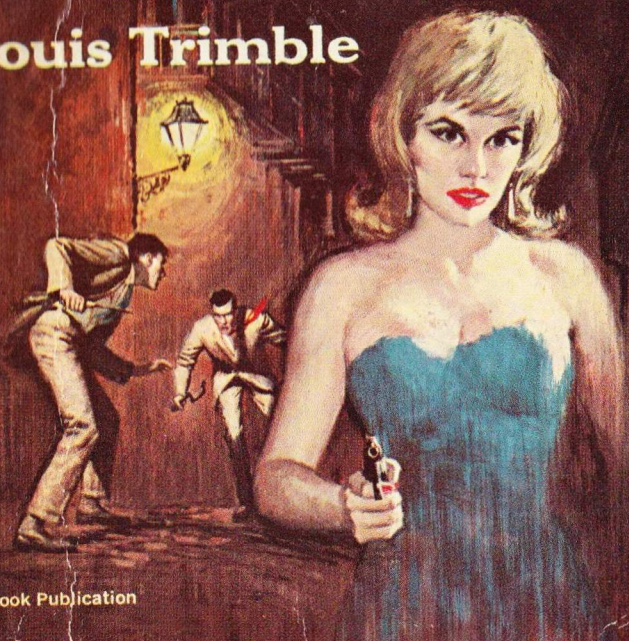


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in dames and death**

THE DEAD AND THE DEADLY

Louis Trimble



First Book Publication

HIDE-AND-GO-SEEK WITH THE GRIM REAPER

When Martin Zane, free-lance insurance investigator, hopped down to Mexico City for a few restful weeks under the sun, he hadn't figured that he would be spending his nights dogging a bony-faced, scrawny little hood who wanted nothing more than to stick a knife into Zane's soft belly.

This didn't bother Zane too much—after all, he still had his days to himself—but he began to get a bit annoyed when an old girl friend showed up and pleaded with him to help her find out why someone was trying to blow up her business partner.

It brought an end to his holiday and the beginning of a new caper in which Zane quickly discovered that knives and bombs were impotent weapons compared to the deadliness of a female body.

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*The Dead
and the Deadly*

by

LOUIS TRIMBLE

ACE BOOKS, INC.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York 36, N.Y.

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HOMICIDE HANDICAP

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Printed in U.S.A.

I

I WAS beginning to feel lonesome, or—as the psychologists put it—rejected. For the first time in three days and nights I wasn't being followed around Mexico City by the bony-faced character with the dirty shirt collar.

I wondered if I might have developed one of those repulsive television diseases that cause people to run the other way when they see you. More probably, Bony-face finally figured out he was following the wrong man and took himself off to find someone else to annoy.

I hiked down the dark side street leading to my hotel. Now and then I thought of Bony-face and his amateurish attempts to keep me from spotting him as he tailed me, but most of the time I thought about tomorrow when I'd climax my vacation with a week at Acapulco.

I was mentally roasting myself in the tropical sun when the drunk staggered out of a dark doorway and wrapped himself around me.

That was my first reaction—that the guy was full of *tequila*. I could smell the sour odor of it on his breath. I peeled him off me. "Sleep somewhere else, *amigo*," I said.

He made a lurching turn. I turned with him and caught a brief glimpse of his profile. Bony-face hadn't forgotten me after all. Then he twisted around behind me. I tried to move with him but he was too quick. I felt the tip of a knife blade slide through my clothing and touch the skin over my ribs.

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He said, "Let's go talk, Zane." He spoke in English, with a strictly north-of-the-border accent.

I started to step away from him, but the knife tip stayed right with me. He said, "Move. Into that doorway."

Guns I can sweat out; but not knives. I moved into the doorway. I tried to remember all the ways the Army had taught me about handling a man with a knife. None of them seemed practical right now.

The doorway led into a small vestibule. I tried to maneuver my back against the side wall, but Bony-face got there first. He kept me turned away from him, dangling me on the point of his knife.

"What are you doing here, Zane?" The words came out through his nose in an unpleasant, high-pitched whine.

I said, "What would a marine insurance investigator be doing in Mexico City. After three days of following me around, even a chowderhead should be able to tell that I'm on vacation."

The vacation bit was true. I was here strictly to enjoy a little of Mexico's November climate. I didn't even have a case waiting for me back home in LaPlaya, California. In fact, I'd spent only one day at home the last two months. I used up half of September and all of October in northern California, doing a job for Ted Winters of Marine Mutual Insurance. When that wound up, I stopped in LaPlaya long enough to pay some back bills, do a small favor for a friend, and pack my vacation clothes. Then I flew to Mexico City.

And for two weeks everything was just the way I wanted it—restful. Until three days ago when Bony-face started hanging on my tail.

His knife dug a little deeper into my hide. A drop of blood trickled warmly down my backbone. That blood was the only reasonable thing about this. Bony-face himself made no sense at all.

He made even less sense when he said suddenly, "What did you find out about Finney?"

I said, "You've got my name right, but that's all. I never heard of anyone named Finney."

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He tensed to give the knife another push. This time I was ready for him. I made a hard right twist on my toes. It brought me around facing him. He was wide open for me to wrap my fingers around his wrist.

I wrapped. He was lank and bony but he didn't pack much bulk. I twisted his knife arm and he gave ground. I squeezed my fingers down and snapped my hand over, palm up.

He screamed as his wrist joint fought leverage. His free hand came up, clawing for my eyes. I ducked and swung a pacifier at his belt buckle. I must have relaxed my grip a little. He was like an oiled eel, the way he slipped out of my fingers.

He went under my arm and bolted for the street. I started after him and stopped. I wasn't about to go galloping through the chilly November night. Not at this altitude. And not when I was convinced he had the wrong Zane.

I walked down to my hotel, trying to figure out if he knew my name before he started following me, or if he had picked it up the last three days. Either way, he was still mistaken.

I went into the hotel lobby. It was deserted except for the desk clerk and the night elevator operator. The clerk handed me my key and threw in a lift of his eyebrows.

"The *señorita* is very lovely," he said in Spanish. "The *señor* is to be congratulated."

I looked around but there was still no one else in sight. "What *señorita*?"

"The *rubia* in your room," he said. "She has waited no more than an hour."

A *rubia* is a blond. I didn't know any blonds in Mexico City. I didn't even know any real blonds back home. But the clerk looked so pleased, I hated to destroy his illusions about me. I said, "Ah, the *rubia*," and went off to the elevator.

The operator let me off on the sixth floor with a lewd sounding, "*Buenas noches, señor.*" I walked down the hall to my corner room. I tried the doorknob. It wouldn't turn. I used my key and then pushed the door open quickly. I

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stepped to one side as light flooded out into the hallway. I had walked into one trap tonight; that was enough. I said, "You make the first move, sweetheart."

A voice floated huskily out to me. "Martin, lover, I wondered if you were ever coming back."

It was a voice I hadn't heard in two years, and one I didn't particularly enjoy hearing now. It belonged to Corliss Leonard—rich, conniving, greedy, and exciting Corliss Leonard.

I took a deep breath and stepped into the room. She was standing by the side window, her back to the drawn draperies. She came toward me, gloved hands held out in greeting, a hesitant smile on her beautiful lips.

There are only a few things a man can do when he meets a woman he's spent a good part of two years forgetting. I did the easiest of the few. I said, "Hello, Corliss," and took her hands.

I stared down at her—at the curly, short, honey-dark hair molded to her finely shaped head, at the triangular, almost kitten-like face with the wide, wide gray eyes, at the ripe mouth, at the well-remembered figure. She was wearing a fitted black suit, black pumps and gloves, and a small piece of black something-or-other for a hat. I wondered if the black meant she was still in mourning for her husband. He had died about a year ago, after another year of marriage.

Corliss stared back—at the tuxedo and topcoat, at the dark crewcut sprouting a few early gray hairs, at the slightly overdone chin with the small triangular scar showing white against dark beard stubble, at Martin Zane who had walked out on her offer to help spend a million or so dollars of another man's money.

Her lips parted. The gray eyes grew wider. Her mouth twisted up in the kind of smile that is supposed to turn male muscles to spaghetti. I could still recall when it had that effect on me.

It was trying to have the same effect. I took my hands away from hers. "Are you the one who's had that creep following me?"

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Her expression registered nothing but bewilderment. But I'd learned about her acting ability the hard way. She was an expert at playing the wide-eyed, innocent blond.

She said suddenly, "I'm in trouble, Martin."

I indicated the room's one easy chair. She sat in it and tugged her skirt over her knees. It was a nervous gesture I'd seen her make only a few times before. Each one of those times she had asked me to do something she knew I wouldn't want to.

I'd never done any of those things. But I always listened to her. Now I sat on the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette.

I said, "Does your trouble have to do with a bony-faced character with a nasal voice and an unwashed look about him?"

Her curls danced as she shook her head. "No. It's Ezekial Culpepper, one of my business partners."

I had never met Corliss' partner with the fantastic name, but I'd heard about him. Six weeks ago Corliss had sold the Los Angeles boat accessories factory her husband had left her and bought a smaller plant in LaPlaya. She took two partners into her new venture, a local LaPlaya celebrity, Dorian Pinter, a semi-pro yacht designer; and an eccentric old inventor, this Culpepper. I had heard that Culpepper was trying to perfect some kind of a process that had to do with fiberglass boat hulls.

From there on, I was in the dark. I had been away, working on the case for Marine Mutual Insurance of Los Angeles when Corliss moved into town. I picked up the scuttlebutt on her new operation the day I stopped off in LaPlaya to get ready for this vacation.

I said bluntly, to keep the record straight, "Why come to me because your partner's in trouble?"

Corliss tugged at her skirt again. "It isn't only Ezekial, Martin. Ted Winters may be in trouble too."

She was getting cleverer, I thought. Bringing in Ted Winters put a slightly different light on this. Ted Winters was a Vice President of Marine Mutual, the company that gave me most of my business. More important, he was my friend.

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I watched Corliss worry the hem of her skirt again, and I realized how she must have nerved herself to come and see me. She was no more pleased with being here than I was to have her. No more anxious to ask for help than I would be to give it to her.

I said more gently, "Tell me about it."

She gave it to me clearly and succinctly. When Corliss wanted to, she could sound as fuzzy-brained as a dizzy blond in a Hollywood comedy. But there was no fuzz behind those wide, deceptively innocent gray eyes. Her brain worked like a combination cash register and electronic computer.

