, briefly, Admiral McCabe's own chauffeur.

McCabe spent a grim rock-stomached night after the Australian's murder, brooding savagely but realistically. Next day, he went outside his own farm for help. He called J. Edgar Hoover, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. They were old cronies.

"I need a little home-made domestic intelligence," Mc-

Cabe announced flatly. "I've got a house mouse nibbling on my gorgonzola."

"Breach of Public Law five-thirteen?" the Director asked.

"At least and including murder. I'd like to have, instantaneously, a 'present status' on the subject. And to remind you, this area is *extremely* sensitive."

The Director was eager to help. After all—he himself pointed out—hadn't he loaned the NSA an FBI special agent named Pliny Martin from the Los Angeles office? And how was Pliny doing?

"Fine," McCabe said to Mr. Hoover. "And that happens to be the max-sec area we are now dealing in. His neck, as well as the lives of my other agents, may really depend on your speed and detail. So get on your skates, pal. You can charge this to NSA, the Bear Paw Section, under a Presidential directive. One thing, John. Just the dope. No arrests. We can't stand anything overt on the operation. If I have a rotten apple, I'll do the coring myself."

30

KINCADE TELEPHONED Ravensmith's suite; it did not answer. He checked the Dorchester travel desk and found that Ravensmith had made reservations on the Sunday-morning Aer Lingus Dawnflight, departing Heathrow for Cork at 7:00 A.M. He started to make reservations on the same flight and then thought better of it. As he turned away, he ran heavily into Francis Bane, who obviously had not seen *him*. It was a dead moment for both of them.

"Sorry, pardner," Kincade said, flashing a zizzy smile to mask his discomfort.

"My fault, I'm sure," Bane said softly, overly polite and much embarrassed. He had a soft baritone voice with a weird feminine quality and a lisp which he could not quite control. It was Simon's first closeup of his shadower. He made speedy use of it.

The Polish flatmate of Henry Dieu was young, no more than twenty-five, and built like a chromium T-bar strut. Beneath his superb clothes he had the sculpted figure of a Michelangelo David. The shoulders were tremendous, the waist waspish, the biceps bulging, the hands titanic, all the end products of isometrics, barbells and rigorous karate.

There was an eerie softness in Bane, something dark and formidable. His pale eyes seemed on the verge of tears. His gorgeous teeth were set in a faintly warped mouth. He could not maintain a glance. Old Bwana Shiftyeyes, Kincade thought, staring flatly with good old-fashioned Yankee arrogance. "Say, haven't I seen you someplace before?"

"Perhaps," Bane said quietly. "Perhaps with Henry Dieu? But we haven't met, Mr. Kincade, although Hank has told me all about you, of course. I'm Francis Bane."

"My pleasure."

Kincade strode on without showing any further interest, aware that Bane was unhappy about the chance confrontation. He was no actor like Gerald Hywel. His mouth had crooked petulantly through his smile at his own carelessness. Kincade's back felt chilly as he made for the American Bar.

The lift doors sprang open as he passed in front of them. Ravensmith stepped out, dressed to the nines in a russet dinner jacket with black satin lapels. "Simon, you old cheetah chaser!" he called. "Abide with me!"

"By God, you look like your old pappy just kicked the bucket and left you a million bucks!" Kincade said.

The microsecond of reactive flicker in Ravensmith's shining blue eyes told Simon the story. Bwana Charlie knew now, too. He had been tipped.

The confirmation was instantly gone as he threw an arm around Simon. "Now then—"

"It's a long story."

"Oh, I knew you were back in town," Charlie said. "Milady talked with me. Matter of truth, I'm munching the fatted calf with her in half an hour or so. Love to ask you along, Simon, but it is a private bash—"

"Thanks just the same," Simon said. "I think she's had me for the time being."

"Not at all, chum. She said you had a marvelous do up there in the windy wolds. Said you turned a fire-eating steed into a sugar-sucking Shetland."

"He was a good hammerhead. Just needed some woodshed discipline. You see the Vanishing American?"

Ravensmith laughed loudly.

"Something funny?"

"Dear old cock," Ravensmith said, "*nobody* has seen Bwana Codpiece since I introduced him to Buffy Pristine, after you departed, last Thursday. You remember Bluetop? Well, chum, he has not had his face out of the valley of depth

since they made the pretense of shaking hands. Although he does show up at the Montebank for her second show. To take her home. To crawl back onto the chandelier. I mean, Simon, it's a flaming endurance contest."

"Far be it from me to break the rhythm," Kincade said. "He didn't expect me back until Monday."

"Have you no plans for the evening?"

"I was thinking that this just might be a good time to fly over to Ireland and see my great-grandmother in Kinsale. I've been putting it off and Pop will have my hide if I blow it. I might catch her at Mass tomorrow morning."

Ravensmith smiled, unsurprised. "Don't be a bleeding clot, and don't go tonight. You'll get lost in Cork, or at least arrested from imbibing too much Irish with too many kith and kin. *I'm* flying over at dawn—my *Lusitania* salvage stint. Why don't you join me? Not only that, chum, but I have a car stashed at Cork airport, and I know the way."

"Hey!"

"You will then?"

"That's super, Charlie!"

"Then dash yon and make your rez. Perhaps I'll see you later at the casino."

"No," Kincade said. "I'm just finding out that sex is a young man's game. I'm going to throw out a loop of horsehair and hit my bedroll, so I'll be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for great-grandma Katie tomorrow."

Ravensmith's eyes glinted. "More likely some robust Irish wench."

"No, for true, Charlie."

Ravensmith waved irreverently as he passed through the revolving doors to where his black Bentley awaited him.

Simon returned to the travel desk and reserved space on the seven-o'clock Dawnflight. When he entered the lift, he noticed that Francis Bane had returned to the travel desk and was making urgent inquiry. Then the doors closed.

About 10:00 P.M., after he had had dinner served in his room and watched television for a bit (there was a breath-taking birdwatching documentary on the BBC in prime time), he crawled into his bed. He was settling down nicely when he heard Littlesky come in.

"Hi, honky," Willy said.

Kincade eyed him balefully. "Where have you been?"

"In love," Littlesky said. He made a pained face and held his crotch tenderly. "You're back early from the lost week-

end, aren't you? Don't tell me the Old Massa wound up in the cold, cold ground?"

"Gentlemen don't discuss such things," Kincade said, rising hastily and showing Littlesky the scarlet Keyhole card in his wallet. "But you wouldn't know that, you raunchy Rain-Dancer."

"That's a Hopi gimmick," Willy said, nodding recognition of the card and what it meant.

"Anyway, far be it from me to spoil your scene. I'm flying over to Eire in the morn with Bwana Charlie."

"To see your great-grandmother."

"Uh-huh."

Littlesky quickly made sign, asking whether everything was all right. Kincade replied with the gesture of picking up pony droppings and throwing them away. Things were shitty. Watch yourself in the clinches.

"See you Monday, boss."

"Ambe washte," Kincade said, in the old form.

He was awake and dressed when the operator called him at five-thirty. Littlesky had not returned. He picked up his round-trip tickets at Enquiries. He was alone with Mr. Greenley, the clerk of that moment, and took a chance. (I'm taking too *many* chances.) "I noticed Mr. Bane ticketing last night. Is he on this flight too?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Kincade," Mr. Greenley said. "He took the Starflight, the last section, at midnight. What's going on over there in Cork? I thought the film festival ended last month."

"I dunno, pard," Kincade said and went out the front, where he was picked up by a thoughtful Charles Ravensmith, who drove them out to London Airport.

"Something on your mind, Charlie?"

"Yes." Ravensmith smiled at him as if he had just solved the secret of the Cheshire cat.

"Good, I hope."

"Devious, rather," Charlie said. "So devious, it even awes *me*." He shook his head in self-admiration. "Do you dream much, Simon?"

"Used to."

"Nightmares?"

"I've had my share," Simon said, a flashing shadow of Jenny's laughing face briefly crossing his consciousness.

"Did you ever dream the one about the lioness? I understand it's a typical male nightmare, has to do with male courage and frustration."

"Maybe.'

Charlie wet his lips. "You are all alone on a timeless, Dali desert. No weapons, no trees, not a bloody place to hide. Stark naked, your genitals ungirdled, your hands empty. And suddenly, out of nowhere, this great flaming lioness appears. She takes one look and comes for your dangling manhood. There is nothing you can do."

"I've had that dream." Simon nodded. "I'd try to bury myself in the sand, deep, but she always got to me."

"Yes," Charlie said, "but before she actually seized your jewels you'd wake up, right?"

"That's it."

Charlie took a breath. "Last night I had that same dream, only this time *I* finished it. When I turned to run, this miraculous tree sprang out of the sands, beneath my feet, and carried me skyhigh with it. There in the bole was a spear, a great bloody Masai third-grade spear, buried deep. I flipped it down at the old cunt and ten-pennied her pelt dead as bones."

Kincade waited for Charlie to continue, but that was the end of it. "Well, for God's sake," he finally said, stirring. "What kind of a dream is *that,* you silly kiwi?"

"Binds you rigid, does it?"

"I don't get the meaning."

Ravensmith smiled sententiously. "Even if you were able to confer with Dr. Freud, or Richard von Krafft-Ebing, I rather think that *I* am the only shrinker who could translate that vision for you, Simon. And I have no intention of doing so."

Simon shook his head and grunted. "Bwana, you need a rest. You have been up from down under too long."

"Exactly," Charlie said.

31

AT THAT SAME hour, Littlesky stirred reluctantly as Buffy Pristine insatiably hot-mouthed him into erection and, inevitably, coition. But for once in his life, a rare phenomenon, his heart was not in his thrusts. He just could not help remembering the fascinating MI 6 operation of the previous night and how close he and Kincade were to completion of the mission and to heading home at last.

Sir Julian Keys had coded the foray TRACE. From Lon-

don's Battersea light-and-power complex he borrowed four expert electricians, whom he planted in the main conduit sewers on either side of the entire block of South Audley Street where the Montebank was located. He also employed the service of a steeplejack. He brought along Hackenbush and a cold-faced robot with ice-cold sapphire eyes named Hooligan. A humanless security type. They in turn brought a canister of a special tear gas (which had been aerated with the acrid scents of burned electrical insulation and melted copper) and some fluorescent dust. Littlesky had been invited into the operation as a courtesy. As it turned out, his presence became most important of all.

To the north side of the Montebank rose an old pink-stone townhouse called Waverly. It was five stories high, as compared to the club's four. Waverly was over a hundred years old and had declined to a rental for foreign visitors, mostly American actors who would be in London only during the shooting of their movies. The owner received an outrageously opulent lease fee from such transients and kept the highest two stories closed off.

Atop the roof of the townhouse, where Sir Julian and his group gathered, close on to midnight, there was a great blackened chimney. From it, when you looked down at the Montebank, across a fifteen-foot alleyway which separated the properties, you could not only see the Montebank's rooftop but also the green garden behind the club, a surprising oasis, beautifully maintained; it even boasted a small maze, with a pretentious little gazebo in its nucleus.

Sir Julian also had a man inside the Montebank Club, keeping an eye on the available six of the seven Needles of Keyhole, who had gathered in force, summoned by Lady Henley. Not an unexpected meeting in view of Ravensmith Sr.'s demise.

The micro-walkie-talkie in Sir Julian's hand crackled crisply at eleven forty-five. "Lark to Lion."

"Roger, Lark. Get on with it."

"They have all taken the lift up. Sparrow reports from his RDF that they have all taken the lift down, too, sir, but they did not leave it at floor one. They are in the headquarters now, sir."

"Ta," Sir Julian said. He beckoned to the steeplejack to begin the climb. But at this point the jack tripped and twisted an ankle. Littlesky had never seen Sir Julian so white-hot frigid. He was uncheeped speechless at the accident.

"Hell, Sir Julian," Littlesky said, "I'll handle this freight. I

may not be a crampon-cleated Sherpa, and I've never hiked up Annapurna or the Nanda Devi, but many's the time I've been ice-burned in the Teton massifs. All this takes is a hand-over-hand rope traverse."

"Eighty feet *up*." Sir Julian measured the perils. He could not afford to have anything happen to the Shoshoni. He stared hard at Littlesky. "You're sure of this?"

Willy smiled. "I'm not just three-sheeting, Pappy. This is my gladstone. I'm a stuntman in the movies. They'd pay only a lousy five hundred bucks for this bit, that's how safe it is."

"Very well," Sir Julian said. "Then let me brief you."

"Not necessary. I get the picture. I traverse, right? When I get over there, I feed the flourescent powder into the air-conditioning equipment and let it settle wherever it settles, to impregnate the people." Sir Julian nodded. "Then I shoot the tear gas into the tunnel and let the fan suck it down into the cellar, which will drive anybody there out into the open. Only—"

"Yes?"

"Won't they realize that they've been had when the tear gas hits them?"

"We hope not. We have infused the gas with odors which will make it appear to be a very violent short circuit, electrically."

"Uh-*huh*. So when you're sure the gas is downstairs, you pull the plug."

"Exactly. We punch the entire street out, to confirm the short circuit, and to drive these pople out into the open, where, with black light and the binoculars, we can follow their footsteps in the dark."

Littlesky chuckled.

"Something?" Sir Julian asked.

"Isn't this bushwhack just slightly less than honest? You're hoorawing Keyhole with an illegal entry so that you can swear out a legal search warrant." Littlesky shook his head. "Naughty."

Sir Julian's unblinking eyes had the dead warmth of a mackerel emerging from the broiler. "Nothing is ever illegal, my young friend, until one is caught at it. So HMG implores you to take care."

"Give me the tackle," Littlesky said.

They unloaded forty yards of braided black nylon line. The rope had been artificially dyed to prevent reflective highlights in the dark.

"That should support you adequately," Sir Julian said.

"Oh, *quite*." Littlesky smiled. "I weigh one seventy-five. This stuff can handle stress of sixteen thousand pounds. What's the grappling iron for?"

"To hook into the Montebank chimney as a hold."

"Not with this Injun. Those top bricks could have pretty rotten plaster by now. I'll rig for myself, thanks." He made a lariat noose, quite wide, coiled the remaining nylon over his left arm, mariner's style, and, after a cowboy twirl, tossed the loop out and down, across the crevasse between the two buildings. The Montebank chimney was tall and slim. Movies had taught Willy the art of doing things right the first time, which prevented the director from dubbing you a fathead. The loop fell over the chimney, neatly into place. He tautened it.

"Well done," Sir Julian said sincerely.

"Next setup," Littlesky said wryly.

He passed the other end of the line around the heavy Waverly chimney and tied it off with a sound bowline.

"Ready when you are, C.B."

They slung the canisters over each of his shoulders, hooked a gas mask to his turquoise Navajo belt, and he took off.

Willy stepped out into air, keeping his lean body straight, and hand-walked rapidly above the eighty feet of open gulch between the two buildings. It was dreary dark, there was little auto traffic on South Audley, and no pedestrians passed by to look up.

When he reached the Montebank's roof, he slung off the fluorescent powder canister and opened it. The air-conditioning induction maw was close to the chimney, the huge fan sucking in high pitch. He tipped the dust in carefully until the jug was empty. Then he donned the gas mask, slung off the tear-gas container, shoved the nozzle into the fan's field and opened the valve. He let it all go, until the pressure hiss faded under the fan's whine.

He turned and gave Sir Julian, above him, a thumbs-up gesture. Sir Julian mouthed his walkie-talkie. "Lion to Weasel. Go to black."

The entire reach of South Audley Street from Mount Street to Grosvenor Square snapped awesomely into darkness. The twinkling lights of the club vanished. The air-conditioning fan shuddered to a halt with a grisly clanking squawk. Below, in the club, frightened cries could be heard faintly.

Littlesky eased up the loop from the throat of the chimney and curled it around himself. He turned Sir Julian pale by leaping off into space and swinging across the crevasse to plant his outstretched moccasins hard against the Waverly walls. Then he climbed to the roof, hand over hand. Sir Julian had had a very bad turn at the action, but when Littlesky's face showed above the roof edge, there was a wicked grin on it.

"We always give the director something extra, Pappy. Something we can argue about later when we tap the assistant director for more wampum. It's called an adjustment."

Sir Julian was not pleased. Hackenbush and Hooligan briskly hauled Littlesky up the last couple of feet to safety. After he had rid himself of the empty canisters and the gas mask, he dropped the nylon rope from around his middle. Sir Julian made gesture to lie flat and handed him a pair of black-light binoculars.

Fascinating.

In the darkness you could not see human forms. You could hear only gasps and muted cries and the rustles of fear. But through the binoculars (which were 7 x 50 mm. night glasses) the most astonishing things were happening below. In the core of the little maze, where the gazebo stood, weird blue-green footprints were emerging right out of the earth. It gave Littlesky all the tingly thrill of an old Technicolor horror picture. The footprints left the garden and split around the Montebank on both alleys heading for South Audley Street. But there seemed to be a profusion of prints, not just six lefts and six rights from the Keyhole board. Willy commented on that. Sir Julian said, "Five technicians. Operators of the memory-tapers on incoming messages and the computers and files. Twenty-two footprints in all." He lifted his walkie-talkie. "Lion to Weasel. Go to white."

The street and the Montebank came alive brightly once more, glaringly after the solid black. The binoculars no longer recorded the eerie footprints, nor—in some cases—the eerier outlines of beings who had been dusted all over by the fluorescence.

Sir Julian pointed. Littlesky saw the center of the gazebo was a trap door. As he found it, it closed and became a weathered floor once again.

"I'll have to be dashing," Sir Julian said. "Thanks awfully for your help."

"What's left? You've got the headquarters pegged. Nobody

can argue there ain't no hole in the ground under that shebang in the garden. It's a box canyon. Serve your warrant and close up the shop." Littlesky shrugged. It was all so simple.

Sir Julian forgave him with a smile. "Actually we intend to track these fluorescent feet to their respective lairs. A final proof of the duplicity. At the Dorchester, Mr. Ravensmith's. At the Savoy, your inamorata, Miss Pristine."

"My *what?*" Littlesky said, appalled. "I'm not knocking the scene, buddy boy, but after all, it was in the performance of duty."

"Beyond. . . . At the Montebank, Mr. Tarantella. In Belgrave Square, Lady Dara Henley. To the flat on Hill Street, Mr. Dieu. To the flat in Sloane Square, Mr. Dickerson. Which leaves only Miss Fukimora aboard the *Poseidon.*" Sir Julian sighed. "The files and the testimony of the first gentlemen to elect Queen's Evidence should settle *her* roast. Thank God we are close to the end of this bloody business."

"Yeah," said Littlesky fervently. "You can say that again for our side of the Big Water. So long, Pappy."

"Good night."

Now, in the midst of his copulation with Buffy, he finally blotted out this remembrance and bent with energy to the red man's burden because he was hungrier for breakfast than for sex. He also hoped that when MI 6 had tracked Buffy's golden dust-stained slippers to the chamber, they had not taken incriminating photographs as evidence. Some zip-cooner would surely smuggle them out. Even though he was on the side of the angels, he had no desire to wind up on a Rive Gauche filthy postcard in some Parisian tourist trap.

32

By God, Kincade thought, it's true what they say about Ireland! It *was* emerald-green, soft and lovely; the misty rain *did* fall like Queen Anne's lace, no hardness in it. As Bwana Charlie's little drophead Triumph roadster sped south on L42 from Cork to Kinsale, Simon measured the pleasure of his present with the dread of the approaching future.

"What I used to do," Ravensmith chattered as they spun off the fifteen miles southwest from Cork airport, "was to drive all the bloody way across England and Wales to Fishguard, and then cross St. George's Channel on a B. and I.

ferry for an interminable ten hours. It was purely hell. So then I decided to leave this set of wheels at Cork and fly hither and yon. Been very convenient ever since."

"A piece of cake," Simon said. He was thinking of the titanic black waterproofed valise in the car's boot, with welded eyelets on each end. When he had looked quizzical, Charlie had said, "Scuba gear. Oxygen tanks. All the tack."

Simon let it go at that.

"There's the Spaniard over there," Ravensmith said.

"Which is what?"

"Fantastic alehouse, built in an old stable. Pity we're hitting it on the Sabbath or we could pop in for a pipkin of porter and a bawdy ballad or two. What's your—pardon my silent snicker—great-grandmother's address, chum?"

"Blackrock Cottage," Simon replied after checking the address from a paper slip. "Gillabey Road. Kinsale."

"Gillabey Road . . ." Ravensmith mused thoughtfully. "No. Not in Kinsale. That would be over in the east in the town of Summer Cove. See those ruins on the lip of that scar? That would be Charles Fort. Your wench resides just this side of the ruins. Shouldn't take more than a few minutes." Ravensmith winked. "A bit early for satanic sex. Does she have a friend?"

"So help me God, Bwana Charlie, it really *is* my great-grandmother. I'm not putting you on—I mean, sending you up."

"Time will tell."

Simon stared. "Meaning?"

"Well, it's only fair dinkum that I meet your relic. After all, I did tote the visiting in-law, did I not? And in this home of the harp, your relative would lose her social standing if she didn't offer a cup of tea to a stranger, much less your devoted friend." Ravensmith's glance had the flinty glint of a bounty hunter who has just tracked his man to earth.

The broken-stoned cottage, the surfaces all painted white, gleamed fastidiously through the sun-filtered morning mist. The dying rain dripped lightly from the shaggy golden thatches of the roof. To one side of the doorway a huge black rock sat, surrounded by herb plants. Beyond the low stone front wall unbridled fuschias smashed through the greenery riotously.

"My word!" Ravensmith said, pausing. "Puts poor old Wowserland to shame. Really quite lovely, isn't it, chum?"

"Beautiful," Simon said. To him, the cottage had all the charm of a Buchenwaldian gas chamber. He stopped at the

door before knocking. "Charlie, thanks a bunch but there's no point in you getting hung up here with the auld-lang-syne bit. The old squaw may be dust for all I know."

"Wouldn't hear of it." Ravensmith smiled. "If she's a memory, you'd be beached, wouldn't you? Couldn't leave you marooned in the Erin wilds."

Kincade sighed and knocked lightly on the door. It was opened presently by a pink-cheeked girl of ninteteen, her hair black as a raven's, her eyes brown as a Castillian's, her breasts neatly small, her backside neatly large. "The best of this day to you," she said with a white-toothed smile.

"By the holy mountains of Connemara, may blessings be upon this house and all therein," Kincade said politely. Charlie raised black brows at the statement, but after all, Charlie was just not up on Hibernian cliché. Simon had seen *The Informer* on the Late Late Show more times than even John Ford.

The colleen bowed politely.

"My name is Simon Kincade," Simon said. "I'm looking for a lady named Katherine Murphy Kincade, my great-grandmother. She would be quite old—"

"—but alive and in the best of health," the colleen said cheerfully. "Then you would be the sprig off the American stem. That would make you and me relations. For Grandmother Kate is my great-great-grandmother, me being the daughter of Alfred, who was the son of Tyrone, who was your father Osborne's brother, both being the sons of Sean, who was Kate's husband. I am Elspeth Kincade. Come in, cousin, come in, please. This home is yours."

Charlie cleared his throat.

"Oh yes," Simon said. "Friend. Charles Ravensmith. Miss Elspeth Kincade."

"The heart of Blackrock to you," Elspeth said to Ravensmith charmingly. He kissed her hand with elegance.

They faltered into the living room, with its massive rough-stone fireplace, a blaze cheerfully bouncing off the logs of the hearth. The floor had once been broken stones too, but it had been besomed over a century until now it gleamed like warm marble, interrupted infrequently with small throws of woven rugs. The loom hung in a corner. The hard uncomfortable furniture was sparse. To one side of the fire in a rocking chair of dimension, Great-grandmother Kate sat, bundled up in her Kinsale cloak like a Draconian executioner. The cloak was native to the old crones of Kinsale,

worn on Sunday, massive, black, and with a hood like an infant's caul, all to protect against the omnipresent winds off the cold Atlantic that whistled harshly up the inlet. It appeared that there was more Kinsale cloak than there was Great-grandmother Kate. Her face barely showed under the arch of the hood. Her feet were buried under its weighty folds. Only her small hands poked out from under the ugly thing, tentatively, like the first daffodil through snow. The hands didn't tell much. They were encased in lace gloves, without tips. Her fingernails were scarred, discolored, cut short.

"Grandmother!" Elspeth shouted. *"Grandmother!"*

"Eh?" The old lady stirred. "Eh? No need to caterwaul! Ain't deef!"

Elspeth ignored her without courtesy, as if the conversation was unnaturally normal. The colleen pulled back the hood slightly, and bellowed, "Look who's here, Grandmother! From the States!"

"That's better!" the old harridan shrilled. "Birch your bottom if you get sassy. Damned young generation! Got no more respect these days. Eh? *What?"*

"From America! It's your great-grandson come to pay you the call!"

The face of Grandmother Kate emerged from the black hood. It looked older than Ireland itself, at least as antique as its snake-exorcising patron saint. Wrinkled as wet tissue paper, the lips tightly clenched to indicate a lack of dentures, one glorious wart on the chin with three outcropping gray hairs as thick as thread and long as cat's whiskers, the celestite eyes dimmed and watery, the nose blunt as a dull ax, the jaw formidable and unmerciful, despite the march of time.

"What? Where? Stand back! Get back before I slap your grubby hands!"

Elspeth said in a normal voice, "Don't get too close. She can't see close up so good. She's a touch farsighted these last days."

"Mumbling again? God curse all mumblers! Speak up, lass." Grandmother Kate peered up into Kincade's stunned face. Suddenly her eyes looked startled. "Sean? Is that you, blessed Sean?" She crossed herself piously. "By the holy tongue of the *Fainne,* it's himself come back from graveside to visit his bride in her gloaming!"

"Nah!" Elspeth shouted rudely. "Not your sotted spouse, Grandmother! T'is his proud descendant—your own great-grandson, Simon!"

"Simon, is it?" the old lady shrieked cheerfully. "Wearing the beloved face of himself! Come then, Simon, and kiss me decently!"

The prospect was not inviting, what with the shining fresh-et of uncontrolled drool which spated down to her chin from one corner of her tight lips. But Simon managed a noisy peck which seemed to delight her, and she smacked back enthusiastically into thin air.

"The tay, slattern!" the old lady screamed at Elspeth. "Be putting out the tay and biscuits or you'll bed without supper this night, wicked malkin!"

It was incredible that NSA had actually unearthed this ancient survivor of the Kincade family. He had not expected this. Nor had Charlie Ravensmith, who said warily, "I may be staying over tonight, chum, so suggest you hop a bus or lease a car when you head for Cork. Meanwhile, I'll just pop off without raising dust—"

"Mumbles, mumbles!" the old lady shrieked. "God's malison on all mumblers! Was that the voice of an Englishman? God's blood and the curse of Sinn Fein on all his kith and kin!"

Ravensmith looked horror-struck. He waved a frantic goodbye and retreated through the broad front door. Grandmother Kate was rowdy and raucous until the roar of Ravensmith's Triumph diminished, going back toward Kinsale. Then she grew instantly still and seemed to drop into an instantaneous nap.

"He's gone," Elspeth said quietly.

Commander Paul Sampson stepped out of the kitchen, behind the fireplace. He didn't look himself. He wore stained old pants, with galluses, a heavy sweater, a peaked fisherman's cap and dirty black boots. "Welcome to Blarney Island, Simon."

Kincade gaped at Commander Sampson, then at the colleen, finally at Grandmother Kate.

Grandmother Kate said, "If I don't get out of this miserable cloak soon, I'm going to melt."

"I'm sure he won't be back," Elspeth said. "You should have seen his face. It was *that* close to vomiting if he had had to kiss her. In any case, sir, I could wear the cloak and pretend to be asleep in her chamber. But I doubt he'll return."

"All right, Miss Hayes," Commander Sampson said. "I guess you can strike the set."

"Thank God," the old lady said. She popped a pair of contact lenses into her hand; the dimmed eyes vanished. She

pulled off the repulsive wart. Then she started peeling off the fishskin makeup which had created the wrinkled texture. It took off the blunt nose with it. As the Kinsale cloak-hood dropped back, revealing her emerging face, Kincade began to recognize her. The tight lips loosed; she smiled faintly at him, showing perfect teeth. Commander Sampson helped her out of the weighty cloak. She breathed a sigh of relief and said, "Is that it, Commander?"

"That's it," Sampson said. "Colonel Albertazzie will be landing in Cork at noon. I'll go up there with you."

"Albertazzie?" Kincade said. "But he's the President's chief pilot. On Air Force One."

"That's right," Sampson said. He returned to the actress. "If there was an award for this performance—"

"Send it to Nyack," she said.

"You have our deepest gratitude—"

"Well, at least, I fooled *this* one." She pointed at Kincade, whose face was now darkening in a humiliated blush.

"My God!" He said. "I know you now! But it's impossible! You're supposed to be in Hollywood shooting a movie on that Arthur Hailey book—"

"Exactly why it was safe to have her *here,*" Commander Sampson said. "Let's skip identifications, eh, Simon? Except for Miss O'Faolain here. She happens to be a member of Cork's Southern Theater Group; I fancy you'll be seeing Elspeth in California one of these days." Sampson chuckled. "Well, laddy, and how does it feel to trod on the ould sod?"

"I'll be damned," Simon said, grinning. He was delighted that Keyhole and Scissor had been out-Hyweled by the home team.

"Look," Commander Sampson said suddenly. He pointed far down the inlet, toward the open ocean. Blackrock Cottage occupied a high place on the eastern cliff of the bay, with an infinite scan of the southwesterly heads and seas.

Miles down the River Brandon's estuary, an unpretty freighter was making for Kinsale. Her bow had seen weather. Red lead splotched through her black paint from Plimsoll to stem.

"Poseidon?" Kincade asked. His voice was hollow.

"Poseidon," Commander Sampson replied. "Right on the money." He glanced at Miss Hayes. "I'll be escorting our friend here to the plane in Cork, Simon. You're to remain in the cottage until I return. I'll brief you then. Sorry to hang you up, but I'm sure you can use the respite from wiretap and buggery, and you'll find something useful to fill out the time."

Elspeth looked up at Kincade, her dark eyes glinting. She said blatantly, "I'm sure he will."

33

AT TWELVE NOON in Washington, Admiral McCabe was pacing the floor of his bachelor quarters in a Georgetown apartment house when the phone rang. It was the FBI Director.

"Yes, John?"

"We have your 'present status' on the subject you mentioned."

"Good or bad?"

"Bad." Mr. Hoover paused. "The special agent in charge is Lafayette Foster. Call him Lafe. He'll brief you on the data. I imagine it will take some massive clearances for him to get into the Fort. Thought you'd like to start the machinery now."

"Hell with the Fort," McCabe said heavily. "Send him out here. There's no wood left to burn."

Half an hour later, the door chimes rang. McCabe hurried to the door. When he opened it, he found a slight dark-haired young man of thirty with candid gray eyes and a reluctant smile. "Admiral McCabe?"

"Come in, Foster, come in," McCabe said, edging the Special Agent inside with one hard hand while slamming the door with the other. "Let's have your ID."

After he had checked it, McCabe handed the ID back. "All in order."

"May I see yours, sir?" Foster asked quietly.

The admiral started to blowhard at the waste of time, but then he chuckled grimly and gave Foster his own identification. Foster said, "All in order, sir."

"You want a splash?"

"A little too early, Admiral, but thank you. Here is a copy of the report. Very bad lad here, Admiral. You read along, and I'll just fill you in."

"Go ahead."

"You must pay excellent salaries over there in Maryland."

"Okay. Make your lousy joke."

"Here we have a master sergeant in the U.S. Army, attached to NSA, who owns a thirty-five-foot cabin cruiser, belongs to the Potomac Yacht Club, drives a yellow XKE Jaguar roadster, has a membership in the Thorn Tree Golf

Club, supports three mistresses, is heavy with hospitality at local bars, pays everything in cash, has a nothing bank account, is a radio ham with a California kilowatt—which means he radiates two thousand watts of power, a thousand more than is legal—and is in constant communication with a G-prefix ham station in London. His telephone bills are rather large, since he also calls this number"—Foster pointed it out in the report—"which I.T. and T. have traced to a gambling club in London called the Montebank."

"Shit," McCabe said sadly.

"Yes, sir. And other than the fact that Sergeant Ogden Cheever is presently being sued on a paternity charge by a young lady who is *not* one of his three mistresses, the fellow is as clean as the driven snow."

McCabe stared at him. "Where is this mother now?"

"Down at the yacht club. Sunday brunch aboard the *Miss Conduct*. Bloody Marys, broads and bagels. Shall we make the arrest, Admiral?"

"No," McCabe said. "There'll be no arrest."

"You're not going to try him?"

McCabe choked in dismay. "What the hell do you think the NSA is—a democracy? Thanks just the same, Foster. My own fraternity will slap the pledge pin on this gay caballero."

Foster shivered at McCabe's tonelessness. "Then I'll leave the report with you, sir."

"Thanks."

Foster instinctively snapped off a smart salute. Then he looked shamefaced as McCabe's brows rose. "Navy?"

"Yes, sir. DDE. South China Sea."

McCabe smiled and shook hands with him. "Lafe, you tell the Director that if he ever looks at you cross-eyed, you've got a berth over in my mill."

Foster smiled warmly at last. He let himself out as McCabe plunged to the desk and took the red line through to Fort Meade.

"McCabe here." He gave his classified code number, "This is a max-sec scramble. Ashby in IDENT." He was patched through instantly.

Ashby's voice was tremulous with excited dread. "I'm on another line trying to reach you—"

"The files?"

"Let me hang up the other phone, sir." A heavy plastic click. "Yes, sir, the files. Booby traps and all!"

"Sam Carson," McCabe said.

"*And* Simon Kincade."

"Details, Ashby?"

"The cameras photographed the thief, sir, but this fellow knew the ropes. He wore a stocking mask over his face. Absolutely unidentifiable. He also knew how to turn off the capacitance alarm and the ultrasonic-ray alarms. He did not remove the files on Carson and Kincade, sir, but he obviously photographed them. The seals are broken."

"What about the dye-stain spray in the files?"

"The spray was activated, Admiral. Whoever did it has his hands full. Unless he wore gloves, which he probably did. But if any hit through the stocking mask, he'll go livid purple, and not all the soaps on earth will wash that aniline off. It has to wear off. Takes at least a month."