She said, "I sold the plant in Los Angeles because I wanted to invest in Ezekial's idea. If it works out, I can make a great deal of money."

I said, "Just what kind of an idea has Culpepper got hold of?"

"He's trying to perfect a process he calls 'welding' fiber-glass. If it works, we'll be able to make boats up to a hundred feet cheaply. The government is very interested. If we can even come close to making the process work, they'll step in and finance the rest of the research."

I nodded and waited. She explained that Culpepper wasn't young any more and that the future of the company depended on him. When the partnership was set up, Corliss contacted Ted Winters of Marine Mutual and had him write one of those blanket policies. It provided for a payment of a hundred and fifty thousand into the company treasury on the death of any one of the partners. And it insured the company research laboratory and its equipment for another hundred thousand dollars. It also took care of the usual contingencies—fire, theft, accident or injury to employees or visitors.

I said, "I can't see why there should be trouble for Ted Winters. Marine Mutual should like the fat premium you must have paid to get coverage like that."

"It was very expensive," Corliss admitted. Her gray eyes clouded with worry. "But I had to buy that kind of policy,

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no matter what it cost. This venture is terribly important to me, Martin. And so much depends on Ezekial perfecting his process so we can get a government research contract."

I wasn't interested in Corliss' business problems. I was concerned about Ted Winters. I said, "That still doesn't tell me why Ted Winters is in a bind."

"He isn't yet," Corliss said. "But he could be if—if something happens to Ezekial." She took a deep breath. "You were away from LaPlaya when I applied for the insurance, and Ted came down from Los Angeles himself to make the investigation."

She didn't need to tell me any more. I saw the pattern now. Ted Winters was a topflight man in his field—he had worked up from investigator to a high-level vice-presidency in twenty years. But he had one glaring weakness. He was naive about women. As far as he was concerned, there were only two kinds of females—ladies and dames. Ladies were incapable of any kind of deceit; dames were fair game. Ladies he accepted at face value and treated with old-fashioned gallantry; dames he chased with the single-minded purpose of an unattached, forty-year-old bachelor.

I said, "To make it simple—Ted put his personal okay on your insurance application without making the check any competent investigator would make on an industrial account of that size. So if anything out of the way happens, he'll be up before the brass for not having done a thorough job."

Corliss nodded unhappily. "He took my word for a lot of things he should have checked out."

I said, "What did you do, give him a bum steer?"

"I might have," she said. Her voice was almost a whisper. "I didn't mean to, Martin. I honestly told him everything I knew about Ezekial."

I just looked at her. She gave her skirt another tug. "But I guess I didn't know as much about him as I thought."

"Meaning what?"

She said, "This morning Ezekial found a bomb. If it had gone off, it would have killed him and destroyed the laboratory."

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I added it up—a hundred and fifty thousand dollars insurance on Culpepper's life; a hundred thousand on the lab and its equipment. A quarter of a million dollar claim against a policy okayed by Ted Winters. Not to mention a man's life.

Corliss said, "That's the third time in ten days someone has tried to kill Ezekial. And none of us can imagine why anyone would want to hurt him."

II

CORLISS LOOKED pleadingly at me. "You can see why I want you to come and help us, Martin."

I said, "Why didn't Ted Winters call me himself?"

"He doesn't know what happened," she explained. "Nobody does but Ezekial and Dorian Pinter and myself."

She hesitated. "Until today, I really couldn't believe anyone would want to kill Ezekial. But when I saw that bomb, I knew we had to have help. And I couldn't think of anybody I could trust but you, Martin. I flew down here because I knew you wouldn't listen to me over the phone."

I thought about Acapulco waiting for me, warm and sunny. But it would still be around next week or next month. I wasn't sure I could say as much for Ezekial Culpepper.

And I thought of Ted Winters and the twenty years he had spent building a reputation for himself at Marine Mutual. I even thought a little about Corliss and her hopes for the future.

I picked up the phone and called the airport. The first plane I could get would put me in LaPlaya tomorrow afternoon. I reserved a ticket and hung up.

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I said, "Just remember—I'll be working strictly for Ted Winters. If you're trying to play me for a sucker, I'll clobber you."

She looked hurt. "I've told you the truth, Martin."

She stood up and moved to the door. "My plane leaves soon, Martin. Could you call me a cab?"

I called her a cab. I got into it with her. Being cooped up in a taxi with Corliss wasn't my idea of a way to spend an evening, but I still had some questions that needed answers.

I asked her about Dorian Pinter and learned that he had been taken into the company for two reasons—he knew the kind of people who might help get the company a government contract, and he had fifty thousand dollars waiting for an investment to find it.

Corliss explained, "Each of us put up fifty thousand for operating expenses. But I contributed the Leonard Company name and brought quite a lot of machinery from the Los Angeles plant. So Ezekial and Dorian each have thirty per cent ownership and I have the other forty per cent."

That was the kind of deal Corliss would make—and clean up on. I didn't say that out loud; I said instead, "Where did Culpepper get that kind of money?"

"From one of his inventions," Corliss said, "he's really quite clever. He's invented ever so many things. But none of them have really been very important or very profitable individually."

"But you think this new process of his will be important?"

"It has to be," Corliss said. "Fifty thousand dollars was every cent Ezekial had. And almost all that Dorian could raise too."

I said, "I can understand Culpepper cleaning himself out to go into business with you. He needed a lab and machinery and probably the backing of a company with a solid name like Leonard. But what made Pinter kick in? He could make more designing yachts for an outfit like Art Connelly's, and he wouldn't have to risk his capital either."

A faint smile touched her lips. "Dorian insisted I let him be a partner," she said. "He thinks he's in love with me." She

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gave a slight shrug. "He'll get over that in time, of course."

I said, "You mean you'll let him off the hook when you're sure you no longer need his money."

"Martin, don't be like that! Just because I'm a good businesswoman. . . ."

She wasn't boasting. She was a good businesswoman. Two years ago, she'd been even better. She had come to Los Angeles the year before that and gone to work for Tom Leonard. In less than six months she'd become his private secretary. Just a year after she and Leonard first met, he offered her himself, his bank account, and a wife's share in his factory.

She was going with me when that happened. When I heard about Leonard's offer—and Corliss' answer—I walked out. Not that Corliss asked me to—or even wanted me to. She had a better idea. I was to stick around—out of sight.

As she put it, "Tom isn't young, lover. He's awfully sweet—but you know what I mean. And I'll have just oodles of money for us. You can have all sorts of things—even a new boat instead of that old thing you live on now."

It was walk out or break her into little pieces. I walked and kept walking. I left my investigator's job with Marine Mutual and went to work for myself in LaPlaya, a hundred miles away from Corliss.

After a few months, I knew I had no business being so self righteous. I'd gone with Corliss almost from the day she arrived in L.A. She'd made no secret of the fact that her eyes were on the main chance. So I shouldn't have been surprised. But it's easy for a man to let himself be blinded by a pair of ripe lips, by large, soft gray eyes, by an exciting and willing body.

After those first months in LaPlaya, I stopped hating her. Now I didn't even dislike her any more. I just didn't want her around to remind me of the sucker I'd been.

I said, "All right, you're a good businesswoman. Now let's get back to Culpepper. How long has he been in LaPlaya?"

"Just since I opened the plant," Corliss said. "He doesn't know a soul there."

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"He could have met someone," I argued. "Maybe he tried moving in on another man's woman."

She gave a smothered giggle. "Not Ezekial! Wait until you meet him!" She added more soberly, "He hasn't met anyone. He lives in a little cottage less than a mile from the plant. It's an awful place but he rented it so he could work in the lab when he felt like it."

She shook her head firmly. "There just isn't any reason for the attacks on him."

I said, "What do the police think about it?"

"We didn't call them," she said. "Ezekial wouldn't hear of it. He's so afraid someone will get into the lab and steal his process. It isn't patented yet, you see."

I said, "What good is the process to him if he doesn't live to use it?"

"You'll understand that better after you meet Ezekial."

"You could have called in the law without Culpepper's knowing about it," I pointed out.

"Don't sound so suspicious!" Corliss said. "I didn't even know about the first attempt to kill Ezekial until he told me. I saw the second one and I did think about the police, but I was afraid to bring them in."

I waited for her to explain that. She said, "If I had, they would have upset Ezekial's work and investigated everything—including our company insurance. And that wouldn't have helped Ted Winters."

I had to agree with her. I said, "Why did you wait until the third try at Culpepper before you called me in?"

"I tried to find you after the second time," Corliss said. "That was five days ago. But no one seemed to know where you were. Then today I got desperate. I bribed the telephone girl at your answering service to tell me where you'd gone."

I had already figured that out. I'd deliberately not told anyone but the girl at the answering service where I'd be. That was another reason I couldn't make sense out of being tailed around by Bony-face. I couldn't figure out how he'd managed to find me.

I said, "Had the girl told anyone else about me?"

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Corliss shook her head. "I'm sure she didn't. I had a simply terrible time getting her to talk to me."

I scratched the scar on my chin. "How many people knew you were hunting for me five days ago?"

"No one. I used the private line in my office when I called around. And I was always alone. Why, Martin? Does it make a difference?"

I was trying to tie Bony-face and his screwy questions in with this problem of Culpepper. But I couldn't make a connection. He had been tailing me for three days; she hadn't let anyone know she was looking for me until today.

I didn't have a chance to answer her question. We reached the airport just in time for Corliss to sprint for her plane. I waited until it was airborne and then turned in my ticket to Acapulco and picked up the one for LaPlaya.

I was on my way back to the cab when I saw someone try to maneuver out of sight behind a group of people. It was Bony-face, dirty yellow hair, hounds-tooth sport coat and all. I thought about going after him but decided he wasn't worth the trouble it would cause in a place this public. Instead I went outside and then moved back in where I could watch the ticket counter I'd just left.

I made a bet with myself he'd go to that counter. I watched him do just that. After a long harangue with the clerk, he bought himself a ticket. I made myself another bet—that I'd see him on my plane tomorrow.

I lost the second bet. The jet took me to L.A. International Airport in three and a half smooth hours. A lot of people rode with me, but Bony-face wasn't one of them. He wasn't in sight either when I got off the shuttle plane that ran from L.A. to LaPlaya.

I had wired the airport parking lot boys that I was coming back, and they had my new Rambler wagon warmed up and ready to go. I paid the kid on duty and added a tip.

I said, "Any chance you might have seen a skinny character with long yellow hair and a bony face around here four or five days ago?"