"I know all that," McCabe said tersely. "Let me think. Nothing in the Carson file. Dead man, buried at Wind River. That doesn't hurt us. But about the Kincade file—"

"Disaster, Admiral. The Kincade files holds all the pertinent data proving he is dead. Even the dental photos we made from the skull for matching—"

"Then," McCabe said, "the boys are blown."

"Absolutely. Shall I alert—"

"Negative. I'll handle their ejection." McCabe's voice hardened. "Now, don't go splitting your gut, Ashby. This time I happen to know who our fink is. I want you to assign our top two enforcers. Book them and Master Sergeant Ogden Cheever through to Fiji, most secret, via the Air Force shuttle. Also—*and most important*—telephone John Bigwater at Nandi Airport in Fiji and use the KG-thirteen for scrambling. Tell Bigwater that we are sending him a nice fat pig for the Feast of Tuka."

Ashby's voice was mouse-small. "Like Colonel Fritz Peyser?"

"You bet your ass!" Mc'cabe said grimly. "Only this overweight entree will have a lot more meat and less gristle."

"Where is Sergeant Cheever, Admiral?"

"Send Cohen and Haggerty over to the Potomac Yacht Club immediately. Armed. I'll meet them there to pick up the crown roast."

Master Sergeant Cheever, however, did not keep to titillate Fijian palates. Aboard the trim white cabin cruiser, moored at the marina, he had been sitting on the poop with three second-hand virgins, explaining the eerie purple splotches on his face, spinning off a vodka-stoked hallucina-

tion about the return of a rare Vietnamese fever he had acquired in the Delta, an obviously colorful plaint.

But when he saw Admiral McCabe and the two agate-eyed NSA security men, he turned and spun down the after-hatch into the main cabin below. He was able to reach his .45-caliber Colt automatic, which he stuck into his mouth, thumbed the safety off and then triggered. The mushrooming bullet blew out the back of his skull to a six-inch diameter and made an untidy mess of the cabin, even though his bright blood did scupper neatly into the bilges. It was some time before the girls stopped screaming.

34

SECRECY WAS no longer essential, McCabe realized, but speed was. It was 2:30 P.M., EST, before he could spread the alarm. He used the Air Force's AIRCOMNET wire teletype system to push the message through. The message was too vital to be trusted to ciphony.

Stripped of the argot of priorities and classifications, the message read: "GWIFA SENDS. THE FOLLOWING TROOPS HAVE BEEN CUSTERED: BEAR PAW, FUSTIGATOR, GRAYWOLF, BLACKHAWK. THEY ARE ORDERED TO RETREAT TO HOLE-IN-WALL AND AWAIT CAVALRY. TOUGH TITTY. END SEND." It was dispatched to Commander Paul Sampson at the nuclear-submarine base in Holy Loch, Scotland, and also to Sir Julian Keys at the Bayswater MI 6 station.

Sir Julian was not impressed with the final vulgar comment, even though he understood some of Admiral McCabe's angry disappointment. Nor was he dismayed at the blowup. He felt they were close enough to finalize the Keyhole assault, even lacking the American team. He was more worried about the fact that Commander Sampson, in Ireland, would not receive the intelligence until an American courier had flown it over, so he instantly dispatched one of his own agents to Sampson with a copy.

Before that, however, he telephoned Montebank.

Willy Littlesky was seated in the dining room with Buffy Pristine, between shows, sucking Whitstables and bubbly and wondering why Buffy kept looking at him wide-eyed. Was she trying to tell him something? When the maître d'hotel arrived to say that Mr. Littlesky was wanted on the blow-

er by someone called Pappy, he knew damned well she had been trying to tell him something.

Sir Julian read him the message intact and added, "You have the word, I take it?"

"The word is Geronimo," Willy said. "I'm bailing out."

"This very instant." Sir Julian was severe. "Not another moment. I'll handle the hotel and your luggage. Now chuff!"

He chuffed. But first he returned to Buffy at the table and hastily squatted, smiling broadly, as if everything was taxfree or deductible, and he didn't have a care in the world—just in case Tarantella or one of the other scorpions was watching. He said through his teeth, "It's roto-rooter time, Buff. How long have you known?"

Her face took on pain. "Since last night. We had a meeting. For God's sake, be very careful, *bibi*. I love you."

"Now you tell me." His voice was cold as gun metal. "So . . . I'll be seeing you."

"At my place in Marrakesh," she said softly. "We'd be safe there. Nobody would know but me."

He said, "That's the trouble, Buff. *I* would know too. And if you didn't set me up, I'd have to send you over. Too much blood under the bridge."

"But I *love* you, *bibi*."

"I know the feeling." His voice was grim through the blatant smile. "Tough titty, like the man said. *Kwaheri*."

He was gone, snaking through the hustling waiters in his bright-red dinner jacket until it melted into the panoply of all the other colors.

Meanwhile, afraid to waste the time for the message to reach Sampson, Sir Julian telephoned the commander at Blackrock Cottage, ordered a tape recording to preclude error. When Sampson turned his machine on, Sir Julian repeated the message to the letter, and then hung up.

Sampson had been maintaining a walkie-talkie communication system in Kinsale for the English team that was keeping hard eyes on the *Poseidon* and the American team that was awaiting the loot transfer. Both teams were on separate frequencies. It was a touchy business, having British agents afoot in southern Ireland. The Irish would have taken a dim view of the whole thing. Nor were the Americans exempt from trouble. It was one thing to be a curious tourist, another to be an agent of a foreign power.

Sampson paled perceptibly at the news, his mouth going thin and bloodless. He checked the time, 11:10 P.M., then

opened his attaché case and pulled out a Colt Super 8 automatic pistol. He cocked it and flicked the safety on, then shoved it into his belt. The time sequence of McCabe's teletype assured him that Keyhole must have been aware of identities twenty-four hours earlier, and he was only arming in case Scissor, or one of the other enforcers of Keyhole, came calling at Blackrock Cottage for Sam Carson.

Elspeth O'Faolain had been keeping him company, plucking at her guitar and singing new old-folk songs. "Elspeth," he said flatly when his grimness alerted her, "something has gone very wrong, and I think it would be a hell of a lot smarter and safer if you peeled off and went home. I'll make out fine here. And"—he added as she started to object—"that *is* an order."

It was a good order as things turned out. Not ten minutes later, after he had broadcast McCabe's warning to Kincade and Pliny Martin (the only two American agents on the Irish operation), he heard a faint sound behind himself, and when he turned, a beautiful girl stepped out from the kitchen, having entered by the cottage's rear door.

She was wonderfully pretty, with bright dark eyes and the singular beauty of Nipponese-Caucasian mixed parentage. He admired the chic Givenchy suit she had had duplicated in Hong Kong. She also wore a less smart accessory: A cheap Italian .25-caliber Beretta pistol adorned her left hand. It was pointed at him. Before he could challenge her, she said politely, *"Sayonara,* Sampson-*san"* and fired two shots which cracked like breaking wood.

Both bullets hit. The first thunked heavily into his duodenum, delivering an instant perforated ulcer and breaking him into an unintentional crouch. The second stung him on the lower right side, performing an appendectomy he had evaded for years. The second bullet also twisted him to his right, and he fell in a skid. Except for the blows and the stings, he did not feel too bad yet, except when he tried to reach his own Colt. His arm wouldn't work; it was suddenly made of rubber. He hated having to die without a chance to snap back some retribution, but there was nothing he could do. A sickening blackness began to pervade him from belly to brain.

He could still hear. It seemed to him that he heard a man's voice. He made one more attempt to pull his pistol, but his hand just rested on the butt uselessly. Then he felt someone else's strength helping him. The Colt fired off seven shots, in

a mere two seconds. In his omnivorous coma, Commander Sampson was delighted, but he remembered that he had felt no recoil. Had *he* fired those shots? He passed out before he could decide the issue, but briefly his fading vision told him that, although he had never seen her before, he had just been shot by Miss Niji Fukimora and that she would never sip sake or clack chopsticks again.

Commander Sampson came awake again, later, and found himself bunched in a drophead sports car, the top down, the cold rain lashing his face into consciousness, while the little Triumph raced toward St. Mary's Hospital in Cork at ambulance speed. He finally got one solid look at his driver and was astonished.

The Good Samaritan was Charles Ravensmith.

BOOK FOUR

Sam Carson

"Let me go, my friends. You have got me hurt enough . . ."

—Dying words,
Ta-Sanke Witke
(Crazy Horse)

1

SIMON KINCADE spent his last moments on a dank rampart of the old redan known as the Charles Fort, high atop the cliff which overlooked Kinsale harbor below. He was huddled in a wet black rubber sou'wester. The dampness had made him miserable; the decaying ruins had made him lonely, amidst old ghosts.

He looked down at the *Poseidon,* anchored below him on the fringe of the dark-brown seaweed which cluttered the waters. He could have arced spittle down her single funnel. There was activity aboard the freighter now. He could see the crew making ready to depart for Southampton. All day long, from the moment she had moored and taken aboard the Irish customs inspectors, she had been unloading cargo via small lighters. Simon knew that the MI 6 team was all over the harbor—at the yacht club, at the shipyard, at the pierhead, on the sporting yachts—keeping a weather eye on everything the *Poseidon* did. Even he, with the aid of binoculars, had seen the Japanese immigrant, Miss Niji Fukimora, disembark in a jolly boat, to be met on the dock by Charlie Ravensmith. Then they had driven off together, God knows where. That had been just before the rain, at about 6:45 P.M.

Before the rain, it had been a pleasant day. While Commander Sampson motored to Cork with the actress, Simon had slipped into a hippie outfit, donned a wild peruke and even wilder Piccadilly-Weeper sideburns with beard, hooked on pale-purple shades and slung a guitar (which he did not know how to play) around his left shoulder. Then he and Elspeth O'Faolain, like many other young couples of Kinsale, had bicycled up to the old fort for a picnic of beer, braunschweiger sandwiches and Rabelaisian rondeaux.

Charles Fort had been built by the English in 1677, and until the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1923, it had been occupied. After the pact it had been allowed to crumble under the hammer of time, but it still had many archways and cavernous tunnels, labyrinthian enough to hold any minotaur in maze. Some rooms were still intact. Deep in the bottom of the fort there were still damp dungeons.

Elspeth said, "When I was a young lass, we would come

out here on a Sunday and picnic, and then me and my courting lad would go exploring—mostly to find a place alone for some giggles and tickles. You would be that surprised at what's still below. One dungeon has an old *oubliette—"*

Simon stirred. "What's an *oubliette?"*

"You might say it's a dungeon within a dungeon. In the times of yore, when you wanted to black-and-tan a prisoner forever, you would drop him into the *oubliette.* It's a tunnel of sorts, maybe a sewer pipe would paint it better, and it went down through the ground to the nearest river. This one, which Paddy Bryant and I found, right here in the fort, went down in a curve and it came out below us, right out of the cliffside, straight into the bay below.

"You actually went down there?"

"Once only, on a long rope. It was *that* dangerous. You see where that ship is lying in anchor below us? The *oubliette* would come out about fifty or some feet above her mizzen mast, give or take the agger."

"Let's see it," he said, restraining his excitement.

Elspeth threw up her hands coquettishly. "I'm a woman of age now," she said. "We don't have to hide to be adiddling."

Simon sighed. He would have thought that she had had enough of that since the erotic interval at Blackrock Cottage during the changing of his clothes. But he remained patient. "Not for romance, my sex-starved shamrock," he said, "I've got to see it."

"Long gone," Elspeth said, pouting.

"Which means what?"

"Some years erst, there were two accidents. A brace of the bolder lads went exploring, and they dropped through the tunnel to the gawp on the bay. They tried to climb down, since they had brought no means to climb back up with, and they were killed in the fall. The authorities sealed up the gawp then. And a good thing too."

"Show it to me."

She was dubious. "It's down deep. The walls are rotten. And we'd need a lamp."

"I'll get an electric torch from the bikes."

Equipped, he followed her down into the crumbling darkness, oppressed quickly by bone-deep cold, listening to the fearsome cracking of eroding rock, mincing tenderly down the shattered stones of the steps, warily flashing the bike

light up at the ponderous arches, some stones of which were sagging below the line of their original thrust, perilously. It was a terrifying, water-soaked descent, fraught with unpleasant possibilities. Finally, they stood in a narrow corridor, with two rotting cells on either side of it, stinking, dreary damp. The iron bars of the cells had long since oxidized into red muck.

"Second on the right," Elspeth said, shivering. "God protect us from the banshees herein."

Kincade was not a dedicated cave dweller, and he sensed the black pressure himself. He could feel the past in these ancient stones. He could hear the echoing of tortured wails. He could feel the spleen of the long-dead, who had perished in chains and drowned in their own watery lungs from the insidious cold and condensation. Simon moved into the small cell, its rock walls fragmented.

"There," Elspeth said in awe, pointing. She warped in a violent shudder. "Now let us return to God's world."

Simon cautioned her to remain as he played the bike light on the rough rock floor. He found the hole plug against one wall, the wall which abutted the bay side of the cell. There was a neat patch of concrete visible, about a yard square. It was not new; green slippery moss covered its damp face, which was set in a border of old pine as its mold. He dug fingers around the pinewood and tried to lift the concrete lid to no avail.

"Damn," he muttered, disappointed.

He felt carefully of the stones around the border of the concrete lid. They were all firmly embedded in earth and mortar. Except one which was dead center in front of the three-foot patch. It was the size of a pterodactyl's egg and, at first, seemed firm. But actually it was only wet sand that gripped it. He dug the sand away with a finger, until he could seize the stone and lift it out. In the black hole that it left he could see a hatch handle on the pinewood mold of the concrete, a chromium grab such as any motorboat used on its hatches.

"I'd best be returning," Elspeth said in an awed whisper as she trembled from cold and fear.

"Not yet."

"It's making late, Simon. The commander will be operating his communications, and I am to be the courier in the case of radio failure."

"In a minute."

He raised the concrete cover and splashed the light down into the hole which loomed under the lid. The chute went down at a slight angle, like the downhill run of a roller coaster. But it was no longer so dangerous. Somebody had pegged a jointed aluminum ladder into the rock wall on the bottom side of the slope.

Elspeth gasped. "You mustn't go down there?"

"Wait here."

Kincade climbed down the *oubliette* gingerly, flashing the torch below him with caution, but there were no problems. Forty feet later, he hit a flat foyer in the rock. It extended westerly along a smooth floor of stone, and at the end of it he could see the reflected brightness of daylight. As he crawled its length, he noted two niches off the main tube, one to the left and one to the right. The left niche was empty. The right niche had a small cannon such as a yacht club uses for its sundown signal, or the raising of the colors, or the winning of a regatta. With it were coils of nylon line, several light blocks for a breech's buoy and other impedimenta.

At the end of the tunnel he squatted and peered out into the overcast daylight, flat and harsh after the darkness of the *oubliette.*

The *Poseidon* squatted below him, hanging on her bow hook, a stern anchor out to prevent her swinging with the tide. Her mizzen mast tip reached almost up to where he sat. The yards were a mere thirty feet beneath him. He could have tossed a grenade down into her tilted funnel.

He noted that there were pitons firmly set in the ceiling of the tunnel, through which the nylon could be run and at which an end could be secured. Simple as pie. They fired the small cannon which took a light line over to the yards of the mizzen. The slave line was then tugged by hands aboard the freighter to haul over the heavier and stronger nylon which served as the breech's buoy track. Only, it didn't use a breech's buoy. The traveling blocks were hooked into the eyelets of the big black watertight valise that Charles Ravensmith had imported into County Cork. Give the packet a shove, and the Keyhole cash accumulations of the month went rolling neatly down the nylon to be seized by covetous hands aboard the *Poseidon* and then stowed safely aboard for the voyage to the Cape of Good Hope and the eastingdown to the Orient. The transfer required only darkness to be completely effective. The rain would give it utter obscurity.

The *oubliette* itself would smother the dry bark of the cannon.

Kincade climbed back up to the dungeon cell and found Elspeth's pale face in the darkness. Very carefully he replaced the concrete hatch and the cover stone. As Elspeth guided him back to the upper reaches of the fort, he was careful to commit every twist and turn to memory. He knew that when he descended into these black depths next time he was going to be in one helluva hurry.

2

THERE WAS no doubt about it now. Simon could see, from his vantage atop the ramparts, that the *Poseidon* was readying to sail. Blue peter unfurled at the starboard truck of her forward mast. The anchor crew edged forward into the forepeak, to stand by the chain with the fresh-water hose and wash down as the ponderous links came aboard from the sea. Still, there was no sign of Ravensmith and his boodle bag. Simon stared at the little walkie-talkie, listening to its wordless hiss, and wished it would say anything.

He lowered his binoculars and dug under his sou'wester for a tissue to wipe the mist off the glasses. When he had returned to Blackrock Cottage to rid himself of the hippie costume and get into a practical native outfit, he had been given a Colt Python .357 Magnum revolver by Commander Sampson along with a GI flashlight. He wished now he had also borrowed a wristwatch. What the hell time was it? Wasn't anything ever going to happen? Nerve-wracking to sit up hunched atop an austere parapet, feeling the ominous future creeping up behind you.