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He gave me a surprised look. "No, but I saw him this afternoon."

I doubled the size of the kid's tip. He said, "The guy came in on the early shuttle. I remember him because he beefed about paying five bucks for four days' parking. And because he went over and took a long look at your wagon before he got into his own car."

"What was he driving?"

"A beat-up old sedan," the kid said. "A kind of dirty green."

"But you didn't see him when he brought the car in four days ago?"

"Nope," the kid said. "I wasn't on duty then." His eyes gleamed. "Working on a case, Mr. Zane?"

I said, "I haven't figured that one out yet."

I drove off, thinking about Bony-face taking an interest in my wagon. Then the fog began to roll in from the Pacific the way it does in November, and I had to concentrate on my driving.

The airport road is far from being a main highway. It's no more than a narrow strip of blacktop that winds through dune country most of the seven miles into LaPlaya. Only two roads branch from it—one winding along the deserted lower end of the city's big natural harbor to a picnic spot called The Spit, and the other a mile farther on shooting off to the plant Corliss had bought.

By the time I reached her turn-off, the fog was so thick that I was feeling my way. I bumped over blacktop for about a mile and stopped when a pair of heavy wire gates loomed up ahead of me. I was barely able to make out a little guardhouse and a sign reading: LEONARD PRODUCTS COMPANY.

Old Herman Nockheimer came stumping out of the guardhouse, squinted at me, and swung open the gate. Another man, not quite so old, moved up behind him.

"You sure this is the right one?" the second man demanded.

"I know Mr. Zane," Nocky said scornfully. He waved me

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in. As I went by, he called, "Stop on the way out if you have an extra minute, Mr. Zane." He sounded anxious.

I said I would and rolled slowly toward a half-empty parking lot. I wondered what was bothering Nocky. I decided he probably only wanted to thank me for getting him this night gateman's job.

He was a great old man, and we'd split many a cup of coffee together when he ran the elevator in my office building. Then he was dropped by the building owners for being "overage." Nocky was unhappy; at seventy, he thought he was still useful. I agreed, and when I stopped at home on my way to Mexico City, I made a few phone calls and located this job for him. I didn't call Corliss directly—I wouldn't have done that even for Nocky—but I spoke to Ted Winters in L.A. and let him do the rest. Nocky was the kind who would fret until he could thank me personally.

I dropped Nocky from my mind as I pulled my wagon between a beat-up coupe and a big, black Imperial. I walked along a cement walk toward the dim lights marking the plant office.

I couldn't see much in the fog, but I'd been here before Corliss took over and I knew what the place looked like. It wasn't very big, just two cement block buildings set at right angles to one another, and a big wooden boathouse that ran from the smaller building to the edge of the harbor.

The office hadn't been changed much from the way the former owners had arranged it. Desks formed two rows behind a long counter just inside the front doors. Along the left side of the room were four small offices with opaque glass doors opening onto a hallway. Light shone from behind only one of the doors at the moment.

I went up to the counter and a well put together brunette with too much make-up on her eyes came to see what I wanted. I told her; she nodded and went to an intercom. Then she went back to her desk. I watched her, trying to figure out how she could move around in the tight, short

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skirt and high, spike heels she wore. But she didn't seem to have any trouble.

The door to the lighted office came open and I turned away from the brunette. I saw Dorian Pinter and I started down the hallway to him.

We had a grunting acquaintance from having met a few times at the Athletic Club, but we'd never got to the hand-shaking stage. We didn't get there now. Pinter just said, "Follow me, Zane," and moved into his office.

I followed him. He was one of those fortyish atheletes, stocky and hard-muscled. He had a short, choppy way of walking and talking, both of which had always annoyed me. They were just too damned efficient.

He maneuvered behind his desk and looked at me as if I was the hired help. "Mrs. Leonard isn't here right now," he said.

I caught the "Mrs. Leonard" bit. "Did *Corliss* leave any message for me?" I asked.

"Just to give you what help I could." His voice was flat.

I said, "You don't seem to like the idea."

He didn't say anything. He sat down and looked sullen. I couldn't figure him out. But I wasn't in any mood to try. I was tired and hungry and not at all happy at the prospect of working so close to *Corliss*.

I laid my hands flat on his desk and leaned forward, pushing my chin at him. "I don't know why you don't like my being here, and I don't care," I said. "But just remember, the easier you and Culpepper make things for me, the sooner I'll be on my way. So shall we get started?"

I got a real shock when he looked at me. His eyes were a dark, clear brown. They turned cloudy with hatred as they moved up to my face.

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III

"JUST REMEMBER why you're here," Pinter said in that flat voice.

I thought, "This joker is jealous!" He thought I had come back to move in on Corliss again! I wanted to laugh. This was the gag of the week. This really made my day.

I straightened up and grinned at him. He didn't like that. He had left himself wide open and he knew it. He got up abruptly. "Come on. Culpepper can tell you what you want to know," he said.

I moved aside to let him lead the way out. We went down the narrow hall and through a door into another hall. This one was short. It led to a very solid looking door marked: "Research Laboratory. Private." Pinter pushed a button.

A faint ringing came from the other side of the door. "It takes time for him to come out of his fog," Pinter said. "If he doesn't answer in five minutes, ring again."

He started away. I said, "While I'm waiting, I could get your angle on this."

He stopped and turned and let me have another cloudy-eyed look. "All I know is what Mrs. Leonard told me." He seemed to think that needed explanation, even for me. He added, "I don't spend much of my time here. I have other work to do."

"Were you around when Culpepper found the bomb yesterday?"

He said, "No," swung around and chopped his way out of sight.

I reached for the button, but before I made contact the door opened. A middle-aged man popped into the hall and shut the door quickly. He was something to look at—about two-thirds my height and not much bigger around than my thigh. His face was weathered from exposure to sun and

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wind. He had pale blue eyes and a lot of bald head with a fringe of fine white hair around the edges.

Corliss had said he was old. Perhaps he looked that way to a woman of twenty-six. But I guessed him to be short of sixty, and from the way he moved, he had a lot of life left in him yet.

I said, "I'm Zane."

He put out a horny-palmed hand. "Culpepper. I heard you was coming." He had a shrill voice with a lot of shout in it.

I said, "Let's get started, shall we? Where did you find the bomb?" I stepped forward.

Culpepper squared away in front of the door. "I can't let you in there," he said. "That's top secret. Nobody goes in but me and my partners, not even the janitor."

I'd heard he was eccentric. Now I could believe it. I had met a lot of old timers like him—mostly fishermen whose years of working alone seemed to make them suspicious of people in general.

I said, "I wouldn't know what you were doing if you tried to tell me."

"You know a lot about boats," he said stubbornly.

My patience frayed at the edges. Yesterday, Bony-face and Corliss. Today, Pinter. And now this old timer guarding his door like Horatius at the Bridge.

I said, "I know enough about boats to make my living, and that's all. Now let me in there."

"My process ain't patented yet," Culpepper argued. "And until it is, I don't want nobody looking around."

I remembered Corliss telling me that after meeting Culpepper I'd understand why the police hadn't been called in. I realized now what she meant. Cops prowling around would probably have given the old man a stroke.

Right now I didn't care if he blew all his gaskets. My patience stopped fraying and just unravelled. I stepped forward and caught Culpepper under the arms. He weighed more than I'd thought but he still didn't have a chance of fighting my weight. I set him to one side and opened the

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door. I walked into his lab. He came after me, screeching like a hen trying to protect her nest.

I ignored him and looked around. This part of the laboratory was a big square room with cement block walls and a substantial looking roof. There were no windows; all the light came from fluorescent fixtures hanging from the ceiling. On the far side of the room was a scattering of wooden forms shaped like boats of various sizes. A big metal monster that looked something like one of those big dryers in a laundromat squatted to our left, and to the right was a workbench cluttered with tools and scraps of stuff I assumed to be fiberglass.

I said, "I don't know any more than I did when I was outside. So relax and show me exactly what happened."

Culpepper cantered around a while longer and then said reluctantly, "Over here, Zane."

"Here" was a wheeled worktable standing near the furnace. It had nothing on it but an intricate looking clock set on top of a black metal box about a foot square and a foot deep. The front of the box was covered with calibrated dials and three thick, black rubberized cords ran out of the back and disappeared toward the metal monster.

I said, "What is it—the bomb?"

He wasn't amused. He scowled at me with his thin, flat mouth and the gray chin-whiskers bristled again.

"That's the timer for the electric oven," he said, pointing to the metal monster.

"What do you bake?" I asked.

He said, "I test my fiberglass molds for heat resistance. I started to set the timer yesterday when I first come in like I always do. Only I knocked it to the floor."

He glared at me. "I been a little jittery lately since them other two attempts to kill me."

I said, "Remind me to ask you about those later. So after you knocked over this gadget, what happened?"

"Nothing. But I was scared I mighta shook something loose, so I opened the control box to check the wiring."

He picked up the metal box and turned it around, rear

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side to us. The back of the box was off, exposing an intricate maze of wires and connections inside. Everything looked fine to me except for two freshly cut wires sticking up into a fairly large empty space.

Culpepper squatted down and pointed to a lower shelf of the work table. Something that looked like an ugly colored, sawed off piece of candle lay there. Two wire ends stuck out from the top of it.

"Gelignite," he announced. He explained that the electric detonator for the bomb was connected to his timer, as were two other charges of the same explosive. He had found one behind the electric furnace, and one under the wooden forms across the room.

The way the connections were rigged, all Culpepper had to do was activate the timer and the three gelignite bombs would have gone off together, blasting both the room and Culpepper apart.

I looked at the explosive. "Is this stuff easy to come by? I mean, can anyone with a good reason just go buy it?"

"Nope. But in this case they didn't have to," he said. "We keep it here for testing hulls."

That took more explanation, but I finally understood that after Culpepper applied what he called his "secret process" to a fiberglass boat hull, the hull was trailered out to The Spit and a charge of gelignite was detonated under water. The idea was to see how much force the specially processed hull could stand. This testing was always done at night. At this time of year, there was seldom anyone at The Spit or in the harbor close to it.

I said, "What about the two other attempts to kill you—were they the same as this last one?"

"Nope," he said promptly. He started for the door. "There ain't nothing more to see here."

I took the hint and followed him into the hall. I wanted to look the lab over more carefully, but I preferred to do it with someone besides Culpepper for a guide.

He shut the door and locked it. "The first time I was crossing the street in front of my place to get my car and

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come back here to do a little night work. This old jalopy come out of nowhere and nearly knocked me over. I jumped mighty quick and far, I tell you."