At that moment the walkie-talkie's atmospheric rush ceased as a radio carrier filled the speaker. The silence was eerie. After a pause the familiar voice of Sampson broadcast, "Stand by. Code Bear Paw. This is an emergency. You will act accordingly. Paul Revere sends. The following tape is no drill." Another pause. Simon leaned closer and cut down the gain. The voice of Sir Julian Keys, gloomily squeaky, took over as Sampson replayed the tape he had recorded from Sir Julian's relay. "The following troops have been Custered—"

Sam Carson sighed.

So perished Simon Kincade. This was the way his world

ended. Adios, Old Paint. *Ambe washte,* hoss. And so, as the sun sinks slowly over the Big Range, we say goodbye to Simple Simon. You were ghastly while you lasted, Old Jingo, but there were times when I got real fond of you and your stupidities. *Kwaheri, rafiki. Hasta la vista.*

Sam Carson felt strangely empty. It was difficult to realize the mission was finished. Disappointing too, of course, that they had not gone all the way. But he was grateful they were getting out alive, grateful that they would be heading back to the land of scuppernong wine, Jersey applejack and Taos lightning.

He sat there in the drizzle, not moving, while his own consciousness began the arduous task of erasing Simon Kincade from its imposition upon his psyche. Come on! he warned himself. Make tracks!

He heard the car below the rampart and took a look at it. It was a rented English Cortina. It parked beneath him. A man got out of it carrying the big black valise.

Sam Carson skipped down the rough steps, heading for the dungeon at the flankest speed he could manage in silence. What the hey, he thought grimly as he gamboled his way into the maw again. So it's all over. But at least let me stay for this particular finale, just so I can see Bwana Charlie's face when I tree him. (But something inside him kept yelling that he was a damned fool for taking the risk, a damned fool not to be on the dodge.)

When he reached the low dungeon cell where the *oubliette* hatch was located, he realized his first mistake. He could not go down into the *oubliette* first because he had no way of closing the hatch and resetting the covering stone. He grunted a ripe obscenity, heard the footfall coming down behind him and skipped over into one of the cells on the other side of the corridor. He covered himself with the black sou'wester so that his white face would not reflect any light, but he kept a peephole for one eye and slid the Python revolver, with its brief two-inch barrel, into his right hand. The man with the black bag did not throw light his way, nor did he check the area for intruders. He was quite sure of himself, as if he had performed this function many times before without incident. Light from his electric torch bounced off wet rock, and Sam could see that it was not Ravensmith. The man was Francis Bane.

It didn't make any difference, really, but it was a letdown. Bwana Charlie was his meat. It was the wild wombat whose

pelt he wanted to spin on the barbecue. It occurred to him that Ravensmith's absence was also cause for worry. Where was Charlie? At that second the body tag behind his left ear tingled, startling him. It persisted for ten seconds, then stilled. Someone was locating him, making sure he still had his scalp.

Meanwhile Bane had lowered the black valise into the *oubliette*'s throat on a nylon line. After it hit the flat foyer below, Bane followed it, legging down the jointed ladder skillfully, despite his size. Soon the bobbing reflections of his flashlight softened and vanished.

Okay, Samuel Wyeth Carson, he thought grimly, throwing off the sou'wester and rising, here goes the barefoot halfbreed from Fort Washakie, for Wakan Tanka and Queen and Nixon!

He was wearing top-siders, a nonskid yachting sneaker which the English called plimsolls. They were sure and silent. He stuck the Colt revolver carefully in his belt, ready for a quick jerking. He dared not turn on his own GI flashlight, but hung it on his belt by its clip. Then, with infinitesimal caution, he went down the ladder. When Sam was surer of the ladder, he speeded up the descent by taking three rungs at a time. Unfortunately, this pistoned one knee higher than his beltline and eventually worked the short barrel of the Colt loose. It slipped free and dropped to the rock floor of the tunnel with a dismaying clatter. He leaped down himself and frantically rose to his knees, feeling for it in the dark. He froze immobile when Francis Bane's torchlight centered squarely upon him, spotlighting him like a presidential candidate.

Behind the light, Bane said, astonished, "But you're supposed to be dead."

"May God follow in your footsteps!" Sam said, Irishly trying to keep his voice light. It was rougher than a tiger tongue. He tried to find Bane's eyes behind the light, but that was not possible. There was nothing but the core of glare, dead on him. He felt his hopes emptying swiftly; there was little he could do. A fine broth of a spy he had turned out to be, the clumsiest Yankee operative since Nathan Hale.

Bane said, puzzled, "How did you get here?"

"It wasn't easy."

"No matter. You should have been hit last night. I don't understand. But I haven't the time to waste, Kincade."

"Hold it," Sam said. "Don't do anything foolish. "You're surrounded."

The soul-chilling click of a hammer being lifted back from half-cock sounded. Sam gritted teeth.

Then another voice spoke—a heavy bass voice, loaded with reality: "Freeze, baby! Rack it up!"

Bane disobeyed the third man in the *oubliette* and instinctively swung the light toward the niche from where the command had emanated, firing quickly into the crevice. Three sharp shots came back. Bane gasped at the impact of bullets and fell, dropping the light, which lay at an angle that still illumined Sam by the foot of the ladder.

Sam had been fascinated by the bursts of glare from the gunfire. He could see they came from the niche to his left, the empty one. But he wasted no more time. He dived for his own gun, which lay near him; it cast a long shadow in the throw of Bane's fallen flashlight.

"Freeze, Bear Paw! Don't touch it!"

Sam stopped.

The third man said, "I am Blackhawk. Do you read?"

"Five by five."

"Okay, Sam. *Now* pick it up. I didn't want you spraying this Irish ghetto with indiscriminate lead before I could identify. Go ahead."

Sam picked up the revolver and slid it into his belt. "How is Bane?"

"He's done."

"He asked."

"He got. I was firing up from my belly. They took him under the engine."

The voice was getting familiar. Sam Carson went forward on his hands and knees as Blackhawk reached for Bane's electric torch and set it on end, its beam hitting the ceiling of the tunnel and diffusing its harshness into a glow which lighted the entire *oubliette* pleasantly. He could see the third man now. The sight brought him agape, eyes bugged out. The third man said, "Okay, baby. Back to White Power."

"Balshakkar?"

But it wasn't really the old Balshakkar, not the blue-black savage from the Northern Frontier District, not the Kongoni-clad, big-lipped, arrogant Rendille with the mirrorlike shaved pate. Nor was it Balshakkar the London clown in his honky-tonky threads and his outlandish deerstalker cap. This Balshakkar was lean, real and large, dressed in black

turtleneck and black slacks, wearing black gloves. Except for his teeth, there was nothing about him to reflect a lumen of light. He was totally absorbent, and his intelligent eyes were alert and aware.

"Balshakkar?" Sam repeated.

"Not anymore," Blackhawk said, smiling as he enjoyed the surprise. "Old 'Shakkar is as dead as Simon Kincade. You heard the word. My real name is Pliny Martin, Sam." His black hand gleamed in the highlights of the wet wall reflections as he thrust it at Sam, who shook it gratefully. "We can exchange autographs later. Right now, we still have a problem."

As if to confirm him, the *Poseidon* blew three blasts on her horn. The mouth of the tunnel caught the stentorian belches and nearly deafened them. Three blasts meant her engines were in reverse, but this was only a ruse for shore watchers. She still had not moved, although the clinking of the bow anchor's chain was pealing in click-cadence as the winch raised the hook.

"They're expecting a delivery," Pliny said. "Shall we empty the bag and fill it with rocks and send it down?"

Sam said, "We'll send them a very proper delivery. Give me your belt."

He stripped off his own, stowed his gun in a pocket, accepted Pliny's belt and married them into one long thong. He passed this under the arms and around the shoulders of Francis Bane's broken corpse. Pliny finally understood what he was doing. Sam closed the belt. Pliny helped him raise Bane's body until they could hang the belt on one of the traveling blocks. Then they lifted his hips and, using Bane's own belt, hooked it onto the other traveling block.

"Kwaheri," Pliny said.

Sam slipped Bane's body forward to the point where the incline began. Then he gave it a hard shove out of the mouth of the *oubliette.* It coursed down toward the waiting ship at an angle of fifteen degrees. It gathered speed rapidly; the incline steepened under its own weight. Bane's head lolled gruesomely, his long legs dangled, his big hands seemed to flop on the swaying line like a flying albatross. His demolished heart spated blood out of the holes in his chest and back every foot of the way.

At the mizzen's yard, the two crewmen who were to receive the black valise recognized the fact that this bundle was not on the bill of lading. They shrank away from the bloody

mess, leaving the dead man to crash sickeningly into the mast itself. There were yells of terrified repugnance and then of quick alarm.

"Bon voyage," Sam Carson said.

3

PLINY MARTIN had leased a handsome little MG sedan in Cork. The boot was barely big enough to receive the black waterproof valise. They had left the *oubliette* through the hatch so that they could drop the concrete lid down and replace the handle-hiding stone. They also retrieved Sam's sou'wester from the other cell. Pliny had kept Bane's 9-mm. Walthers pistol as a souvenir.

"How the hell did you get down there ahead of him?" Sam said.

Pliny smiled. "I dogged you and the girl this afternoon. Found the hatch after you left."

"I never saw you."

"I don't glow much in the dark," Pliny said. "Anyway, I figured no one could get there first without Whitey seeing the stone disturbed, so I borrowed Jacob's ladder in Kinsale and pegged to the top of the cliff and went down to the mouth of the tube the hard way, on the outside." He retrieved the ladder and stowed it.

"Then it was you who triggered my body tag."

Pliny chuckled. "Sam, I've been triggering you ever since you came to Africa. Remember that first night when you were at the New Stanley in Nairobi? After you got back from the Boma Club?"

Sam nodded. That had mystified him at the time. "And up at Newmarket at the King's Arms?"

"Affirmative." Pliny started the engine of the MG and goosed the accelerator. "That was my bag, baby. NSA elected me as your nanny."

"You sure covered ground."

"When you're number two, you try a little harder." Pliny put the car into gear, and they left Charles Fort behind them. "Not that you didn't reverse the process once or twice. Like that day when you zipped those cheetahs! Oh my God!" Pliny shook his head. "How come you chased those damned cats?"

"There wasn't anything else left to do," Sam said, "after you blew the thirty-oh-six magazine. You haven't hunted much?"

"Only men."

"Well, you see, it'd worked for me before. If you haven't got an animal trapped or wounded, he'll usually run if you come at him like King Kong. I just took the chance. What was your job before the mission?"

"Special agent, FBI, Los Angeles. I was nominated for this little gig sometime last April. I guess while they were soul-washing you, I was getting the same kind of paint up in the NFD. There wasn't any time really to learn Rendille, but I did put in some pretty good work with Swahili."

"I think we'd better check the commander," Sam said.

"No way." Pliny found the main road and trounced on the pedal hard. "We are blown. My job is you. We are going to split for the high ground."

"We're both armed," Sam said, his voice flinty. "He may need help. We'll check in."

Pliny stared at him, the black eyes momentarily diamond-hard. Then he eased up on the pedal. "You are one obstinate sonofabitch," Pliny said. "You and Kincade have a lot in common." He braked the Cortina to a halt in front of Blackrock Cottage and kept the engine noisy while Sam ran inside. Sam was back in an instant, waving to come and wearing an expression which told Pliny the worst. Pliny killed the engine, took the keys, pulled Bane's pistol and joined him.

"The Fukimora girl, obviously," Sam said. In her death throes, her body had automatically urinated and defecated, and she lay askew in a stew of blood and feces. Sam wondered what she had looked like. You couldn't tell now. (My God, was this what had happened to Melisande?)

Pliny said, "The man was hit." He indicated Sampson's bloodstain across the room. "Somebody helped him out. You can see his toe marks dragging through the blood. He may have a chance wherever he is."

"You're pretty good."

Pliny shook his head worriedly. "Sam, we've got to make dust and fast. But first we'll have to dump that lady. We'll use your raincoat. Keep the crud from leaving a clue trail for the Irish fuzz. Wrap her up in it. I'll haul her back and dump her in the tunnel. Meanwhile, you get a swab and soap and water."

"You've got it."

It took forty more minutes before Pliny showed again. Sam mopped as best he could, wondering if Sampson was dead or alive. He kept the revolver ready at his waist for instant skinning, but the only one he had to draw on was Pliny, when he returned without knocking.

"What about the radio gear?" Pliny asked.

"It's part of the MI six operation. Sir Julian's men will handle it. Let's hit the scout. I feel shadows on my back."

They drove to Cork in cautious trepidation, but when they reached the airport, the Starflights of the night had been terminated. It was a quarter past 1:00 A.M.

"We'd have been squares to take the plane anyhow," Pliny Martin said. His eyes were getting wearily red-veined. "Keyhole would be a cinch to have a watch on all aircraft tonight. Just as well we blew it."

"What then?"

"I figure we drive to Wexford and take the British Rail ferry there." Wexford was a dreary one hundred miles northeast.

"You can't take this car out of Ireland," Sam said.

"We leave it in Wexford and walk aboard. You have any bread?" Sam nodded that he was heap loaded. "Then we'll rent a set of wheels over in Fishguard and run for the hole-in-the-wall before we come down with an acute case of assassination." He took a breath. "Okay, Bwana M'Cowboy?"

"One thing," Sam said, nodding. "The bag. It's loaded with loot. We can't take it into England. Customs will go up in smoke and burn us with it. We'll have to leave it in Ireland until McCabe picks it up later."

"No sweat," Pliny said. "We'll drive to Wexford, like I said. We can park the bag in one of those lockers. Lemme think. Sure. The North Railway Station. We have to take a CIE train from there to Rosslare Harbor anyhow to take the boat. Wait a minute. See how good I remember my briefing? The train costs three shillings, four pence. Forty cents. How about that?"

Sam grinned. "You're so smart you make yourself sick. Move this mother."

They reached the outskirts of Wexford after 3:00 A.M. They realized that even with the annual Festival of Opera, Wexford's gayest gala, the town would be shut up tighter than an after-hours pub. So they parked in a caravan layby and slept in the Cortina until daybreak.

At Wexford, they cached Ravensmith's black valise in a locker in the North Railway Station on Redmond Place, then took the train for Rosslare Harbor, thirteen miles away. By midmorning, they were both happily seasick in the slashing northeasterly chop of St. George's Channel. They arrived in Fishguard eight hours later, miserable, and decided to take the train into London. It was nearly midnight when they finally reached the Mews, where Littlesky almost cut Pliny's throat.

4

AN HOUR LATER, Littlesky was still wary of Pliny. He could not get used to the fact that Pliny was on the side of the angels. Even Hackenbush watched Pliny askance, keeping his Browning .38 handily in his right coat pocket.

Pliny said patiently, "Don't you see? Commander Sampson knew your hotel suite was bugged, that Keyhole was listening. So if they could hear an African *shifta* like me laying it on Kincade, he figured they would move in faster, get the ball rolling."

"How is the commander?" Sam Carson asked.

"On the mend," Willy said. "I guess you two bucks don't know the latest. It wasn't Sampson who shot the Nipponese maiden. It was Charlie Ravensmith."

Pliny stared. "You putting us on?"

"Straight tongue."

Sam's stomach began to hurt dully, as if he had developed an ulcer over the last months. "It doesn't make any goddam lick of sense!"

"Unless he's trying to cop the plea," Pliny said thoughtfully. "Unless he feels the jig is up—"

"Don't say jig," Willy remarked. "It's racist."

"—and he's going to buck for clemency, go over to Queen's Evidence and avoid the rope."

Sam shook his head. "That won't ride the bronc. There hasn't been a capital hanging in England for some time. So he'd draw life. That's no choice. I don't get it." He looked gloomy.

5

SIR JULIAN KEYS had actually used a different espionage cell for the Irish operation. He had mustered seven veteran agents out of MI 5, the British organization for internal counterespionage, under the command of an Orangeman from Ballycastle, named Captain Tyrone Ffyn. The name was unlikely, the man even more so. Captain Ffyn seemed to be a red-faced, gray-haired, gay-hearted lushington. Bland and slow-moving, he was nonetheless a lightning calculator, with an astonishing instinct for the nefarious. He had left his team in Kinsale to watch the *Poseidon* and its cargo, while he himself had taken a post on the little beach at Summer Cove, far below Charles Fort. There he had heard the remote gunfire in the cavern, and there through his binoculars he had seen the gruesome transfer of Bane's body to the mizzen mast. He didn't know, at that time, whose corpse had ridden the rope. He drove back to Kinsale quickly and telephoned Sir Julian at Bayswater station.

"Ffyn here," he said. "*Poseidon* has sailed with somebody's carrion. Might be one of the Yanks. I couldn't tell."

"Best check Blackrock Cottage. This wasn't planned. We may have a thorough cockup."

"Yes, sir."

By the time Captain Ffyn reached Blackrock Cottage, both Pliny and Sam had departed, after dumping the body of Miss Fukimora and cleaning up the swill. But Captain Ffyn was too old a hand not to read sign.

"Sir?" he said on the blower to Bayswater. "We have a bad patch here. There's been a bit of shooting. I counted seven splashes on the walls, all one way. God only knows who was clobbered. No bods. Half-arsed attempt to wipe away the waste. No sign of Paul Revere. No word from the Yanks. All the communications gear left behind."