I said, "It could have been an accident."

"It weren't," he said flatly. "Because five nights ago I was traulering a hull out that snaky piece of dirt road that goes out to the Spit. I was about fifty feet above the water when the same jalopy come around a curve and put its lights square in my eyes by swinging over to my side of the road. To get away from him I'da had to go way over on the sandy shoulder and then my truck and trailer'd gone off the edge for sure."

He looked worried and frightened just remembering it. "Corliss was coming around a curve right behind me. When the jalopy saw her, it moved away quick."

I said, "Did you get a look at the car or the driver?"

"With them bright lights in my eyes?" he demanded testily. "But Corliss had a look see. She said the car was an old, dirty, green sedan. Or so she claimed."

His voice had a tartness to it, as if he was reluctant to believe Corliss. Or, I thought, as if he had learned that she wasn't someone you could always believe.

I'd learned that too—a little late. But I didn't concern myself right now with Culpepper's feelings toward Corliss. I was busy wondering what Bony-face and his green sedan had to do with all this.

Culpepper started walking down the hall. "I'm hungry," he said, "I'm going to eat supper."

I strode after him. "Just a few more questions," I said. "Could anyone without a key get into the lab?"

It was possible, I learned. The lab had two doors—one opening into the boat storage shed at the rear and the one we had just come through. But Culpepper had rigged up an alarm system that went off like a rocket if anyone so much as touched either door when he wasn't around. The alarm was set when he key-locked the door as he had a moment ago, and it was turned off when he unlocked the door.

The catch was that he had also designed the door locks

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and the key so both were magnetized. The only other key that would work was locked in the company safe.

I said, "Then when you aren't around, Corliss or Pinter can't get into the lab without using that special key that's in the safe."

"That's right," Culpepper said. "They ain't got much reason to go in when I'm not around anyway. The key's only there in case we get a fire or something."

I said, "Could you have lost your key or had it stolen long enough for somebody to duplicate it?"

"Nope." He grinned at me. He was proud of the gimmicks he had worked out. "I could give you the key right now and you couldn't duplicate it without a lot of trouble. You'd have to find out how much it's magnetized and all before it'd do you any good."

He opened the hall door and we went into the office building. It was empty and dark except for a light behind Pinter's door and another in Corliss' office. She must have come while I was with Culpepper. I thought about seeing her but decided that I'd had all I could take for one day.

I followed Culpepper outside. He climbed into the ancient coupe. Next to it now was a baby blue Cadillac that I recognized as the car Tom Leonard had once driven.

I said to Culpepper, "From what you've told me, nobody else but Corliss or Pinter had a chance to plant those bombs."

He squinted his pale eyes at me. "Looks that way, don't it," he said. He started his motor and clattered off toward the gate, not bothering to say any more.

Nocky appeared and opened the gate. Culpepper drove on through. I stood there a moment, watching his taillights disappear into the fog.

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IV

NOCKY FLAGGED me as I drove toward the gate. I pulled to one side and rolled down my window. He came toward me with the slow, careful walk of someone growing old.

"How's the job going, Nocky?"

"Real good, Mr. Zane. I sure thank you for it." He took off his old-fashioned rimless glasses and wiped fog from the lenses with a faded blue bandanna. He took a lot of time, fussing the way some men will when they want to say something and don't know how to get started.

I said, "What's the trouble?"

He put the glasses slowly back over his tired eyes. He glanced toward the office building dimly visible through the fog. I said, "Go ahead. I'm listening."

Nocky's mouth opened. It clamped shut as someone opened the office door and let light out into the fog. After a moment, I could make out Corliss and Pinter walking toward their cars.

Nocky gave his feet a shuffle. "I just wanted to thank you for getting me this job, Mr. Zane," he said. He was still looking past me, toward the parking lot.

I looked too. Pinter was going back to the office. He walked like a man who was angry about something. Corliss was coming toward the gate.

I said to Nocky, "Maybe you can return the favor. Drop in at my office tomorrow and give me your angle on the trouble around here."

Uncertainty touched his features and then faded. "It'll be after two, Mr. Zane. I don't get up before then."

"I'll be there," I assured him.

He nodded and moved off toward the lever that controlled the gate. I glanced at Corliss. She lifted a hand and waved at me. Behind her, I could see Pinter framed in the office doorway looking toward the gate. The fog was

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too heavy for me to see his features clearly, but I was sure he'd be wearing that sour, sullen expression again.

Corliss called, "Wait a minute, Martin. I'd like to talk to you."

I said, "I'll be in a better mood to listen if you give me a chance to clean up and grab some dinner first."

She reached the side of my wagon. She put out a hand and touched my arm resting on the window frame. It was an intimate gesture I remembered only too well. I wanted to pull my arm away, but I didn't think it was worth the effort.

She said, "I have some work to do here. I'll call you when I'm finished. Is that all right?"

I told her that would be fine. She dropped her hand and started back to the office. Pinter was still standing in the doorway. I drove on toward the gate. Nocky swung it open and the wagon moved into thick fog.

It was nearly seven o'clock now and completely dark, making driving even worse than it had been before. I managed to see the road only by keeping my lights on low beam and watching the ragged line where the blacktop met the sandy shoulder. I was doing a fast fifteen miles an hour when I reached the airport road and turned left toward LaPlaya.

I picked up to twenty. The fog was sure to have closed the airport and I didn't expect any traffic to worry about until I reached the junction with U.S. 101. But I hadn't crept a quarter of a mile when a car came up behind me. It had only the left headlight working. That was on low beam, and I didn't see a thing until the car rode right up to my bumper.

Cars hanging on my tail make me nervous. I cut my speed to a crawl, hoping this one would take the hint and go around me. But he was either afraid of the foggy dark and hungry for company or he was afraid to pass because we were entering a twisting section that curved through a series of high dunes.

I picked up speed again, but the fog lay even thicker with the dunes trapping it. I dropped down to fifteen. I

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shifted into second as I started up a low grade that twisted into a right hand curve at the top.

I was halfway up the pull when the lights of the car behind me went on high beam and then dropped back to dim. The righthand light went out, leaving the car one-eyed again.

I had about ten seconds to wonder if the guy behind me was signaling to pass. Then I got the answer. Bright headlights sprang into life on my side of the road, less than twenty feet dead ahead.

I fanned my brakes and squinted against the bright, fog-spattered light. I stopped with my right wheels almost on the strip of sandy, soft shoulder. The car ahead rolled a few feet downslope and nudged my front bumper. One-eye behind me eased up and clicked me in the rear.

I was pinned in tight.

I slapped down the button that locked my door. I reached for the glove compartment and the gun I usually carry there. I stopped reaching when I remembered that I had put the gun in my boat while I was on vacation.

I swore, but the gun stayed right where it was. I dropped my hand down and felt under the seat where I always keep an old fashioned tire iron. It was where it should be. I pulled it free and held it along my leg, out of the lights that were making a prime target of me. Then I just sat, waiting for something to happen.

I kept right on waiting. I twisted my head and looked through the back window. One-eye was close enough for me to make out hazy details—the hood of a middle-aged heap, a crumpled left fender, a color that in daylight might well be dirty green.

I thought, Bony-face again!

I couldn't see anything else but the car. And nothing stirred; there was no sound but the low beat of three idling motors.

My nerves began to itch. I felt my temper getting hot. I wanted to open my door and yell just to let off some of the

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steam building up inside me. But that would be what Bony-face wanted.

Something metallic tapped on the window of my right hand door. I twisted around. And there was Bony-face, motioning with his knife for me to get out of the car.

I had a sudden urge to oblige him. I slid across the seat and got one hand on the door handle. I kept the tire iron in my other hand, out of sight against my leg. Then I stopped.

Bony-face peered in at me. He showed me the blade of his knife. His nasal voice came clearly through the glass, "Come out nice and easy, Zane, and you won't get hurt."

I came out. I pushed the door handle down and hit the frame with my shoulder. The door blasted open, catching Bony-face before he could step back. He stumbled in soft sand. I went through the open door with my tire iron swinging.

Light from the car ahead glinted on the eight inches of steel he swung at me. I caught my stride and shifted my swing. The tire iron came down on his wrist, just above the knobby joint. A bubbling scream broke from his loose lips. The knife dropped to the sand. I tossed the tire iron beside it and made a diving tackle.

The lights on the front car blacked out.

Bony-face went down on his back, both hands up to claw at my eyes. This time I was ready for that maneuver. I rolled my head to one side and tried to get an arm free to slug him.

But he still had all the characteristics of an eel. He wriggled out from under me and made it to his knees before I got a grip on him. I heard a car door slam and my door come open, but I was too busy holding onto Bony-face to pay much attention. I had him by one coat sleeve, and that wasn't quite enough.

He broke loose and made a dive for the knife. I went after him sliding over his back and putting a hand on each knobby wrist. I pulled back and up, twisting his joints. He screamed again.

Someone turned off my headlights, and now there was only

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the faint glow from Bony-face's one dim bulb. It was worse than useless; I was fighting blind.

I lumbered sideways and whipped Bony-face around to face me. I caught his wrists again and held on tight. Air gushed through his nose in ugly grunting sounds. Foam splattered me when he opened his lips to yell again. The sour stench of his breath made me want to vomit.

"Start talking, friend," I said.

The soft, scraping sound of a footstep in the sand reached me as I started to turn my head. I stopped when a gun rammed into my back, catching me squarely in a vertebra. "You do the talking, Zane." It was a woman's voice, flat and quite obviously disguised. She pulled the gun back an inch or so.

I held onto Bony-face. He wasn't much, but he was all the protection I had. "What am I supposed to tell you?"

"What did you learn in Mexico City," the woman said. "I want to hear about Finney. All about him." Her attempts to disguise her voice gave it a tinny sound.

I said, "I learned that some Mexican *señoritas* are blonds—real ones. But the Finney bit loses me."

Her voice was quick with anger. "I haven't time to listen to you lie."

The gun rammed my spine harder. This time it stayed there. Getting in too close with a gun is the kind of mistake amateurs usually make. And I had the feeling this woman was strictly an amateur, at least as far as handling a gun went. That didn't make her any the less dangerous. Sometimes it's the other way around. Amateurs don't really know how easy it is to make a gun go off. But it does make them more liable to the kind of mistake the woman had just made.

She said, "I'm going to ask you about Finney just once more."