"Have you contacted Miss O'Faolain?" Sir Julian asked, hoping for the best.

"Affirmative, sir. Knows nothing. Paul Revere dismissed her after your relay."

"Captain, you will dismantle the communications station and pack it in until further word. About the *Poseidon*, did your men get a chance to pop an eye at the clagger?"

"Affirmative, sir. The gear is rife with narcotics."

"Do the Irish Customs know it yet?"

"I think not, sir. Shall we inform?"

"Not quite yet." Sir Julian was masking his turmoil splendidly. "We shall hang it up a bit, Captain. Remain at station. Keep in touch."

The long night passed interminably (while Sam and Pliny wended toward Wexford). Sir Julian remained at the Bayswater station. He was stiff and funky when the phone roused him just after 7:00 A.M. Cork hospital was calling.

Commander Sampson related everything in detail, even though he sounded dreadfully weak, but his mind was clear. He had already invented his cover story, how he had been robbed and shot by a footpad in the Kinsale suburbs and was rescued by an Australian named Charles Ravensmith, to whom all honor. Was there any word from Bear Paw and Blackhawk? There was not. Would he inform the American Embassy? He would, immediately.

Sir Julian digested all this and decided the time had come to have a go at it. After calling the Embassy and informing them of their national's bullet-ridden condition, he pushed his own switch.

He ordered Captain Ffyn to inform the Irish authorities of the nature of the *Poseidon*'s cargo, which rested in a Kinsale warehouse, awaiting delivery.

He informed the Admiralty to execute a previously agreed-on plan, Code ORCA, to keep the *Poseidon* within British territorial waters and prevent her running for the open sea. She was to be forced around Lizard Head into an anchorage at Plymouth, even if they had to sink her in the shadow of the Eddystone Light.

He informed British Customs of the nature of the *Poseidon*'s lading so that Inland Revenue might ready their teams for search and seizure at Plymouth.

Later on, while he was eating a miserable breakfast of cold scrambled eggs, rusty bacon, insipid coffee and the inevitable cold toast, he received a max-sec top-sec from GWIFA, informing him that the cavalry would arrive at Croydon on the following morning, an Air Force 707, which would receive Bear Paw, Fustigator, Graywolf and Blackhawk at 0400 hours and ho for the Colonies!

It was good news for the Yanks, except that the morning newspaper had told him that Graywolf would not be making the voyage. Her body had been found in Hyde Park. Gray-

wolf, as he knew, was Mrs. Tess Maddox. It saddened him deeply. He had been mildly rude to the old trout (only to speed things along, of course), and he had intended to apologize. That would be impossible now. He regretted it. Scotland Yard was handling the homicide.

Following this doleful information, he held a council to discuss the amazing behavior of Charles Ravensmith, but this was quickly scattered by the intelligence reports of his MI 6 agents in London.

Keyhole was evacuating.

6

SIR JULIAN KEYS was flabbergasted, a state of mind he loathed. There was no reason on earth for the abrupt disintegration. But there it loomed, as plain as Maggie's drawers, on all the detailed incoming reports from the various surveillances and wiretaps he had overlaid on The Seven Needles. Couturier Henry Dieu had departed for Paris on an early BEA flight, returning to the luxury of his rococo *appartement* on Avenue George V. He had not paused to await the return of his closet queen, Francis Bane, nor could he have known at the time that Bane had perished.

Miss Buffy Pristine had booked passage via BOAC for Rabat, Morocco, the 10:00 A.M. flight (Sir Julian's watch informed him that she was already airborne), obviously to return in panic to her walled Moorish villa in Marrakesh on Avenue Arabe. She had canceled her Montebank engagement without due course and scurried for the leeside of life.

Dicky Dickerson had departed on the 9:00 A.M. Swissair flight from London to Zurich, to hole up in his suite at the Baur-au-Lac Hotel and visit his money in the secret-numbered account of a local bank.

Lady Dara Henley had suddenly been infused with a tremendous nostalgia for the shores of home. She had reserved accommodations on the TWA four-o'clock flight to New York, her first visit to the United States in five years. Otherwise, she was still in residence at her home in Belgravia, prior to departure. No one had entered or left that residence. Hutchins, her steward and chauffeur, had been seen packing her Lamborghini with her luggage.

Charles Ravensmith had already vanished from sight in Cork, twelve hours previously.

Now what was *this?* Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Hywel were departing for the south of France via BEA, for a touch of sun in old Provence, after the toil of their various roles.

Only Vittorio Tarantella had not called his usual airline. Alitalia, for a sudden jaunt to Naples. He was still at the Montebank.

All these abrupt departures, and the fact that they made no sense, galvanized Sir Julian. The situation was completely evert. Here he had four blown Yanks, flapping to leave England in fear of their lives. Yet, simultaneously, six of The Seven Needles were breaking for the earth's haystacks with even more celerity.

Without a traditional hem or a haw, Sir Julian delivered the search warrants he had sworn out earlier and sent his agents to search and seize British Electro Limited in the Tottenham Towers at Oxford and Duke.

As a worried afterthought, he buzzed intercom to the Mews phone and raised Hackenbush. "Under no circumstances must Mr. Littlesky nor any of the American chaps lay hands on a newspaper, or it'll be your bloody arse if they do!"

"Right, sir," Hackenbush said hollowly, wishing he had stayed in the CID instead of improving his position.

Sir Julian hung up savagely. He twisted his moustaches and stomped the dusty rug of the station in dark dudgeon, hands clasped behind him, mewing desolate sounds to himself, completely aweing his staff. Where in the bloody hell was Sam Carson? Why in the bleeding world didn't he check in? Had it been his bod which had gone to sea? He didn't want to think about that. He found that he had grown extremely fond of the Yank, and it would be a filthy lot indeed if Sam had caught the packet just as he was coming in from the cold.

Then the bad news began.

The raid at British Electro was executed. The entire eighth floor of the corporation's space was empty. Not a living soul stirred up there on the Tottenham spires. The directional antennas were all dead. There were no files, no records of messages, no logbooks, not even soiled ashtrays or cigarette stubs.

There'd be a bit of nuisance about that, Sir Julian ruminated. His swearing out warrants without evidence and then

ending up the same way. The devil with it. Now it was *really* time to get cracking and gather hard data before he wound up with empty hands, begging an apology from the PM like a penniless bluegown.

"Hackenbush, give me the ruddy Indian!"

"Yes, sir."

Hackenbush didn't get a chance to tell Willy Sir Julian wanted him. The Shoshoni anxiously snatched the handset from him. "Is there any smoke on Bear Paw?"

"Not a twitter."

"Pappy, I'm getting goddam worried."

"Now, now," Sir Julian said cheerfully. "He's rather a hardy type. I'm sure he'll find his way."

"That hazy half-breed couldn't find his way out of a moss-covered pudendum!"

Sir Julian sniffed to terminate this kind of ribaldry. "Do you still have that tape of Tarantella which you recorded in the lift?"

"Yop," Willy said. "Are we going to bust the joint finally?"

"*We* are, not you."

"No me, no tape."

"Now see here, Littlesky—"

"Pappy, grow a heart. I'm going fruity here staring at the pride of Paddington. Besides," he added dryly, "there won't be any danger with *you* around."

"I don't think it provident—"

"Remember what happened the last time things popped. You may need my muscle. I'm a damned good shot."

Sir Julian sighed. "Very well. But there will be no shooting, I trust. Inform Hackenbush. We'll pick you up in fifteen minutes."

Willy hastily dressed in pale Levis, high Apache boots and a buckskin jacket. From the supply closet he chose two nickel-plated double-barreled derringers for his armament. They were minuscule, but they happened to fire two .38-caliber Magnum cartridges each. He slipped them into his back pockets, the way the old-timers used to carry their Peacemakers. He also slipped eight extra rounds in his jacket and slid the Green River down into its sheath inside the left moccasin. He was so excited that he nearly forgot the tape player.

Since the Montebank did not serve luncheon, the club was sparsely tenanted. It was too early for gambling. Sir Julian stationed two armed men at the gazebo in the maze, out

back, in case anybody tried to run for cover that way. He left two more men at the front door to pinch off that exit. Then he, Littlesky, Hackenbush and Hooligan stepped into the lift.

Littlesky had previously run the tape down to Tarantella's command. He flicked on the switch. Tarantella's voice said, "Four." The lift ascended as Littlesky stowed the small machine.

After that, with the exception of Vittorio Tarantella himself, the rest was almost pure anticlimax.

They stepped into the big room, with its fabulous array of reproduced art and documents. Tarantella was seated at his desk. They covered him with the ugly mouths of their gun barrels, but this was unnecessary. Tarantella, code name Seam, was dead. His right arm hung at his side, still holding a .45-caliber Webley revolver in a death grip, which was unusual. The bullet hole was in Tarantella's head, right side, just above the ear. There were powder burns.

"Still warm," Hooligan said thinly. "Bought the packet within the hour."

Sir Julian was studying the scene. Completely bonkers, the entire affair.

Hooligan said, "I don't like the gun hand."

"It happens," Sir Julian said. "Cortex shock, convulses the muscles before the gun can drop."

"He was murdered," Hooligan said.

"Let's not chip up that sort of muck," Sir Julian reprimanded him. "That's for the Yard to decide, in any case. You stay here with the remains and search out this whole flat thoroughly. You two, come along. All right, my young friend, where is this other lift?"

Willy went to the huge portrait of the Queen. "Beg your pardon, ma'am," he said as he put his hands on the gold frame and fiddled with it for some time before he found where it was hinged, on the right side. He peeled it back. The portrait was a complete door, covering the second lift, which was tiny. They had to squeeze into it, tightly packed. There was only one button. Sir Julian had to use his elbow to send the cage down.

When they hit the subcellar and the door skidded open, they burst out of the cage in three different directions, all armed and ready for shootout. After a heavy moment, they paused, took their second breaths and then began to feel silly. They carefully uncocked.

The old air-raid cellar was like a necropolis. All the machinery of eavesdrop was still there, banks of tape recorders, one arrogant computer, a gam of high-frequency radio receivers, a bevy of high-power transmitters and enough steel filing cabinets along one wall to be melted down into an armored tank. But the machinery was turned completely off. Not a hum, nor a light, nor a whirl, nor a click. The silence was strangely sinister.

"I wouldn't touch those files," Littlesky said. "Ten to one they're rigged to blow if you don't open them the right way."

"Thanks awfully," Sir Julian chirped. "I'm a bit of a novice at this sort of thing."

Littlesky grinned, abashed.

Hackenbush said, "One of them has been opened, sir. Look here. An entire deck of folders is missing. Somebody has pinched off the golden goose."

Sir Julian nodded. "I dare say." He walked around the extensive perimeter of the subcellar, making desolate sparrow sounds to himself, in respect for the organization of the operation.

Littlesky, meanwhile, examined the lockers. "Get a load of this," he said emptily. "I mean, those people were really gung-ho. Over here the files are marked 'Personnel' with each file pegged into a world location—Hong Kong, Paris, Rome, London, Tokyo. And over here, this group holds the listing for 'Clients' with their locations bunched."

Hackenbush said, "This open file is marked 'Top Secret—Executive.' "

"Of course," Sir Julian murmured. "*That* is the one we needed. These others are just poor damned souls, whether or not they are clients or personnel. They can be easily informed or prosecuted, as the case may be. It was evidence on The Seven Needles we required."

Littlesky was thoughtful. "Sir Julian, did your club have enough stuff to cause this Keyhole blowup?"

"Nothing *they* knew."

"In other words, Keyhole jaybirded itself."

"Precisely."

Littlesky slammed one closed fist hard into an open palm with a stinging smack. "Why?"

Sir Julian shrugged forlornly.

7

MI 6 HAD HAD the task of checking the blown Americans out of their respective hotels and of delivering their bags and trunks secretly to the Mews, no mean feat in itself. So after Pliny Martin had finished his shower and had had his broad black back dried by Sam (who then went back to shaving), he changed into a handsome conservative gray suit and joined Littlesky in the parlor.

"Nice threads, man," Littlesky said, a trifle startled by the sight of Pliny out of kongoni kaross or ludicrous deerstalker. "You don't look half so ugly. Matter of fact, you remind me of a Bahaman friend of mine named Poitier. You want any more flit?"

"No thanks," Pliny said. "You know something, Willy? It's the first time in six months I've been able to wear my own clothes."

"I'll make a note for *Harper's Bazaar*," Willy said absently. He was watching Hackenbush.

"Something wrong?" Pliny asked.

Willy gave him a dead-eyed look and a small hand sign not to press. *"Pole-pole."*

"Ndio." Pliny was puzzled.

The electronic bolts skidded, and the sound brought them all to their feet alertly. Hackenbush shoved his pencil into an upper pocket and laid his crossword puzzle down on a side table. He pulled his Browning and took his place behind the door. Littlesky joined him.

"I don't need any assistance," Hackenbush said haughtily. "Besides, it's probably your dinner, which you are ruddy lucky to get at this hour of the night." It was past 1:00 A.M. and Pliny and Sam were ravenous after kecking their bellies empty into St. George's Channel.

It was indeed their dinner, trayed in by two of Sir Julian's agents drawn from Claridge's kitchens. While Hackenbush was checking their IDs and maître d'ing the placement of the food, Littlesky picked up the crossword puzzle, slipped the main news section of the newspaper out from its folded containment within the second section and quietly stowed it inside his jacket. Pliny, watching him, prepared to distract Hackenbush from turning. Littlesky placed the second sec-

tion of the newspaper with the puzzle on the side table exactly as Hackenbush had left it, then strolled into one of the bedrooms and closed the door, after telling Pliny, "Start without me. But spare me some caviar." Since there was no caviar, Hackenbush spared him a glance of Paddington *hauteur.*

Willy sat on the bed and unfolded the newspaper carefully, not rustling it. He had drawn the *Daily Express* final edition of that Monday morning. He scanned page one. That was all it took. His heart went heavy.

"Sorry, Mama," he said sadly.

He stowed the paper inside his jacket again and left the bedroom. Pliny had started eating the potted shrimp. He paused when he saw the pale hue of Willy's coppery face. *"Tuliza,"* Willy said in Swahili. It meant "Keep calm."

In the bathroom, Sam Carson had finished scraping off his rough beard and was slapping Green Jockey Club on the rawness which the blade had left. Littlesky closed the door and locked it.

"Wacikun," Willy replied in Shoshoni to Sam's silent question. "Heap bad medicine." He handed Sam the front page and sat down on the closed toilet seat. His Indian face had no expression; his eyes had acquired that ominous lackluster they always employed to obscure true feeling.

It was not a pretty epitaph. Littlesky watched the hardening of Sam's jaw and tired to soften it with his own sound. "I suspected," he said very quietly. "While I was waiting for you guys, not knowing what had happened to you in Ireland, I kept asking for the local newspapers. There was always some cop-out. Hackenbush isn't much of a hambone. I could see Sir Julian had tipped him to keep the smoke away from us. So when I got a chance—"

Sam was silent, nor did he react to Willy. He read the considerable story word for word. It dealt with the fact that the CID of Scotland Yard had finally made identification of the headless female corpse found floating in the Serpentine of Hyde Park late Saturday night, in a garish homicide the *Express* had already dubbed "the Mau-Mau murder." Her head had not been found until noon Sunday, discovered by a Hyde Park gardener on the rim of a marigold bed, perched on a sharp stick, eyeless. The eyes were individually roosted on a pair of sharp twigs, speared into the loam, on either side of her head. Which confirmed the torture marks on her body and the fact that this was essentially a repetition of the

old Mau-Mau oath-taking rites in the Aberdare Mountains of Kenya, in 1953. The carrion had finally been identified as Mrs. Tess Maddox, an American citizen, noted researchist for the American Museum of Natural History, a member of the staff of the National Geographic Society, Washington, and an honorary director of the Smithsonian Institution.

Sam folded the newspaper very carefully and handed it back to Willy. He sat down on the edge of the tub. There were memories flickering. Willy could almost see them, like movie film printed in negative. They suddenly ceased. Sam rose abruptly, leaned over the washbasin and stared into the water-spotted mirror, seeing nothing.

Willy intentionally interrupted the fulminating introspection: "Which trail do we ride, Bear Paw?"

Sam dropped his eyes to the edge of the washbasin where his tube of mint shaving cream lay, its top still unscrewed. After an interminable pause, he picked up the tube and carefully squeezed out a worm of the cream. He painted two ominous lines across his high cheekbones and a third on his chin, the Shoshoni sign for war play. Then he turned his face to Willy and stared at him without seeing him.

"I thought you'd never say it," Littlesky said.

8

TWO DAYS LATER, the warpath converged, at the luxurious bar of the Es Saadi Hotel in Marrakesh. Each straggled in by various airlines from various climes, all discouraged. They had flown far and fast but in utter frustration. They had fought the losing fight. The flickering hope of Dulcy Quinn's survival was very faint. They knew it. Travel-worn, they sipped a local Sidi Larbi red wine, wondering about the apocalypse which had presaged them.

"It's dusking," Sam said quietly. He was very remote. "We'll mosey on down through the Djemaa-el-Fna as soon as it's dark. To kill time."

"I hope that's all we've killed," Pliny said.

Sam looked at him.