I let loose of Bony-face's wrists with a sudden thrust that sent him flopping backward in the sand. I kept my body moving, bringing it around with a sloppy twisting motion because of the sandy footing. But it was still fast enough to catch the woman's gun hand with a swinging arm.

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She tried to step back to get solid footing. But she was wearing high heels. They don't mix with soft sand. I was all over her before she could straighten herself out. I got an armful of fur coat and a mouthful of hair. We went down together, with me on top. I could feel a lot of figure as the fur coat came open. But it wasn't much of a thrill. The gun was squashed between the lady and me.

I spit out the mouthful of hair and raised my head. It was too dark for me to see anything but a white blur of face and very dark, shoulder length hair. I wanted to get a good look at her, but she was pitching too much for me to stop and strike a match.

I lifted my body and slid my hand down her arm until I felt the gun. I jerked it from her fingers and reared back. That was a mistake. With my weight off her, she had room to kick at me.

She screamed, "Orvall" in a panic filled voice.

Her coat and skirt rolled up to her hips. I saw a lot of pale skin. But I couldn't generate any interest in it. I was too busy dodging a spike heel coming to tear the side of my head off.

I rolled onto my back. I was holding the gun by the barrel. I tried to get the butt into my palm. But I was too eager. The gun slipped out of my hand and dropped into the sand. I fumbled frantically for it. I made out Orval dimly. He was on his hands and knees, bony face almost in the sand. He was obviously hunting for his knife, and I wanted that gun before he found it.

The woman stumbled to her feet and ran for the front car. "Let's get out of here!" she shouted.

Orval was digging at the sand with frantic motions. "I want my knife," he yelled. "I'm going to carve that sonofabitch!"

"Carve him later!" she screamed. "He's got the gun!"

That stopped Orval's treasure hunt. He staggered up and ran after her. I got to my knees and made a flying dive as he sprinted past me. I got a squirt of sand from his flying feet. It caught me squarely in the eyes.

I was lucky. If he'd stopped then, he would have had me

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cold-blind and with nothing more deadly in my fists than my grit covered palms. But when some people hit the panic button, they keep their fingers on it. And right now, neither Orval nor the woman had any thought except to get away before I started shooting.

Even if I had found the gun, they had no reason to juice up their nervous systems. By the time I had enough sand blinked out of my eyes to see again, there was nothing to shoot at but taillights disappearing into the fog. The woman was heading south and Orval was clattering his one-eyed jalopy toward town.

V

I GOT A flashlight from the glove compartment of the wagon and located the spoils of victory—the woman's gun, Orval's knife, and my tire iron. I dropped the gun and knife in my topcoat pocket and slid the tire iron back under the seat.

Then I sat behind the wheel and tried to put together what I'd learned so far. It didn't add up to much. I couldn't even put Orval and the woman in the same column with Corliss and her troubles. But I figured there had to be a connection—Orval's trying to run Culpepper down and his tailing me made that plain enough. There was only one trouble—plain or not—the connection escaped me.

I started the wagon and oozed my way through the fog toward home. My eyes were burning by the time I reached the bright lights of U.S. 101. From there on into town and down the hill to Harbor Way, I was barely able to keep my eyes open against the slashing brilliance of oncoming headlights.

I made home more by feel than by sight. Nothing had ever

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felt so welcome as the rough gravel that fronts the pier where I keep my boat. I sat a moment, letting the darkness soothe my eyes. Then I peered around for some sign of Orval and his green sedan. There was only motionless darkness and no sound but the familiar mutter of traffic on Harbor Way muting the soft slap of water against pier pilings and boat hulls.

I climbed out of the wagon and opened the rear door to get my suitcase. The top was up and everything inside jumbled in a crazy mess. Now I understood why the woman had got into my wagon before she shoved her gun into my back. She thought I might be carrying something in the suitcase. Something about Finney, whoever or whatever that was.

But what about Finney? The suitcase had no answers for me. I snapped it shut and lugged it down the short pier to the thirty-six foot remodeled fishing boat I call home.

Nothing seemed disturbed here. The padlock on the hatch felt as solid as ever. I went down the companionway into the cabin and sniffed at the darkness. The air held only a faint mustiness from the boat's being shut up. Satisfied, I turned on a dim lamp and let myself relax.

This was home, and it had all of home's conveniences. Since I seldom took the boat out, I kept myself plugged into the city services—telephone, lights, and water. Right now I appreciated the water most. I drew a basinful and plunged my face into it. I forced my eyelids up and rolled my eyes around until I had all the grit washed away.

By the time I was ready to dry my face, a few ideas were beginning to click. I put water on for coffee and carried the gun and knife forward and stowed them in the rope locker in the bow. I went back to the galley and made myself a mug of instant coffee. I settled down in my easy chair with the coffee and a cigarette.

I brought the telephone into my lap and put in a call for Ted Winters in Los Angeles. I knew he wouldn't appreciate my calling. It was Friday night and nearly nine o'clock by now—just the hour when Winters would be getting into

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high gear with some young blond. But I didn't feel like waiting until tomorrow. Not after everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours.

It didn't matter to me that Corliss wouldn't be happy when she learned I'd contacted Ted Winters. I wasn't particularly concerned with keeping Corliss happy. And I thought it was time for Winters to know what was going on in case he could do something to protect himself.

I was in luck. Ted Winters was still in his apartment. As usual, he wasn't alone. He didn't sound happy to hear from me.

I said, "It won't hurt your girlfriend to cool off for a few minutes. This is important."

"I thought you were on vacation," he said.

"I was," I told him, "until Corliss Leonard found me last night. She came all the way to Mexico City to tell me about the nice, big insurance policy you wrote for her new company. Now go ahead and hang up if you want. Call me after you get your lady friend taken care of."

For a moment all I got through the receiver was heavy breathing. Then he said in an aside, "Yes, I know, baby. But this can't wait. Go put on my bathrobe or something."

His voice grew louder as he spoke into the phone. "What's happened down there?"

I said, "I'll tell you that after I hear about the policy you wrote. All about it."

He told it almost the way Corliss had. Only he didn't sound quite as much of a sucker as she'd made him out to be. He claimed to have investigated Culpepper—as much as he could in a few days.

I said, "What did you find out?"

"What anyone else would have," he said testily. "The old boy spent most of his life in northern California and Oregon as a commercial fisherman. A few years ago, he invented some kind of rig that enabled trawlers to catch more fish faster. That made him a fair wad of money—he sold the rights for just under a hundred thousand dollars. Then he apparently went back to the drawing board. Last year he

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came up with some kind of block and tackle to make life easier for purse-seiners. That made him a little better than fifty thousand."

I said, "The fifty thousand he invested with Corliss?"

"So I understand," Winters said.

"And these inventions were all his—he wasn't involved in any patent infringement suits or anything like that?"

"Not that I heard of," Winters answered. "What the hell is going on? Why all the questions about Culpepper?"

I said, "Because someone tried to knock him off three times in the last ten days. But last time he found a bomb before it went off—and blew him and that expensive laboratory out to sea."

Winters made a strangling sound. I said, "So who would want to kill him? And why?"

"My God, I don't know," he said thickly.

"You checked out his finances," I said. "Did you dig any deeper than that?"

"Why should I?" Winters demanded. "Corliss was sold on him. And you know her. She wouldn't have done business unless she'd made a thorough check herself."

He was breathing heavily again. He sounded like he was working up a real sweat. "Can you handle it down there?"

I said, "I'm trying. But I need more information than I'm getting." I told him about Orval and the woman. I threw in Dorian Pinter's attitude for good measure.

Winters knew nothing about Orval. But he had met Pinter. He said, "Don't let him get in your hair. He's gone on Corliss. He acted just as surly toward me when I was down there writing the insurance policy."

I said, "That I can understand. I've seen the way you look at a woman."

He ignored that. "Damn it, do something, can't you. If anything happens to Culpepper or that lab, I'm dead in this business."

I said, "Then you did take Corliss' word for a lot of things you should have checked out."

"Hell, wouldn't you? Look at her business reputation."

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I had to admit that I probably would have come close to doing what he did. I might not think much of Corliss as a woman, but where business was concerned, she knew how to protect her dollars better than an old-fashioned banker.

I said, "I'll do what I can at this end. But I want some help. You check out Culpepper for me—day by day, if you have to, right back to when he was wearing diapers. And check out this Orval character. Try the mug files first. He smells like the type who'd have a long record."

Winters usually gave me an argument when I asked him to put in time on a week-end. But he was very docile right now. I took advantage of his attitude and told him to make a check on Corliss' and Pinter's bank accounts.

He snorted at that. "You sound like you think one of them might be trying to knock off Culpepper for the insurance. Forget that. He's worth more alive than dead. This fiberglass research is something a lot of big outfits are throwing their money into."

I said, "I know that. But according to Culpepper himself, no one but the three partners could get into the lab to plant a bomb there."

"Somebody did," Winters said. "Probably this Orval monkey you described."

I told him to stop arguing and do what I asked. He agreed. Then he said plaintively, "I can't put your fee for for this on the company books. Someone would start wondering why I was having a newly okayed account checked out so soon."

He made me sore. I said, "I didn't call up to haggle over money. Go peel your bathrobe off that blond." I rammed the phone down and glared at it.

After a moment I decided to forgive Winters even if he should have known better than to pull that money bit on me. What I'd told him must have been a real jolt. Enough of a jolt, I hoped, to make him do some work tomorrow.

I hadn't learned much from Ted Winters, but I had got things moving. And in my business that can be important. Very few cases are simple enough for one man to be able to

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do all the work himself. And this one would be no exception. Already it had the feel of a job that was going to take a lot of cooperative effort.

I couldn't see getting that kind of effort from Pinter or Corliss or Culpepper. Pinter wasn't about to do any more for me than he had to. And Corliss and Culpepper just didn't seem to know enough to help.

I lit another cigarette and thought about Ted Winters some more. I couldn't really blame him for that casual way he'd written the fat policy. Not under the circumstances. But it wouldn't have mattered if I could blame him. He would still be in the same trouble.

We fought every time we talked to one another. But they weren't the kind of fights that had much meaning. When the going got rough I could always count on Ted. He'd proved that more than once, both when I worked for Marine Mutual and since I came down to LaPlaya. I'd helped him out too, but I'd never had the chance to do as much for him as he'd done for me.

Now I had that chance. And even if it meant having to see Corliss all the time, I was determined to stick with the case until I broke it.