Littlesky broke the intensity of that look. "What's this Djemaawhateveryousaid?"

"The greatest show on earth," Sam replied, still looking at Pliny. "Been on the boards for a century or three. The

Marrakesh Mart. You can buy a key of kif and a narghile to smoke it up, right on down to a Mauritian maiden with Lassa fever and seven plus clap. . . . *You* were saying?"

"Forget it," Pliny said.

"*That* will be difficult."

"Oh, hell, Sam. You know damned well you had blood in your eye when we left London. I'll admit when I got to Paris and found out what had happened, I couldn't shake the feeling that you'd beaten me there."

"You're lovely."

"Don't get sore."

"I felt the same in Zurich," Willy said.

"And when we find Buffy Pristine dead, then you too fantasts are going to figure I put the slug on her?"

They were silent.

"Lovely. Beautiful." Sam paid for the bottle of wine, his eyes gone Indian.

"Sam, you don't really think she's gone?" Willy said. He looked frightened.

Sam strolled out of the bar without glancing back. Cowed, they trailed him to the street. A thinning moon hung over Avenue Mohammed V, where the air-conditioned hotels sprouted like toadstools and the glittery pelts of Rolls-Royces and Cadillacs brightened the street in their passing (a far cry from the sinister shadows of the native medinas). Sam looked up into the starlit sky, finally locating Polaris through the glare, and then, oriented, turned and pointed south-southeast.

He said harshly to Willy, "I think your golden girl is worm meat, kiddie." Willie looked stricken, but, like Pliny, his eyes were compelled to follow Sam's outstretched arm. "That's where it all began," Sam continued more quietly. "Out there, you'll find a trace, fit only for caravans. You stay on that trace for fifty-two camel days and you'll reach a shitty little place called Timbuctoo. That's where a TV film-maker named Doremus discovered the first bodies spilt into the Sahara by a club called Keyhole."

He turned to them, his eyes once again compassionate. "And now you think *I'm* the pale rider with the scythe? You poor witless sonsofbitches. Haven't you figured out yet what's going on?"

9

PLINY MARTIN considered the question a challenge. His legal mind accepted it and transported him back to the Mews in the wee small hours of that morning when Sam Carson had overpowered Hackenbush (to that gentleman's breathless astonishment) and manacled him to a water pipe in a bedroom.

Pliny said, "What the hell's going on?"

"You can unlock him after a while," Sam said. "Give us at least an hour's start and your word you won't jape to Sir Julian until we're off and running."

"I don't know what *the* hell you're talking about!" Pliny was angry. "You two cats know we are being picked up in one hour for the ride to Croydon. Have you forgotten we're flying home at oh-four-hundred hours?"

"*You* have a good trip, Pliny," Sam said. "*We* ain't going. It's been too much, too long. We're not quitting now. We'll show those sweet mothers a few Injun tricks that'll make them rave like an Arkansas senator. They're not going to peel off and away. Not while I've got blood to spill."

"Christ, Sam, you'll have all the law on your back. You'll be renegades. You'll have NSA on the trail and MI six and God knows what others if you wing it on your own. Leave it to the law before McCabe disappears you!"

"I left it to the law. *Kuisha.* Now we'll do it my way. Have we got your word?"

Pliny was completely befuddled. "You can't walk out on me like this."

"Fine." Sam smiled. "We've got plenty of room if you've a mind." That was all there was to it. They armed from the supply closet. Each took a portable mini tape recorder.

(I must have been fruitcake, Pliny thought, but nobody twisted my arm.)

Before they left the Mews, Sam called the Dorchester Hotel and asked for Charles Ravensmith. Enquiries there told him that Mr. Ravensmith had left early Sunday morning and had not yet returned. Sam shook his head vaguely. "It doesn't shine."

They didn't linger. They left the Mews phone off the hook so that Sir Julian would think the line was busy. They couldn't take the chance of waiting any longer. Sir Julian

and his men might arrive at any moment to safeguard their flight from England.

It was 2:00 A.M., no time to be wandering the reaches of London like footpads. Sam gave Willy and Pliny each ten thousand dollars from his overweight Michigan bankroll. They chartered a hackney for a trip to London Airport and held a powwow en route.

Sir Julian had made the error of informing Littlesky of the Keyhole departures in full detail. They made plans on that basis.

"Hold the phone," Pliny said. "So we overtake them, then what are we supposed to do? Start a pogrom?"

Sam's face was granite. "Tune in, pard. These Gilas are heading for home. Even if the law had something on them —which it doesn't—they can't be extradited overnight. They're fading out of England. In a couple of days, they'll fade out of Europe. Lady Dara Henley isn't really heading for New York. That's pure track-wipe to lead MI six down a blind sloot. She'll book the Indonesian airlines for a toboggan to Hong Kong. Buffy Pristine isn't settling down to never-more-roam at her Marrakesh quonset. She's grabbing her loot and her bijous and heading for Hong Kong. Henry Dieu hasn't gone back to Avenue Montaigne to ready his spring collections. He's gone for his valuables and ho for Hong Kong. Dicky Dickerson is off to Zurich to pluck his pillage and pull his posts before he zooms east. God knows where Charlie Ravensmith is, nor how many passports he has, but it's a sure thing he'll be heading for Hong Kong. Hong Kong is where the Keyhole loot is. And that means Hong Kong is where the heart is. We're going to stop them."

"We don't have any warrants," Pliny said.

"Stop thinking like fuzz," Sam said. "Your gun is your warrant. Plus some imagination. I don't care if you tie up these fuckers and spread gunpowder around them and flip cigarette butts at them, I want them to talk. I want one of them to break. Somewhere, in an operation like this, there are hard records which will hang them high. I want that information, no matter how we get it."

"We can't."

"Graywolf was a friend of mine," Sam said.

Pliny looked unhappy. Littlesky said, "Sam, Sir Julian may have everybody and his Glasegian brother up on the watchtower by the time we get to the airport. How do we bust out?"

"You're the only one with a problem. You have one passport in your own name. So you draw Dicky Dickerson. You buy a ticket to Zurich via El Al airlines. That's Jewish. The Fedayeen have been bombing so many Israeli planes, you won't have a problem getting a seat."

"Thanks a lot."

"And Sir Julian might not think of El Al at all."

"Got it."

"Pliny and I both have two passports. Our own, and the phonies in the name of Balshakkar and Simon Kincade. We'll use those identities because Sir Julian won't believe that we would endanger ourselves by dropping back to the blown identities. He thinks we're still in danger from Keyhole." Sam's voice took on an icy cheerfulness. "Actually, it's the other way around."

Pliny didn't like any of it. "Whom do I draw?"

"Henry Dieu," Sam said. "You'll fly to Paris via Air France. You'll hole up in the Raphael Hotel, Avenue Kleber, under your Balshakkar name. You'll be the courier. Willy will report to you there from Zurich. I will report to you there from Nice."

"What's in Nice?" Pliny asked.

"Gerald Hywel and Rachel Derry," Sam said. "Two nice spaced-out catamounts, just waiting for a proper pelting. They have plenty to tell and they'll be glad to tell it by the time I stake them out in an anthill."

"Easy!" Pliny said.

Sam blinked. "I'm just going to separate them from their juice, buddy boy. Cold turkey."

"That'll do it," Willy said.

Pliny asked, "Suppose we don't find any of these people. How far do we take this stakeout?"

"All the way to Hong Kong," Sam said. "You've got enough money. There's more if you need it. If anyone of us gets nipped by Sir Julian's kindergarten keepers, he buttons his lip and gets shipped home. The others continue the mission. Any questions?"

"Yes," said Littlesky, squirming on the seat in discomfort. "Where is the men's room?"

Pliny Martin encountered no problems. He left on an Air France plane at 7:00 A.M. for Paris and arrived one hour later at Le Bourget. He took a *fiacre* into the city and booked himself into the Raphael, a charming hotel in the sixteenth arrondissement, not a block away from the Etoile, where

he could see the Arc de Triomphe looming from his bedroom window. He was awed. He had never been to Paris before. It was very exciting. He could not speak a word of French. As a native Californian, he had popped for Spanish, since—as a young attorney from Watts—he expected most of his clients to be *chicanos*. But there was no problem. When he called the Raphael operator to send out for a Berlitz phrase book, he found she spoke very good Americanese, acquired from the many movie troupers which had haunted the hotel during foreign filming. "You are a friend of Monsieur Dieu?" the operator asked when he put in a person-to-person to Les Sept Aiguilles.

"We're *pals*," Pliny lied, noting the sudden tragic tone in her voice.

"Then I have bad news for you," the operator said. "I will send you the newspaper."

The room steward arrived shortly with something called *Le Monde*. Its headline read DIEU EST MORT! The *garçon* translated the story for him. God is dead. Not Jehovah God. Henry God. The famed couturier, code name Hem, had jumped or fallen to a cemetery plot in Père Lachaise from the balcony of his *auvant*, his penthouse, on Avenue George Cinq, sometime around noon the previous day, shortly after his arrival from London.

It was *très triste* but true.

It was then Pliny had shamefacedly put aside his instant suspicion that Sam had done the pushing. The time made that impossible. Whoever had nudged God into heaven had been waiting for him up there, high among the *toits* of Paris.

10

THE LEBANESE guerrillas did not plant a bomb on Littlesky's El Al jet, nor had Sir Julian planted his name among those miscreants to be detained by Customs. Littlesky made a safe landing at the Flughafen Kloten north of Zurich at 9:30 A.M. and by ten he had registered at the luxurious Baur-au-Lac Hotel, having acquired a ten-tepee suite for heap wampum. He was soon ensconced in his quarters devouring a mammoth Swiss breakfast and enjoying a view of a buxom Swiss *mädchen* named Bertholde. When she brought

fresh towels, he regarded her openly with an exsufflicated sense of his own prowess, little realizing that all Swiss maidens—no matter how attractive, and no matter what the stability of the Swiss franc—are born with a dream of American dollars and an insatiable urgency to emigrate to a fantasy called California. After he had flashed all of his teeth and most of Sam's money, he had her hooked, unaware that he had simultaneously gaffed himself.

He was lucky. Before coition transpired and while his lustful body digested breakfast, he telephoned the front desk. "This is William Littlesky in suite seven-oh-five," he announced arrogantly. "I understand an old friend of mine is honoring your humble *auberge*. Mr. Richard Dickerson?"

The respectful silence told him everything.

"*Quel dommage . . .*"

"I fail to grab your meaning."

"Herr Dickerson *was* a guest, sir. Unfortunately—but you do not know?"

"I do not know."

"He is dead, sir."

Littlesky sighed. The news instantly relieved him of unpleasant responsibilities and considerable hazard. He thought, I could have phoned it in. "That is shocking," he said gloomily. "Could I bet the queen on it, pard?"

"Absolutely," the clerk said when he finally understood. "Forgive me for the bearing of bad news. But it is true. His body is lying in *le morgue* if you care to confirm."

"No, no. . . . What happened?"

"He drowned."

"Where?"

"Probably in the Limmat River. The body was discovered floating in the Zurich Zee." There had been, apparently, an overhigh alcoholic content in the body. The police surmised that the saturated visitor had somersaulted into the river. There seemed to be no prospect of foul play; his money was intact, and his wallet was unpilfered.

"When?" Willy asked, quickly suspicious of Sam.

"Late last night," the clerk said. He added with Helvetian pomposity, "Who dances with the devil must pay the piper."

Willy replied gravely, "Back where I come from we always pay the tomtomer."

After that, he could not wait to flee. He retired into brief purdah to sweat out the day until the time of his scheduled telephone call to Pliny Martin in Paris. He carefully avoided

culminating the tacit pitch he had made with Bertholde, since he wanted, now, to be remembered by nobody. He hoped the desk clerk would not mention his curiosity to the *polizei*. He hoped to Wakan Tanka that Sir Julian's Baskervilles were not tailgating him. He tried to find something to occupy the hours, and in a local Baedeker, which he perused for distraction, he saw one item which titillated his frantic fancy, a *Kunsthaus* which was located nearby on the Ramistrasse. He ducked out and hurried right over there and was bitterly disappointed when it turned out to be an art museum.

11

THE CÔTE D' AZUR had doffed its frequently overcast drear and donned a mantle of sun-drenched sparkling freshness, with a clarity so transparent that one could detect—from the high windows of the Hotel Negresco—a cetean smudge on the far horizon southwest which might have been the island of Corsica one hundred miles away. It was as if nature had prepared Nice for Sam Carson's first view of it. Riding a taxi down the Promenade des Anglais, from the airstrip, Sam was impressed. He looked across the pebbly beach, at the sea, and wished remotely that Melisande could have seen this beauty. The tide was in full flood, at that trembling peak where the waters shimmer in a frenetic unstable glistening, as if there were millions of whitebait coursing just below the surface.

There was no time to waste, however. Like Littlesky, Sam was worried. Sir Julian was far from foolish; his long arm would be reaching out soon, God only knew how inexorably. Sam retired to his suite, high on the sea side of the hotel. Then, with the directory of tourist hotels, he began the interminable task of telephoning in search of Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Hywel. He was unable to locate them. He was puzzled. Their style insured the fact that they would hole up in at least a three-star hostel, though more likely a five.

Then the penny dropped. Of course! Like himself, they were running in obscurity. They would not travel under the Hywel name. Actors, without pressure, often played the incognito game. The Hywels, of all the Keyhole claptrappery,

carried more false passports than anybody else. Except perhaps Scissor.

Now then: Henry Lambeth? Unlikely. Too damned much trouble with the makeup, all of it making Hywel conspicuous. And the albino role for Rachel Derry would be an overstatement. Father Pierre le Cochon? Unlikely. A priest—even with the Roman Catholic revolution—simply did not bang around with a broad. No, the Hywels, who were geniuses at their craft, could only play the most anonymous of their various roles: Peter Pluxton and Sedonia Widdecomb. And that meant that they would hardly advertise their presence in an inn on the Promenade des Anglais. They would take up residence in a more conservative spot like the aging Hotel-d'Angleterre-et-de-Grande-Bretagne, which was headquarters for the local Rotary Club. He came up empty nevertheless on this one.

Then how about the three-star Hotel Marina, 11 rue St. Philippe? It was only five meters from the promenade, small, clean, very reasonable. Jackpot! The telephone clerk put him through to Mr. Pluxton's rooms at once and rang insistently. There was no reply.

Sam Carson left the Negresco instantly. He paused only to purchase a pair of suede driving gloves with knitted dorsals. He strode over to the Hotel Marina, took up a place at the writing desk and scribbled a note. It said, "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog." He sealed it thoroughly in a white envelope, wrote "Peter Pluxton" on the face. Then, adjusting his sunshades for maximum security, he handed it to the desk clerk. "Monsieur Pluxton does not answer," he said. "Please let him have this when he returns." At the same time, Sam distracted the clerk by exposing his clutter of *grisbi* and peeled off a crisp five-pount note (since he had not yet acquired any New Francs). The Frenchman's realistic eyes exploded in delight, and in the interim while Sam had trouble pulling the note out of the clip, the clerk hastily slotted the note into #503.

"*Merci,* monsieur!"

"*La même chose* to you, pard," Sam said.

After he had left the hotel, he found the service entrance and re-entered. He took the *ascenseur* up to the fifth and final floor of the Hotel Marina, located room 503, ignored the *Defense d'Entrer* warning on the knob and cockled the lock open with one of the pass keys he had brought from London. He was careful—shades of Bertillon!—to wear the

new gloves and prevent any incriminating deposit of fingerprints.

The living room of the Hywel suite was a filthy litter of strewn clothes, empty bottles, broken glasses, so typical of addicts. There was also the scent of rotting food and heavy urine. He wended through the morass, past the open trunks, into the bedroom, his gun drawn in readiness for his planned second-act curtain.

Instead, he found that the play had closed. They were both in bed, Gerald Hywel naked, Rachel Derry wearing a mini-nightie which was pulled up around her navel. Hywel's right hand was still holding her hirsute pube affectionately. The ravages of mainlining showed plainly in the flesh of their arms, punctured, scabby, infected. The machinery of injection was in plain sight—hypodermic needles, spoons, rubber tubes; there was also a pyxis, which held the narcotics for their trips. But this last voyage had been a bummer. Strictly a one-way passage. They looked peaceful, no pain, no struggle, but they also looked very dead. They were both still warm.

Sam Carson's stomach instantly picked up its familiar pain. It stayed in tight paroxysm until he had safely departed the Hotel Marina, but it did not really ease until he had checked out of the Hotel Negresco, driven to the Nice air strip and piggybacked a Pan Am plane to Madrid.

He hoped that the Marina's desk clerk had a memory for money, not faces.

When he arrived at the Madrid airport, it was nearly 5:00 P.M., time to rendezvous with Pliny Martin in Paris. He placed a person-to-person call through to Pliny at the Raphael.

"Bear Paw here."

"Where are you?"

"Jesus, I hope we're not tapped. I'm in Madrid. At the airport. I'm not going into town. I'll be taking the flight south. Did you hear from Fustigator?"

"Yeah," Pliny said soberly. "He hit the wall. A dead end. I mean—*dead.*"

"Uh-huh," Sam said. "What about you?"

"The same thing. What about you?"

"Yeah."

"What goes?"