The telephone rang. I lifted the receiver and identified myself. Corliss' voice came at me, sharp with fear. "Martin, I'm in your office. Please come here right away. Something terrible has happened!"

I said, "I know. Orval and his ladyfriend have been in there sticking knives into the furniture."

She wasn't in the mood for riddles. Her voice rose to within a half-octave of hysterics. "Please hurry! Please!"

I hurried. My office is only a few blocks away from my moorage, up on First Avenue. But even so, I used up time before I parked behind her blue Caddy.

I couldn't figure out how she'd got into the building. I had to use my key to unlock the front door. But I knew she was there. I'd seen her car and I'd seen light in my sixth floor window as I drove up the street.

The elevator was on six. I brought it creaking down and

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then cursed it all the way back up. I jogged down the hall on the double. My office door was closed but not locked. I swung it open and stepped into the brightly lit cubbyhole I work in.

Corliss was standing by my desk. It was the only piece of furniture in the room that was upright. My chairs were tipped over. My file cabinet lay on its face, the contents scattered across the floor like huge snowflakes. Even my picture of Kim Novak was crooked on the wall.

And in the middle of the mess a man lay face up, his wide open eyes staring through rimless glasses at the ceiling. It was old Nocky, and he was very, very dead.

VI

CORLISS SAID, "Oh, Martin, thank God you're here!" She stumbled forward and buried her face in my topcoat.

I didn't blame her for wanting someone to hang onto. It had taken me ten minutes to work my way here through the fog. And she must have been here a few minutes before she called me. Even one minute can be a long time if you're cooped up with a corpse.

I pulled her away, righted a chair, and sat her down. I checked my bottom left desk drawer and found my bottle of Canadian whiskey intact. I pouted two shots and gave her one. She took it without bothering to ask for water. I swallowed mine the same way. It didn't really make me feel much better.

I walked to Nocky and took a slow, careful look at him. His seamed old face had a mixture of fear and surprise frozen on it. His eyes mirrored pure terror—as if he'd realized what was happening to him the instant before he died.

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The handle of my long-shafted bronze letter opened was sticking out of his caved-in chest.

I turned away. I had an old slicker in the closet. I used that to cover him. Then I righted my desk chair and sat down. I said stupidly, "Another drink?"

"No. No thanks." Her eyes came up to meet mine—their grayness drowned in shock.

"Why would anyone do a thing like—like this?" she demanded.

I said, "I can think of another question without any answer. What was Nocky doing here? I thought he was supposed to be on the gate at the plant."

Her head wagged slowly up and down. "When I left the plant, he was still at the gate."

Her forehead wrinkled. "But that was over an hour ago."

I looked at my watch. It read nine straight up. I thought back. I had left the plant myself a few minutes after seven. The foggy drive to town had taken me nearly an hour, counting time out for fun and games with Orval and his lady-friend. Then I had used up another hour washing sand from my eyes, phoning Winters, and finally coming here.

Corliss must have left the plant just about the time I got to my boat. I said, "How long did it take you to drive into town?"

"Twenty-five minutes," she said promptly. "I came straight here and worked for a while and . . ."

I said, "How did you get in the building?"

She looked surprised. "I have a key," she said. "I rented a little office on the second floor. It's so much easier handling purchasing and sales from town than at the plant. I thought you knew."

That was one piece of scuttlebutt I'd missed. I said, "Do Pinter and Culpepper have keys too?"

"Of course. Although Ezekial never comes here. He hates cities."

I wasn't interested in Culpepper's dislikes. I said, "Does your key fit my office too?" My voice was sharper than I'd intended.

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A flush touched her cheeks. "For heaven's sake must you sound so much like a detective? Am I guilty of something?"

I said, "You might be at that."

The flush on her cheeks deepened. "Martin!"

I said, "Look, an old man I happened to like a lot is dead in my office. Before I call the police, I want to know as much as I can about what happened. So don't get the idea I'm being personal. I'm just checking possibilities."

"I see," she answered quietly. "And what *possibility* have you attached to me?" The flush had left her cheeks; she was pale now.

She asked for it; I gave it to her: One, only the three partners could have got into the lab and planted that bomb; two, all three of them had keys to this building; three, they all knew Nocky. If she wanted more, there was a quarter of a million in insurance money riding on that bomb.

She watched me in silence, gray eyes huge in the pallor of her face. I threw her another one—Nocky was about to tell me something when she and Pinter came out of the office. The old man had clammed up immediately.

Corliss had an answer for that. Culpepper had a phobia about industrial spies. So all company employees were under strict orders not to talk more than was necessary to anyone. Nocky, Corliss suggested, might have been afraid of losing his job because he was seen talking to me.

That made sense; the job meant a great deal to Nocky. The industrial spy bit made sense too. It was fairly common in some fields of industry. Only I'd never heard of one knocking off the competition or even trying to.

Corliss said in a hurt tone, "The way you act, you'd think Dorian or I tried to get rid of Ezekial for the insurance!"

I said, "It's a thought. If you'd found out his research was worthless, it would be one way to get your investment back with interest."

"It would be," Corliss agreed softly. "Only Ezekial's process happens to be progressing very well."

I couldn't see where I had gained much by rough tactics. I'd managed to make it pretty clear how I felt toward her—

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but she already knew that. I said, "Let's get back to Nocky. You left him at the gate before eight o'clock. You drove here and worked in your office. Then what?"

"Then," she said, "I called you here. I expected you to be home—on your boat. But when I parked outside, I saw a light in your office and I decided you'd come here to wait for me."

She thought a minute. "I called twice. The first time a little after eight-thirty. The second a few minutes later. When I didn't get any answer, I came up here to see what was wrong."

Her eyes clouded with remembering. "Your door was ajar so I came in and saw this awful mess and Mr. Nockheimer on the floor. Then I called your boat."

"Why call me first? Why not the cops?"

She looked steadily at me. "Would that have helped any of us, Martin? You or Ezekial—or Ted Winters?"

I had to admit it wouldn't have helped. Nocky died in my office with my letter opener in his chest—that made me a prime suspect. And Nocky's job would have led the cops straight to Corliss' plant. They'd have learned about the attempts on Culpepper's life quickly enough. And once that happened, Ted Winters carelessness about the insurance policy would have come into the open. Because one of the first steps the law takes in cases of murder or attempted murder is to check the insurance situation.

I got up and checked my office door. The lock had been jimmied. But I couldn't be sure whether it had happened tonight or earlier in the week. Today was Friday. The cleaning woman came on Saturday afternoons. And as my office is at the end of a hall, few people but myself and the cleaning woman ever wander down this way unless they're on business. So the place could have been broken into any time after last Saturday without anyone noticing it.

I went back to my chair. I said, "You saw Nocky alive just before eight. You found him dead at around a quarter to nine. Even if he'd left the plant immediately after you did, he couldn't have got here much before eight-thirty. So in

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the fifteen minutes between eight-thirty and quarter to nine—when you came up here—someone killed him.” I put out my cigarette and lit another one.

“But who?” Corliss whispered. “And why? For God’s sake, Martin, why?”

I said, “The *who* part might be easy to answer.” I was thinking of Orval and his ladyfriend. He’d headed for town, but she’d gone back south—in the direction of the road to Corliss’ plant.

I told Corliss what had happened to me. That was so much wasted breath. The green sedan she remembered from the time she saw it nearly send Culpepper over the cliff into the harbor. But she drew a blank on Orval and on the woman.

I said, “Try again. A brunette, shoulder length hair, five-feet-six or so and pretty solid—not heavy but well upholstered. And not soft either.”

“The city is full of brunettes with shoulder length hair and good figures,” Corliss said. “Can you think of any other identifying feature?”

“It was a little dark.”

“What about her voice?”

I said, “At first, she tried to disguise it—so that won’t help. Later, when she was screaming, she was half hysterical. I can’t help there.”

“What about her car?”

“It had twin headlights,” I said, “so it was a fairly new model. That’s as far as I can go.” I paused and thought a moment. “But it seems to me she has to be connected in some way with your plant or with you or your partners. The way she ordered Orval around, she’s obviously the boss of the operation. He’s more than likely just a punk she hired to do a job. All right, where did she get her information? She had to know where Culpepper would be those times Orval tried to run him down. And how did she find out I was in Mexico City so she could send Orval after me? Where could she get this information except at the plant?”

Corliss said, “But even if that’s true, what is she after? What does she want?”

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I said, "You might as well ask how she knew you were going to hire me three days before you knew it yourself. You'll get the same answer—I just don't know."

I added, "But keep in mind—this whole thing makes no sense at all *unless* she is somehow connected with the plant."

We batted it around a while longer but got nowhere. I worked back closer to the present. I said, "When did Pinter leave the plant?"

Her answer made me grin a little. Pinter had got sore at her because she refused to have dinner with him tonight. She wanted to talk to me, and she told him so. As a result, he stalked out and drove away a few minutes before she left.

She finished telling me that and then she started tugging at her skirt the way she had in my Mexico City hotel room. I stopped grinning and waited to find out what she was nerving herself to ask me to do.

She said suddenly, "Martin, we still can't call the police—not yet. Can't we—hide—Mr. Nockheimer somewhere for a little while?"

I had been thinking the same thing. Not that I liked the idea of tampering with murder evidence. But doing so could give me the extra day or two that might save Ted Winters' business life. And I had juggled a body before when it meant helping a client I only half believed to be innocent. I had a lot more than a half belief in Ted Winter's innocence.

I got up. "I'll move him, but my letter opener stays right where it is. If I get caught, I don't want to be accused of trying to hide the way Nocky was killed or the weapon that killed him."

"But they'll trace it right back to you!" Corliss protested.

I said, "I just don't want anyone to get the idea he can put the squeeze on me. By leaving that letter opener in Nocky, I have a good arguing point when homicide look over the body. And I'm liable to need that arguing point. A character named Stolz is filling in for Lieutenant Nicolo. And he's one of those old-fashioned cops who thinks every kind of private investigator should be on a diet of rat poison."

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I went over to the body. "Bring your car around to the service door in the alley. I'll have to carry Nocky out there through the basement."

Corliss stood up. "When you said you didn't want anyone to get the idea he could put the squeeze on you, were you thinking of me, Martin?"

I said, "Among others."

Her cheeks reddened. "You don't trust me at all, do you?"

I said flatly, "No."

She didn't say anything. She just looked at me like I'd slapped and kicked her, or maybe watered her drink. Then she walked off quietly to do as I asked.

I picked up Nocky, slicker and all, and started for the door. He didn't heft much, even as a dead weight.

I suppose I should have apologized to Corliss. But I didn't feel like it. In the first place, I'd told her the truth. In the second, I wasn't really concerned about her right now. I was concerned with the body in my arms and I was remembering that Nocky had been my friend too.

VII

HISTORY was repeating itself. The body I carried was the second I'd smuggled out of my office in just this way. I'd put the first one in the trunk of a Caddy too. A turquoise Caddy instead of a blue one. But everything else was the same—the route down to the basement, slipping out the service door, sliding the body into the big, deep trunk, the feeling of revulsion as I slammed the lid down.

And my reaction was the same too. I wanted to be sick.

Corliss wasn't having a much better time. By the time I finished the job and went around to where she sat with a

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hard grip on the Caddy's wheel, I could see sweat beading her upper lip. I said, "Now where?"

"I thought we could take him to wherever he lives," she said. Her voice was stiff, under tight control. "Maybe he won't be found too quickly there."

I opened the door and motioned her to slide over. "He has a little shack down in Squatters Valley," I said. "We can get there faster if I drive."

She made no objection. I took the big car out of the fog-filled alley and slid it down to Harbor Way and turned south. Near the city limits a jumble of factories and junk yards and railroad tracks cluster along the harbor. Behind them is a shacktown called Squatter's Valley. Rent there is cheap—the houses are made out of flattened tin cans, old boxes, anything that will hold together. Hoboes winter there; wetbacks use the place for a hide-out; and a few of our less well paid citizens are permanent residents.

Nocky had been one of the permanents. His shack was solid, made of slab and driftwood he'd gathered from the beaches during the depression days. Anytime in the last twenty years, he could have afforded to move, but he had explained to me once that this was his home.

And he had made the shack into just that—a home. A fence in front enclosed a flower garden; another in the rear kept people and animals out of his vegetable patch.

I felt sad when we pulled alongside the shack. I couldn't see much in the still lingering fog but I knew what everything looked like. I thought of Nocky's poinsettias, of the patch of iceplant he cared for so lovingly, of the four scrawny rose-bushes he used to talk to me about.

I said, "Let's get this over with. If a local resident sees this car, he won't be apt to forget it."

Corliss didn't answer. She was looking straight ahead, her face a dirtyish white in the dim lights from the dash. I turned the lights off. I got out quickly and shut the door. The area here was very dark, with only dim coal oil lights showing from a nearby hovel. Most of the places were without electricity and used kerosene lamps or candles. Every winter

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the fire department had itself a real workout in Squatter's Valley.

I said, "I'll need some help this time."

She climbed wordlessly from the car and joined me as I opened the trunk. The light came on. The slicker had pulled half off the body and Nocky's seamed features looked up at us.

Corliss turned away quickly. I put my teeth down hard and pulled the body out of the trunk. I dropped the lid quickly to turn off the light. Darkness squeezed down on us, wet and foggy. I knelt and made myself go through Nocky's pockets until I located his keyring. I gave it to Corliss. One key opened the gate in the side fence; another one let us into the shack.

Once the door was unlocked, Corliss could have gone back to the car but I told her to stick with me. She said nothing but came docilely along. I carried Nocky inside and laid him carefully on the floor. I used my cigarette lighter carefully, shielding the tiny flame with my hand, while I checked to make sure the body couldn't be seen from outside through a window. Then we left, locking the door and gate carefully behind us.

She sat stiff and silent until we were fumbling back along Harbor Way. She said suddenly, "Why did you have me come with you back there?"

I said, "I didn't want to leave you alone in the car."

Her head twisted around as she looked briefly at me. "Did you think I'd drive off and leave you, Martin?" Her voice lost its stiffness under the prodding of sudden anger. "Why do you hate me so?"

I said, "I already told you. To hate, you have to feel something. And I don't. There isn't anything left for me to hate with."

"I see." She sounded as if her teeth were clenched tight.

I said, "And I didn't think you'd drive off and leave me. The idea was to keep you from being alone and having time to think. This sort of thing is pretty rough."

She looked at me again, but she didn't answer. I worked

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the Caddy up to First and stopped it behind my wagon. "You'd better go home and try to forget what happened."

"I want to talk to you," Corliss insisted.

"I'm dirty and tired and hungry," I told her.

"If you don't think I'll poison you," she said, "come to my place for something to eat." Her voice held a thread of pleading in it.

I was about to argue when I realized that she didn't want to be alone just yet.

I got out of the Caddy. "I'll clean up and then come up to your place."

"Thank you, Martin." She added with an almost apologetic sound, "I have the penthouse at the Beach House. You can park in the basement garage.

I told her I'd do that, went to my wagon, and drove slowly home.

The boat was just as I'd left it. But it no longer had the same cozy, home-like feel of an hour or so ago. Now it was cold and damp and empty.

I ran the shower steaming hot and tried to scrub the feel of Nocky's weightless old body from me. I put down a pair of stiff drinks while I dressed in clean clothes. The liquor made no more impression than a cup of tea.

I drove down Harbor Way to its upper end. Here, just before Harbor Way turns into the twisting road that leads to our town's fancier houses on The Point, the tall tower of the city's most expensive apartment building rises from the sand.

I felt almost like I was wearing overalls to a formal dinner as I drove into the basement garage. My little wagon had an out-of-place look among the collection there that included two Rolls Royces, one Bentley, a scattering of Mercedes-Benz 300's, and a lot of Caddys, Imperials, and Continentals.

I gave the wagon a pat on its fender and told it to defend itself as best it could. Then I found the elevator marked "Private, Penthouse Only," and rode it eighteen stories into the sky.

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Corliss had herself quite a layout—a tremendous living room with the seaside wall solid glass, striking furniture that was as comfortable as it was expensive, and a bar that yielded not only good Canadian whiskey but cognac as well.

I had two shots of whiskey while Corliss sizzled a pair of steaks. I stood at the seaside window, holding a drapery aside so I could watch the lighthouse beam swing against the fog. I listened to the eerie sound of the big foghorn. It's a sound I always like—but tonight it was especially suitable. Its melancholy bellow fit my mood to a tee.

Corliss came to tell me the steaks were done. I went with her to an alcove breakfast nook. She had the table beautifully set—candles, silver, expensive China. And hot, smoking steaks.

We sat down. I sawed into my steak and stopped. I pushed my plate away and looked apologetically at Corliss. I said, "Sorry."

"Me too," she said. She stared back at me. Her face was almost without color and her eyes had the glaze of shock on them. I had the feeling I didn't look any better.

"Maybe some coffee . . ." she suggested.

We got up and took cups and coffee pot into the living room. A fire was going in a fireplace big enough to roast someone twice my size. We sat and watched the flames and tried to drink our coffee. It was perfectly brewed, but neither one of us could get interested in it. Then Corliss poured heavy shots of cognac into our cups. After that, we did better. Later, we did better still. We stopped diluting the cognac with the coffee.

The divan we were on was one of those small two seaters. At first I felt crowded with Corliss so close to me, but after a while the liquor and the fire began to draw away my tautness. I stopped caring that she was close enough for me to catch the well remembered scent she wore, close enough for me to feel the brush of her fine hair across my cheek. All I wanted to do was sit this way and drink brandied coffee. I didn't want to think, I just wanted to relax and let my mind go empty.

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I relaxed a little too much. My guard began to go down. Corliss touched me with her hip and shoulder. I didn't even feel like pulling away. It took too much effort.

A thin shiver ran through her muscles. I said, "Forget what just happened or you'll have the heebies in the middle of the night."

She shivered harder. "It was so awful," she whispered. "That poor old man." Her voice thinned out, "I'm frightened, Martin."

"Here? Now?"

Her head bobbed, brushing hair across the side of my face. "I have the feeling somebody followed us to Squatter's Valley," she said.

I hadn't noticed anything, but then I'd been concentrating on wheeling her car through the fog. I didn't feel worried. I just wished she'd get off this kick. Tomorrow would be soon enough to start conjuring up troubles.

I said, "Unless it was a car with only one headlight, you can relax."

She stopped shivering but she didn't move away from me. We sat silently a while longer as the flames from the driftwood fire played a color symphony for us. She got up finally to pour us more brandy, but she settled back in the same spot.

I could feel the warmth and the brandy pull my guard the rest of the way down. A kind of drowsy unreality closed slowly over me. I made an effort to fight against it, but I didn't get very far. It was like trying to get out of chestdeep quicksand without any help.

Corliss turned her head and her breath rustled softly against my ear. "Don't you want to know why I wanted to talk to you, Martin?"

My voice came lazily from far away, "Not if it has anything to do with Culpepper."

"It hasn't," she said softly. "It only has to do with us—with you and me."

My eyes were open just wide enough for me to see the colors in the fire. My body was slumped in almost complete relaxation. Somewhere down inside me a warning horn blast-

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ed, but I wasn't about to move because of it. Nothing more gentle than an atom bomb was going to stir me now.

She said, "Here we are in the same city again. It's almost like it was when we met—three years ago—you coming to where I work to make an investigation."

I said, "Only three years ago you hadn't started thinking big; now you're worth a couple million, maybe more." I wasn't trying to cut her off short. There was no force behind my words. I was simply making an observation.

She seemed to know that. She went on. "Do you remember how it was when we first met, Martin lover?"

Another warning horn went off. It was a pretty feeble sound. "I remember."

Her voice came out in a little, trembling laugh. "It hit us both so hard. I'd never had anything like that happen to me before. I'd never even dreamed that I'd meet a man one afternoon and be living with him the same night."

"On a dirty, cramped old boat," I murmured, remembering what she'd called my *Saltspray*. But that had been a long time afterward.

I thought vaguely of Irma Wilson. She'd lived on the *Saltspray* too, not many months ago. She hadn't thought much of the idea either. The first chance she'd got, she grabbed a job in New York. She hated the double bunk. She was always cracking her head when she got excited.

Corliss and Irma, my mind murmured hazily. They weren't at all alike; yet in a way they were two of a kind. Lovely, luscious, and both out for the buck—for lots of bucks. I had met both through insurance investigations. And I'd found myself tangled up with each one. I hadn't even bothered to learn any more about either one than I needed to know to do my job.

And it was strange, I thought: I still knew almost nothing about their past lives. They hadn't talked about that part of themselves. It hadn't seemed strange at the time. It did seem a little strange now. Most people like to talk about themselves, their memories, their experiences. But it was as if

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both women had appeared out of nowhere not too long before I met them.