"We'll talk about that later. You call Zurich back and tell Tecumseh to grab the first flight for Marrakesh. The same

applies to you. I'm on my way now. We'll meet in the baf of a hotel called the Es Saadi. Like let's move it, Blackhawk, or we're going to run out of witnesses damned fast."

"Roger."

Sam was lucky to make connections with an Iberian Airlines plane for Malaga. He took a cab into town, where his gentle driver helped him find lodging in an aged but lovely little *posada* called the Emperatriz, named after Eugenie, who had visited there often in her time. He holed up for the night, exhausted.

Next day, with no evidence of Sir Julian's or Keyhole's pursuit, he leased a chauffeur-driven limousine and tantivied for Gibraltar abandoning the skyway for the byway in hard caution. He used up the day, crossing to Tangier on one of the frequent fast ferries, his Kincade passport acquiring a multitude of stampings on each entrance and exit. In Tangier, he caught one of the rapid intercity flights to Marrakesh and was only one bottle of Sidi Larbi deep when Pliny and Littlesky wove in wearily.

12

LITTLESKY HAD a habit of making tenuous jokes whenever his nerves were raw. The three of them were pushing their way through a thousand spectators at the Djemaa-el-Fna, striding along like musketeers in search of D'Artagnan, across the roaring circus maxims of Marrakesh's square.

"Look at us," Littlesky said with a humorless snicker. "An Amos-and-Andy tomcat, a honky Hiberian half-breed and a breechclouted Crow-killer. We look like some funky phony integration stamp issued by the United Nations' post office!"

"Don't knock it," Pliny Martin said. "It's a hell of a sight better than what was and going to be a hell of a lot better than what is."

"Easy for you to say," Willy said dully. "You've got some strong unions. All us aborigines have got are a lot of reservations and a Sahara called Alcatraz."

"Hobble it, both of you." Sam was curt.

"What's up your tube, Chickenheart?" Willy asked, irked.

"Crowds."

It was a sobering thought. In the yellow glare of the acetylene lamps which gaudily lighted the square, there were

long shadows and milling people. It would have been easy to throw a silenced bullet through the welter, or slip up alongside with a sharp dagger and a swift thrust.

They watched around them with harder eyes. It was an ear-dazzling cacophony: the piercing ululations of the yash-maked Berbers against the summer-storm thunder of the African drums, with the shrill green sound of the snake charmers piping up their cobras and the tinny supplications of the shell-game operators. And everywhere the rank scent of roasting meat on spits, mingling with the sweet smell of *kif* in pipes.

Father east, they reached the residential zone, where the crowds thinned away. But the isolation only gave them more of an oppressed feeling. They walked fast, sometimes with their hands warming the stocks of their weapons. On Avenue Arabe, fecund with old palm trees, they finally came to a lovely villa blazing with light. The villa was completely walled, except for its front gates, which were high grills, spiked. The gates were locked.

"This is it," Littlesky said, consulting his address book under a gas torch by the entrance.

Inside the gates they could see a lush green garden. Not a living soul stirred, no guards at all.

"Let's take the side street," Sam said.

"Hell with that." Littlesky's voice was tight and hoarse. "Give me your shoulders, Sam, and I'll go over and open the gates."

Sam glanced around. The street was clear. "Dangerous, child. Think you can make it?"

"I did it for three hundred bucks in the remake of *Beau Geste*."

"Pliny, kneel in front of me," Sam said. He stood facing the wall.

When Pliny knelt, presenting his massively muscled back, Littlesky took a small start, ran, used Pliny as the step, Sam's shoulders as the riser and made the top of the wall. He hauled himself up, balanced on top, and then leaped lithely down on the other side. It was a fifteen-foot drop. In a few seconds, Littlesky had unlocked the gates and they scurried inside like hugger-muggers.

"She's probably okay," Willy said. "All these lights. Means somebody's home."

"I don't like it," Pliny said.

They went to the rear, through the lush flowers, huge roses

big as melons, through a group of plum trees, past a ripe grape arbor. The service entrance was locked too. One of Sam's skeleton keys opened it. They stepped into the villa and listened.

There was no sound, not even the ticking of a tireless clock.

"I don't like it," Pliny said.

Willy turned on him grimly. "Will you knock off with that crap?"

Sam said, "Walk your pinto, redbelly."

Buffy Pristine's home was splendid. In the living room the walls were a lushly Moorish sweep of magnificent rugs, spilling down fantastic splashes of exotic colors, which changed like a revolving kaleidscope as the flickering gas torches danced light across them. There were electric lamps too, fashioned from old hashish water pipes, illuminating leopard-covered hassocks and zebra-hided sofas. The walls were half tiled.

"Which way, Willy?"

"The mirrored bedroom maybe. Maybe she's up there."

She was up there.

She was in bed, stark naked. She was there fifty times in fifty mirrors and once in reality, her scarred vulva gleaming brightly under the reflections of the lamplights in the mirrors. The mirrors were not set flat in the walls nor the floors nor the ceiling but were all canted so as to reveal only the great round bed and whatever action transpired upon it. What they reflected now was unpleasant.

Buffy Pristine had been strangled with a *kiboko* whip. *Kiboko* was a Swahili word for hippopotamus. The whip, made from the dried and toughened hide of the hippo, was a formidable weapon.

It had been wrapped around her throat and passed up above a half life-size, hand-carved ebony lion's head at the summit of the studded black-velvet backboard. Her eyes were bulging out of her head, unseeing; her pink tongue was protruding six inches, unbelievably. The aspect intended for one to believe a rape-murder.

"Oh my God!" Willy Littlesky whispered.

"I'll handle this," Pliny said. "Get him out of here."

Pliny started walking to the bed.

Littlesky let out a muted shriek. "Don't touch her, you sonofabitch!"

Pliny froze and stared at Sam, whose own heart had

dropped leadenly into his belly as he thought of the possibility of Dulcy Quinn being strung up this way—poor Dulcy, who hadn't even known what was going on. Just kindling for the bigger fire. He felt sick.

"Willy?" he said gently. He opened his arms.

Littlesky fell into Sam's embrace. His dark eyes, tortured now, were misted with rare tears. "Sam," he said, starting to sob. "I'm sorry, Sam. But, by God, I *liked* her. In spite of everything. I *liked* her."

"I know," Sam said.

Sam held down Willy's head against his chest and let the Shoshoni weep while he nodded to Pliny, who went to the bed, cut Buffy's body down and, after feeling her flesh, covered her discreetly with a scarlet satin throw.

Pliny said, "Cold. I'm no M.E., but I'd guess at twenty-four hours ago."

"Twenty-four hours," Sam said thinly. "It's been twenty-four hours every foot of the way. Someone has been ahead of us twenty-four hours on the whole route. And there are only two Keyholers left who could have managed that."

"Stitch and Scissor?" Pliny asked.

Sam nodded. He would explain later. Right now he kept holding Willy Littlesky warmly, like a brother, and while he did so he saw agonized visions of a bright-yellow African plain, two dead elephants and his own tearless woe.

Pliny brought him back with a gentle tap, trying not to interrupt Littlesky's necessary anguish. Pliny said quietly, "Sam, I think some folks had better haul their asses out of this snakepit."

Sam said, "You afraid of the long arm of the Royal Moroccan Northwest Camel-mounted Police, Pliny?"

"No. I'm afraid of the longer arm of a man named McCabe."

At the sound of McCabe's name, Littlesky grew quiet. He straightened up and wiped away the tears. "He's right, Sam."

"You both have to be kidding."

"I never laugh at my own funerals," Pliny said.

Littlesky spared one brief glance at the bed and was relieved that Buffy's body had been cut down and covered. He nodded silent gratitude to Pliny and led the way out.

As it turned out, Pliny had not been kidding at all.

13

THE SUITE which Sam Carson had engaged at Es Saadi had a brief foyer with a delicate Moorish arch beyond it, backed by a frail filigreed ivory screen to lend a mote of privacy to anybody in the mosaically tiled living room beyond. When, to their astonishment, they looked through the air space of the screen and saw Joseph Patrick Hackenbush enjoying its privacy, the moment gave them time to draw and intrude upon him. They were taut.

"Now, now, blokes," Hackenbush said, raising a bland hand in caution. "No shooting the popguns, or you'll blight the *bstila.*"

"The *what?*" Littlesky said.

Hackenbush smiled in utterly nonindigenous Mayfairian contempt at the Shoshoni's ignorance, while Sam motioned Pliny to check the bedroom. "No need. I'm alone, Mr. Carson. And if you don't mind too much, I laid all this on your tote. HMG only lets us out of the island with a bleeding fifty quid."

"Nobody," Pliny said, returning from the bedroom.

"Bstila," Hackenbush replied to Willy finally, meanwhile stuffing inelegant forkfuls of the concoction into his gold-toothed mouth and sipping on a cowardly Moroccan wine called Valpierre, "is a type of tarty confection which, like Rome, wasn't built in a day. It's a flaky pastry, clapped up with chopped almonds, and pigeon meat, also raisins, onion, ginger, a touch of coriander and Allah knows what, eh? There are one hundred layers of the flaking, but even with a gourmet like number one—" he pronounced it gowermette—"it don't last much longer than an organism." (He meant orgasm.)

Sam fanned Hackenbush, but the English agent was weaponless. He said, "That wasn't exactly cricket, y'know, locking me up like some bloody Inland Revenue tax snooper. Put me in bloody bad light with Lion. I didn't deserve that, y'know."

"And now you're going to be a hero for taking us back, is that it?" Littlesky asked. His eyes were red and hostile.

"Not atall. I'm just a proper escort for you, nothing less or

more. You'll be going back on your own, soon as you've shared a word with GWIFA."

"Jesus Christ!" Pliny gasped. "I knew it. I knew McCabe was here!"

"Only in a manner of speaking," Hackenbush said.

"Knock off the games, Hack," Sam said.

Hackenbush shrugged and waved a hand toward the desk across the room. On it reposed a compact, highly efficient transceiver in an unimpressive steel frame with a chrome handle. It operated on UHF only, either self-contained or from exterior generator. Sam Carson recognized it. He had once contributed to the final radio frequency stage, replacing multiple coils with a single spiral that operated automatically over the instrument's entire Herztian range. It too was a product of NSA's Research and Development branch. It leered at him, its dials like the contemptuous eyes of Admiral McCabe. He hated the sight of it.

Hackenbush turned it on, picked up the tiny carbon microphone and said, "Tourist to Passport."

The set hissed, then replied, "Passport to Tourist. Go ahead."

"Bear Paw for GWIFA."

"Roger. Please stand by."

Hackenbush passed Sam Carson the mike with a poorly conceived smile of pity and went back to the Valpierre cheerfully. Sam's jaw was rigid.

"Easy, man," Pliny cautioned.

Willy added, awed, "Yeah. *Pole-pole.*"

Suddenly McCabe's booming bass voice cut through the atmospherics, growling in flat annoyance. "GWIFA to Bear Paw."

"Reading five square," Sam said. "It's your dime."

"I knew it, I knew it," McCabe said. "If any sonofabitch had to wake me up at five in the morning, I knew it would be you. So *nice* to talk to you, and before you transmit, let me remind you that you're still in the Navy and that I'm still your CO. On the other hand, to ease your mind about security, this call is being KG-thirteen scrambled via the Air Communications network of SAC in southern Spain, then amplified and piped over to your very own Air Force 707, which is sitting at the Marrakesh airport, waiting for you at this moment. The plane is relaying me to you right there in belly-dance land. Got the network?"

Sam's temper bent briefly. "How the hell did you locate us?"

"Oh for crissake, Sam," McCabe replied impatiently, "you should know better than to ask stupid questions like that. I've known where you all were since Lion informed me of your flight from Blighty. Did you ever hear of that malodorous fraternity called the CIA? They've got to be good for something, and this time they were. The fact is you disobeyed a direct order, and I'll have your hide for it."

"All we were trying to do—"

"I know what you were *trying* to do! The point is, did you *do* it? Did you get any hard evidence? Have you located the main Keyhole file on The Seven Needles? No, you have not. And don't bullshit an old bullshitter! You're empty, and you know it!"

"That's true, Admiral, but we've still got a chance to break this. If your CIA is so damned omniscient, why didn't they hound-dog Ravensmith and Lady Dara?"

"They weren't on Charlie Ravensmith." McCabe said, his voice softening. "And Lady Dara has not left England; neither has that assassin she calls her chauffeur, Hutchins."

Sam said earnestly, "Sir, since I'm bucking for court-martial anyhow, let me go back to England, let me find Charlie Ravensmith."

"What would you do, sweat it out of him? Execute him?" There was something odd in McCabe's tone. "Kill Charlie Ravensmith?" he asked himself. "Heaven forbid! That would be like spitting on Old Glory or shooting a Victoria Cross winner, or drawing moustaches on George Washington's portrait. No wonder you crow eaters are stuck on reservations. It's not safe to let you out without a seeing-eye dog. Why, you nearsighted Hawkeye, that Australian honky has tied you up in a Gordian. He's made you nit-plucking mothers heavies, and he'll undoubtedly wind up with the George Cross from HMG and the Civilian Award of Merit from the U.S.!"

"What the hell is he raving about?" Littlesky called shrilly, angry now.

"I heard that, you Hollywood fiddlefoot," McCabe said. "And I'll tell you what I'm raving about. Not only did Charles Ravensmith rescue Commander Sampson from a bleedout in Kinsale last Sunday night, not only did he shoot down Miss Niji Fukimora while she was in the act of murdering an American officer, not only that, but he also managed

to pluck Miss Dulcy Quinn from the Keyhole inquisitors and get her out with a whole skin, while you two nature boys were trying to find a pot to pee in!"

"Dulcy's alive?" Sam gasped in sharp surprise.

"*And* well."

"Oh, thank God!"

"*And* living in Pasadena. She's been safely there since Tuesday, while you were playing Moto in Marrakesh. Or was it Philo in Paris? What a barefoot gumshoe you turned out to be. Of *course,* I had to explain the mission to her and swear her under Official Secrets. But the girl is safe. Thanks to your nefarious Bwana Charlie."

"Beautiful," Sam said when the relief had passed. "Just lovely. I get the picture now. And that means that Bwana Charlie is right there in London?"

"Never left the Forchester," McCabe said. "And if you try to lay a glove on him, you won't have enough meat left to be buried in the Wind River reservation."

"Oh, lovely . . ." Sam murmured. "His cover story stood up, of course?"

"Like an erection." McCabe waited, letting Sam think.

"Admiral, ship me back to London."

"Give me a sane reason."

"I know where to find Dara. Where she is the Keyhole master file on Ravensmith is."

McCabe sighed. This was what he had waited for. "You're sure?"

"No."

"If you don't locate her and that file," the admiral said thoughtfully, "you realize Ravensmith is clean and clear."

"No chance," Sam said grimly.

"If you take him, you get taken." McCabe was quite serious. "It'll be your neck as well as his."

"He'd be worth hanging for," Sam said, and he was quite serious too.

Admiral McCabe remanded them to London immediately.

14

THE AMATEURS were finished. The pros were taking over. When they arrived back in London, Sir Julian Keys reinstalled them in the Mews hole-in-the-wall, except for Pliny

Martin, who had been ordered detached immediately and returned to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Los Angeles. "The Mews is not the most comfortable," Sir Julian chittered politely, "but with Lady Henley and her man Hutchins still at large, there is still danger."

"You didn't mention Ravensmith," Sam said bitterly.

"Of course not, old man. He's on our side now."

With innate United States Government frugality for its agents, Pliny Martin was booked coach on a Pan Am flight, but Sam told him to keep the residue of the ten grand he had given him and change the reservation to first class. "And don't be an honest john and declare it to IRS as income. I won it in a crap game, so to speak, and they'll only lose it in another one at the Pentagon."

They took Pliny Martin to Heathrow that same noon, all of them riding in a cumbersome black saloon Humber which Sir Julian had provided. Pliny took one of the jump seats, beside Hackenbush. Hooligan sat up front with the driver. Willy, Sam and Sir Julian reposed uneasily in the rear. Sir Julian was morose. His bird voice, helped by the sniffles, had acquired the vulgar honk of the red-eyed coot, an unpleasant sound.

"Thanks for saving my derm," Sam said. "I'll see you again, Pliny."

"How's about you and me finding neutral ground in LA and breaking bread when I get back?" Littlesky said.

Pliny grinned. "There's no such thing as neutral ground, Willy. You pick one side or the other."

"How about Nat and Al's deli in Beverly Hills?"

"See you there."

They did not wait for Pliny's takeoff. They still had a long drive up to Newmarket, and the day was yellowing, through the overcast. Sir Julian was silent, sniffling, unhappy.

Sam said, "Ravensmith."

"Quite."

"Is he really going to get away with this?"

"With *what?*" Sir Julian replied. "Do you think I am gavotting at the chain of events? With *what,* dear chap? What has he gotten away with? We have no evidence against the bastard dantling!"

"That's redundant," Willy said.

"Incredible," Sam muttered.

"Spell it out for me, Sam," Willy said, frowning. "It still doesn't shine."

They were crossing Hertford for the Gog-Magog Hills in West Surrey, driving easily and comfortably. Hackenbush and Hooligan stirred, interested too.

"Dara made a mistake when she ordered Ravensmith Senior blown up," Sam said, thinking slowly. "While the Old Digger was alive, she had a nutsy hold on Scissor. She could still prove he was Monty Wyndham, a Canadian cutthroat. But when we snapped too close to her arse and she lost her nerve and ordered Sergeant Cheever to turn the Aussie off, she turned herself off. Bwana Charlie was then the legal heir to the Old Digger's millions. Charlie didn't need Keyhole anymore. He didn't need the other six needles, including Dara, nor the perils of his position. He decided to buck for the gold, to go legitimate. In Perth, he will be worth—with his own loot—about one hundred thirty million dollars. The catch was that the other six needles, and some stray assassins like Francis Bane, and Hutchins, and some stray thespians like Hywell and Rachel Derry, could still tie him into Keyhole. With them gone, he was scot-free."

Sam turned to Sir Julian. "When he rescued Dulcy Quinn, Sir Julian, was that the same night Tess Maddox was murdered?"

"Quite. Saturday night. You mentioned that he was dining with Dara that night, when he invited you to go along with him to Ireland the next day. They dined in Belgrave Square at milady's town house. This is Ravensmith's tatting, y'understand. During cocktails, Mr. Bane arrived. Ravensmith overheard strange things. Then Dara excused herself. Hutchins had to drive her somewhere. Ravensmith was left alone. He explored the house, found Miss Dulcy Quinn, mounted her on his charger and took her safely out. He instructed her to head directly for Heathrow, board the first aircraft for America, gave her money and advised her to contact her own State Department the moment she reached New York, which in turn alerted the admiral."

Sam said, "Then Ravensmith went back and sat down and was all tickety-boo when Dara, Bane and Hutchins returned, ostensibly after planting Tess in Hyde Park."

"The schedule stands up," Sir Julian said gloomily. "The young lady affirms it. She would have undoubtedly been slaughtered that evening without his assistance."

"So then," Sam continued, "he takes me to Ireland. But instead of putting the knock on me, he lets Bane take the risky road at the *oubliette,* knowing NSA and MI six are

staking everything out. And he racks up Niji Fukimora. One down. Goal to go. Did he have any explanation on his providential entrance at Blackrock Cottage?"

"He had returned to pick you up."

"God! He really is gorgeous."

Littlesky coughed. "It still doesn't shine. If you and Pliny were stuck in Ireland Sunday night—no flights out of Cork —why wasn't he?"

Sir Julian replied, "Mr. Ravensmith *chartered* a private craft at Cork, sometime around midnight. He was back in London at one-thirty A.M. This has been confirmed by the Dorchester."

"And then," Sam said, "the panic started."

"Not quite," said Sir Julian. "Lady Henley could not have known about the Fukimora girl. But it was when the *Poseidon* radio-telephoned that they had taken aboard Bane's corpse instead of four hundred thousand pounds that she realized what the Australian was up to and hence ordered the Keyhole evacuation."

Sam felt his hard stomach where the dull ache had returned. "That means he killed Tarantella early Monday morning, just after the Montebank closing. And he pulled the executive files."

"Possibly. Time of death works out that way." Sir Julian sucked on a tooth. "Yet, the nerveless burke had breakfast in his hotel suite. Witnesses swear to it."

"Oh, sure!" Littlesky shook his head grimly. "He was twenty-four hours ahead of us. So after kippers, he took off for Paris on one of his phony passports and popped Henry Dieu off the balcony on Avenue George the Fifth."

Sir Julian nodded. "Witnesses again. He had tea in the Dorchester lobby around four P.M., same day."

Sam said, "And then took off for Zurich on another phony passport, tipped Dickerson into the Limmat River sometime during the night, took off for Nice on the earliest plane, mainlined the actors their overdose. They probably never even woke up from their shoot of the night before. And finally, he was gone to Marrakesh.

"That means he was only two hours ahead of me in Nice. The Hywels were still warm. But he went directly to Marrakesh, while I diddled the day, trying to throw you and McCabe off my track. By the time I got to the Es Saadi, Bwana Charlie—witnesses, I know!—was dining on wilted woodcock at Wembley."

"Or something like that," Sir Julian said. "It's most depressing. Added to his heroic feats, mind you, was the fact that he spared you too, Sam."

"It gives one pause," Sam said enigmatically. "Yet, we may get lucky."

"How, old man?"

"Dara was no man's fool. A very odd Stitch indeed. I can't believe that she hasn't left a damning record of Ravensmith behind somewhere. She trusted nobody. I don't mean the executive files at the Montebank. I mean, a personal history of Scissor, evidence to hang him higher than Guy Fawkes. It would be characteristic of her."

"But where?"

"The villa at Newmarket."

Sir Julian sighed. "I'm afraid not. We *have* been out here before, y'know. In your absence."

Sam looked appalled. "Nothing?"

"Oh, the automobile was there, the Italian thing. But no sign of her nor Hutchins, nor violence of any kind. Just the car, packed for departure, parked normally. And, dear, boy, if you expect to find secret air-raid shelters and such, like the Montebank, scrub it. We checked the house thoroughly."

On the outskirts of Newmarket, Sam sat up and stretched. He seemed more at ease. When they pulled up in front of the familiar villa, he could see the Lamborghini still parked out in front. Other MI 6 agents, who had been keeping surveillance over the premises, emerged from their stakeouts. Sir Julian waved them away.

"She is dead," Sam Carson said. "She is memory and Bwana Charlie has got the secret file she kept on him."

"How come, Bear Paw?" Littlesky asked, while Sir Julian stared in some puzzlement.

"Otherwise, Ravensmith would never have sat around London like the scion he has just become."

Sir Julian coughed. "And Hutchins?"

"Gone forever. You'll never find him. Bwana Charlie needed a murderer for Dara. He couldn't just leave her body hanging around without a killer. So Hutchins is your man—even if he is melting in some unmarked grave. Look—the fable—when the heat comes on, Hutchins panics. He pops Dara the brass knuckles, forces her to tell where the family jewels and the money are hidden, finds them, kills her and runs. It gives you something to chase forever."

"Tidy," Sir Julian said. "Let's see how close you've come."

The villa was as Sir Julian had last seen it. Everything was neat. Nobody had returned to the scene.

Sam led Sir Julian into the living room and, in detail, described how he had followed Dara down the staircase on that erotic night when he had inadvertently sodomed her and how she had retreated into this same living room and disappeared. He pointed at the huge wall of books on the far end of the room, beyond the glorious Renoirs which hung to the right. "Back there," he said. "Behind that bookcase. There's got to be a small storeroom of some kind."

It took them a long time to find it. The walls behind the bookcase had been cement-filled to dampen any hollow echo on knocking. They took down all the books, looking for a secret switch. There was none. Under the books, in the first cabinet, which held a collection of stereo records and was about three feet high, there was a normal lock. Sam opened it with one of the NSA skeletons he had taken on the ring from the Mews. They crawled in.

Not bad, Littlesky thought, viewing the carnage. Chickenheart had come pretty close at that. There was a herd of jewel cases, open, strewn, some of the diamonds still lying around, as if the hasty homicidal had been in a hurry. But this was only camouflage. Even Sir Julian could see that. The real prize, the file on Monty Wyndham alias Bwana Charlie, had obviously been taken from the open safe. Just as obviously, it no longer existed. Ravensmith's devotion to duty would never be in doubt. Nor, even more obviously, would Dara's costly bijous ever be located.

Another side of the discovery was rough. Lady Dara Henley's decaying corpse was in the storeroom, spread-eagled from wall to wall. She was naked, her beautiful body showing some of her cosmetic citracixes under the harsh fluorescent light of the hideaway. She had been tortured for the safe's combination.

Sam, however, was wrong on two counts. Two years later, in the muddy ground of a small stream near the town of Bury-St. Edmonds, to the east, two young fishermen unearthed Hutchins' skeleton. It was not identifiable by then, but the jewelry found with the body was easily traced through Lloyd's to the estate of Lady Dara Henley.

By then, it no longer mattered.

15

WILLY LITTLESKY was glad that McCabe had ordered them back to Dulles Airport. Two days had passed since the finding of Lady Henley's remains had wrapped the mission. He did not like the way Sam Carson stared glassily, brooding, and he loved his brother-in-law enough not to want Bear Paw to wind up on a life term in Dartmoor for pinching off Bwana Charlie.

Late Friday afternoon, with both of them scheduled to fly back on Saturday morning via commercial line, Willy Littlesky went down to Chelsea to repeat his fond farewells and left Sam Carson sacked out in their Dorchester suite, where they had moved back after the discovery of Lady Henley's corpse.

Sam, weary of spirit, his stomach a constant ache now at his frustration, sensed someone in the room. When he opened his eyes, Charles Ravensmith was standing over him, holding a pistol on him, aimed between his eyes. Ravensmith was smiling cheerfully. *"H'jambo,* Bwana M'Cowboy," Bwana Charlie said pleasantly. When Sam's eyes narrowed at the sight of the gun, Charlie waved a hand. "No, no, nothing like that. Just wanted to be sure *you* didn't have one. I've checked you out. You know what a dicky temper you have, Simon. Begging your pardon—*Sam.*" He smiled nicely. "Thought we ought to bandy."

Sam sat up in the bed and leaned against the backboard. It occurred to him that Charlie was very personable and that it was impossible to imagine Charlie doing all the vile things that he had been doing in the past week. Sam said nothing; nor did he look hostile.

"Dear old chum," Charlie said quietly and seriously, "it simply *won't* do. With everything tickety-boo, and when we should all be happy as dammit, I simply cannot wander through life with your shadow over my shoulder. That way, one of us winds up killing the other. Which would be highly stupid under the circumstances. You're a reasonable chap, *rafiki.* I thought we might make up our minds."

"What is it, Charlie?" Sam said.

"You know I'm really quite fond of you." Ravensmith slipped the pistol in an inner pocket. "Quite truly, Bwana

M'Cowboy. I should have been *very* sad if the end had gone differently. But it didn't. And here we are! Both. Alive and well. And *I* am rich. You were a fake millionaire. But *I* am now a real one. What's to blow up a cross-eyed Bob about?"

"I don't follow you, Charlie."

"Cast your Nelly Blyes at it this way, chum. We were both soldiers in different armies, eh?"

"I guess."

"Your army wanted Keyhole destroyed. It *is* destroyed. *I* helped destroy it. That can't break your heart. And surely the demise of those wretches can't wring a true tear from your honest eyes."

"They bought their tickets," Sam said. "But Tess Maddox didn't."

"I was just as shocked as you." Ravensmith's eyes clouded sincerely. "I was fond of the old pelican too. And I swear to God, Simon—Sam!—that I had nothing to do with it. Dara lost her nerve. Bane did the killing, Bane and Hutchins, and they Mau-Mau-ed it to create a scandal. But meanwhile, I actually *did* pluck your lady friend from some unpleasantry. I never went back to Belgrave that Saturday night. From then on, since it was obvious I unlocked Miss Quinn, my own life was in considerable peril. All the time you and I were in Ireland, things were rather thready."

"You were supposed to turn me off."

"I took a different turn, Sam. You saved my life once. Remember, with *simba?* It was a delight to save yours."

Sam's eyes clouded, remembering.

Ravensmith, noting it, said, "I had absolutely nothing to do with Melisande. You know that."

"And all those others—Condon, Duffy, Gallagher—"

"In a war, soldiers die. They were soldiers. It could have gone the other way, in all fairness."

Sam Carson sighed wearily. "I'm bushed, Charlie. I've had it. I'm glad you got Dulcy out of the quicksand. So now you want to smoke the calumet? You want me off your trail?"

"More than that. I want us to be friends again. *Rafiki.* Blood brothers."

"You are incredible," Sam said softly, without anger. He looked at Charlie with peculiar pity. "You look like a man. You sound like a man. Sometimes you act like a man. But the truth is you've never quite reached the age of puberty, have you?"

"Now, now, old darling, you're not going to moralize?"

"That would be using a sieve to bail the boat," Sam said. "What I mean is, none of this has affected you in the least, has it? You're like the little boy pulling wings off flies just for something to do. You've got the conscience of a nine-year-old."

"You *are* going to moralize."

"No, Charlie. It's just that your puerility is showing, I should have known when you told me your dream—"

"Sam, think, *think!* Out there is a world beyond our dreams!"

"Nightmares, you mean."

"Imagine it, chum! Anything in the entire universe that your heart desires!" Ravensmith smiled happily. "I'll show you how much I mean it. I've heard from the solicitors. I am the sole inheritor of not only the real Charlie's forty million, but one hundred and ten million more from the Old Digger. In real live Australian dollars. If you'll shake hands *really* and give me your word *really,* I want you to come along with me to Perth. Be my character witness, my friend. I'll settle twenty million dollars in cash on you the moment we reach western Australia. Yours forever."

Sam closed his eyes.

"Think of it!" Ravensmith said ecstatically. "Think what you could do with it. Your own. Not some flaming joke from some flaming spy department. Free and clear, a ticket to all the good things in life. We've had enough of the other. No strings. Straight out. Let sleeping dogs lie, Sam. Who wants to rouse them anyway? Now, *think* about it."

Sam thought for a long time.

The Aussie went to the bar in the living room, concocted whiskey-and-sodas and returned and handed Sam one. Sam drank half of it off.

"Well, old cock?"

Sam said, "I've been ordered to Washington."

"Flaming hell, chum!" Charlie said, eyes glowing, "What can they do to an amateur AWOL worth twenty million?"

"Not a hell of a lot."

"Sam, we could take off tonight. Copenhagen. Pick up an SAS flight to San Francisco. Pick up a Qantas flight to Sydney and zippity down to Perth and the good life. Think what it would mean."

"Yeah," Sam said, his face warming, a smile finally eroding the dreary stiffness of his weary mouth. "God, yes."

"You once said you'd never broken your word in your life." Ravensmith's blue eyes were ablaze.

"True."

"Then give it to me! Give me your hand on it, chum, and it's ho for the pillage!"

Sam made no move. He mused, "Qantas? . . . That means we could have a stopover in Fiji."

"Why Fiji?"

"I have a very special friend there."

"That's more like it!" Ravensmith nattered as he envisioned a chesty sheila who was skilled in the hundred ways. "We could both stone a few crows en route. It would do us good!"

"Yes," Sam said.

"Give me your hand, Bwana M'Cowboy," Ravensmith said, his thin nose dilating at the nostrils, his teeth gleaming white in a fulfilled smile.

Sam gave him his hand.

Later, when Bwana Charlie had chuffed off to get their tickets for Copenhagen via BEA, Sam picked up the telephone and put in a person-to-person long-distance call to John Bigwater at Nandi Airport in the Fiji Islands. While he waited, Sam glanced down and looked at the snake scar on his hard belly. He closed his eyes for a moment. He realized, suddenly, that his stomach ache had vanished. He saw the bright-yellow African plain once more, but this time it held no people, nor dead elephants. There was nothing on the plain but two boubou shrikes, fluting in a mimosa tree.

The telephone clicked noisily. Then the operator broke in and said, "I have your party in Fiji, sir."

"Thank you."

The booming voice of Bigwater came through cleanly, "Hello there?"

"Howdy, Big John," Sam said.

"Sam?" Bigwater said, pleased. "By Jupitah, is that you, Sam?"

"Yes," Sam said.

"Is all well, my brother? When am I going to see you again?" Bigwater asked.

"On Tuesday," Sam said. "Just in time for the Feast of Tuka." He sighed happily. "And guess who's coming to dinner!"

It would be nice seeing John Bigwater again.

16

THE CAR PULLED up under the north portico at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and discharged the team in the midst of a gay USO troupe under the aegis of Bob Hope, who was arriving for a Presidential reception in the East Wing before planing out on the Christmas rondelay to Vietnam and other perilous points.

Admiral McCabe steered them away from the USO group to the West Wing, then down the long gallery to the Oval Room. They were ushered in immediately. President Nixon was waiting for them before joining the USO reception. Littlesky looked astonished at the sight of the President, but Sam Carson kept his face straight, not knowing what McCabe was trying to pull.

McCabe said, "Mr. President, may I present Commander Sam Carson and Willy Littlesky."

The President shook hands with both of them. He smiled into Littlesky's dark eyes. "Are you aware that Admiral McCabe has suggested, in return for your valued services on this mission, that we should give the country back to you?"

"No *thank* you, sir!" Littlesky said hastily. He felt shamefaced. He had, after all, voted for Hubert Humphrey.

The President turned to Sam Carson. "Commander, there is no adequate way to show you our gratitude, nor even to let your fellow countrymen know what you have accomplished."

"I understand, sir."

"Still," President Nixon said warmly, "there must be something this office can do for you."

Sam replied, in a plaintive voice, "Mr. President, all I really want in the world is to go home and be let alone."

The President glanced at Admiral McCabe. "I'm sure that can be arranged," he said.

"Yes, sir," McCabe said respectfully.

For The President's Eyes Only is wild, funny, bizarre, outrageous, sexy, gruesome, clever . . . "If it's escape reading you're after, cuddle up with For The President's Eyes Only. The hero, a he-man part American Indian, is an electronic genius, a man of action, infinitely resourceful, infinitely attractive to women. The guy can do everything but knit...[The book] has more slinky women, more suave super criminals, more tough heads of espionage departments, more apparatus all the way around, than anything since the great days of Ian Fleming."

—The New York Times Book Review