It was strange, but not strange enough for me to brood over at the moment.

Corliss broke into my hazy thought process. "I said a lot of things I didn't mean when you got mad at me. You said a lot of things too. Did you really mean them, Martin?"

I didn't want to dredge up cold, dead torches. Not with a live fire glowing in front of me. I said, "Forget that too."

"All right, Martin. But I can't forget everything that happened to us. I never will forget that." Her voice was a soft breeze; and it was a hot wind, hotter than the fire.

I made my last puny attempt to fight. "Don't work around to asking me to move in here. You know better."

"I should have known better sooner," she whispered. "But I had to learn how precious your independence is. That's something I won't forget either."

She was touching me with her hip, her shoulder, and now her lips. They brushed against my ear. Her hand moved over mine. Now her voice had no more substance than a spring mist. But somehow it was part of that hot wind, too. "So much of that year we had together was so wonderful, Martin lover."

I think she was a little drunk from warmth and brandy and reaction from what we'd done a little while ago. I know I was.

Otherwise I would have tried to get away when those beautiful lips moved over my face and my mouth. I would have tried to get away when we slipped off the divan to the thick, fire-warmed rug. But after that I didn't need liquor or warmth or reaction from shock to keep me where I was.

For the moment there were no more ugly memories. There was only firelight flickering over Corliss' warm, satiny skin, making dancing flames in her wide gray eyes. And finally there was everything—and there was nothing.

I hated myself with belly twisting hatred. I looked at Corliss' body lying quietly between me and the fire. I wanted

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to hate her too, but there wasn't enough hatred to share. I had used it all on myself.

And what right did I have to blame her? Part of me said, "You're over twenty-one, Zane. You're a big boy now."

Another part of me said, "Get the hell out of here while you still have that precious independence she reminded you about."

I got the hell out of there. I heard Corliss crying as I shut the hall door.

I sneered at the fancy crates parked in the basement. I patted my shiny, new, plebian little wagon and took it away. I wondered if it felt corrupted from its stay in the building.

I rolled up the ramp and into the fog. I ran down my window to let the moist air wash over my face. A car parked at the curb with its nose toward the ramp slammed bright headlights at me.

I ducked and gunned the wagon, skidding to my left and coming alongside the car. I hit the brake and then slapped the throttle. The car was a big, black Imperial. And Dorian Pinter stared at me from behind the wheel.

I said to nobody in particular, "The poor devil."

Nobody in particular didn't bother to answer me. I said, "To hell with you, brother."

I was drunk; drunker than I had been earlier. And I felt like getting even more drunk.

I didn't. I went home and let the slow sway of my boat rock me to sleep.

VIII

I WOKE TO find a bright, late sun washing the fog away. I lay a long time in bed, watching the sunlight dance on the

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water and trying to weave the shreds of yesterday's memories into some kind of sensible pattern.

I didn't make much headway. Somewhere in all that had happened there should be a thread that held everything together. But I couldn't find it. I just didn't know enough about the people I was dealing with. Culpepper and Pinter had been little more than names until yesterday. Corliss was someone I had known intimately for a year, but only in that strange, isolated way lovers know one another. She had never volunteered anything about herself; neither had I. Our talk had always been personal, of the now and of the future, never of the empty past before we'd met.

And these last two years, I had deliberately locked her out of my mind. As for Orval and his ladyfriend, they were nothings. In the bright daylight, they didn't even seem real. Nor did Finney. He—if it was a he—was just a word.

Nocky was the only concrete thing I could get a grip on. I was sure now that he had wanted to tell me something important. And he ended up dead.

I asked myself the question Corliss had asked—who would want to kill Nocky? A nice old man who asked nothing more from life than the right to the dignity of supporting himself and the right to a few hours of his own to cultivate his garden.

I could find only one answer. He had been killed to keep him quiet. Suddenly I began to shake from the need to find the person who had pushed my paperknife into Nocky's tired old heart.

I got up and dressed and ate while I listened to the radio. There was no mention of Nocky's body having been found.

I drove to the office, bought a morning paper, and took it upstairs. I read everything, including the obituary notices. I couldn't find a word on Nocky. So for the moment, at least, the police weren't looking for the owner of the paperknife.

I put the newspaper aside and straightened the mess Corliss and I had walked out on last night. The job took time—I checked through every file before I put it back in

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the cabinet. I read every scrap of paper I could find, even the throwaway ads that had accumulated while I was gone. I ended up with nothing. Nowhere could I find a clue to why my office had been searched.

I reasoned that Orval or the woman had done the job—looking for a tie between Finney and me. But that was pure guesswork. I had no proof. And anyway who was Finney?

The cleaning woman came in and I turned the place over to her while I had lunch in the coffeeshop downstairs. She hadn't appeared to notice the jimmied doorlock and I didn't bother to mention it.

I had a steak, two fried eggs, and a pot of coffee. I chewed and swallowed and thought. My mind was beginning to function better. Bits and pieces began to click together.

As far as I was concerned, this affair had started with Orval's tagging me around Mexico City. And everywhere I turned, Orval kept appearing—his old green car had been the one that nearly got Culpepper twice; he and his brunette lady friend had booby-trapped me in the fog last night; and I suspected that he had jimmied my office door and torn the place apart, looking for something. Looking for what?

My problem was to find Orval and squeeze the answer to that and to a lot of other questions out of him.

But how do you find one knife-carrying punk late on a Saturday afternoon in a city the size of LaPlaya?

That was one question I did have an answer for—you didn't find him; you let him find you.

I went out and rolled my wagon through the streets. I drove past my boat and then on to Corliss' apartment. I didn't stop. I turned east and circled back to Harbor Way. I headed south, not moving very fast and keeping my eye on the rear view mirror whenever the traffic let me.

I saw nothing resembling Orval's battered green sedan. I angled uphill to U.S. 101 and followed it to the junction with the airport road. The only car that turned with me was a late model brown Mercury. It stayed well back, making no attempt to pass on the twisting, narrow blacktop.

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I reached the turn-off to the Leonard plant. The Mercury was still well back. I swung to my right and drifted westward into the harsh glare of the setting sun. My rear view mirror showed the Mercury go on toward the airport. I stopped and thought about what to do next.

I decided to go back and hunt in the parts of town where a punk like Orval was most likely to hang out. I shifted into low and started forward. A car coming from the airport flashed into my mirror as it hurried toward the city. I swung my head in time to see that it was the brown Mercury. Only now it was moving north twice as fast as it had gone south before.

I drove on, looking for a place to turn around. I was all the way to the plant gates before I found a spot wide enough to make the swing without backing into the sand.

And I got my first break of the day.

The gateguard who had been with Nocky last night came out of the guardhouse and squinted through the fence at me. I rolled down my window and yelled, "Just turning around this time."

He squinted some more. Then he waved both arms at me in a frantic gesture. "That you, Mr. Zane?"

I swung closer to the fence and braked the wagon. The old man swung open the gate and came stumping toward me. "I been trying to call you," he said excitedly. "About Nocky."

My mouth went dry. "What about him?"

He fumbled in the pocket of his jacket and came up with a dog-eared piece of paper. "When I come to work this morning, Nocky wasn't here," he said. "But this was."

He pushed the paper at me. It was a note. I recognized the angular, old-fashioned script Nocky had learned in Austria as a boy. I'd deciphered a number of his messages when he worked in my building.

I read, "Pete. Been took sick. Cover for me."

I said, "You're Pete?"

"That's right, Mr. Zane. Nocky and me, we got to be pretty

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good friends. So we cover for each other when we don't feel too chipper."

I said, "What's worrying you then?"

"I can't find him," Pete said. "He ain't home. He ain't nowhere."

The steak and eggs I'd eaten earlier turned to icy metal inside me. "You went to his house today?"

"Yes, sir. I called him, but he didn't answer. I got worried on account of he's a pretty old man. So I snuck out at lunchtime and went to see if he wasn't maybe bad sick. But there weren't nobody in his place at all."

That jolted me. I managed to say, "Maybe he was sleeping," and hoped Pete didn't think my voice was as strained as it sounded to me.

"No, sir. I went inside and took a look."

My steak and eggs turned even colder. I couldn't say anything this time.

Pete said, "I called the hospitals and the tavern where he goes now and then. But nobody's seen him."

I had to fight a desire to get to Nocky's house and see for myself if Pete knew what he was talking about. I found it hard to believe that anyone would take the poor old man's body away. There seemed no logical reason for it.

I began to sweat suddenly as I remembered Corliss saying last night that she thought someone had followed us to Squatter's Valley. What if that someone had been Orval or his ladyfriend? I could imagine what they would do with an opportunity like this to put the squeeze on me.

I had a picture of Nocky's body turning up on my boat or back in my office. I could almost hear the anonymous phone call that would help the police find that body. And how Stolz, the bully boy filling in for Lieutenant Nicolo, would love to find Zane and a unexplained corpse together!

Pete said, "I thought about calling the law, Mr. Zane, but I was afraid the bosses'd find out Nocky wasn't here and he'd lose his job. I remembered you was his friend, so I tried calling you."

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I said, "That's right. Let's keep the cops out of it as long as we can."

I took another long look at the note. I was thinking that someone must have talked Nocky into leaving his post last night to go to my office. Someone he knew—probably even trusted. Because if he'd been forced to leave, I was sure that signs of excitement or fear would have shown up in his handwriting.

But nothing indicated he had been under pressure when he wrote this note. It looked the way Nocky's notes had always looked—all the letters stiff and definite.

As much as I wanted to, I knew I couldn't lay Nocky's leaving here to Orval or the brunette. I couldn't imagine him trusting strangers.

And that left me with three choices for the one who had lured Nocky away and then killed him—Pinter or Culpepper or Corliss.

I looked away from Pete, not wanting to risk his seeing what I was thinking.

The sun had slid far enough behind the office building for me to see into the parking lot without being blinded by glare. I noticed Culpepper's old car and an even older one that I assumed belonged to Pete. Down toward the big wooden boathouse that ran from the lab building to the edge of the water was a pick-up truck with a boat trailer attached. There were no other cars around.

"Open the gate," I told Pete. "I want to talk to Culpepper."

"He won't see you," Pete warned. "He won't see nobody when he's busy."

"I can give it a try," I said.

Pete shrugged and swung the gates open. As I passed him, I said, "I'll check on Nocky and let you know."

His nod of thanks didn't exactly make me feel like a lot of man. I parked close to the office and walked to the front doors. I started hammering on them, as much to let off steam as to rouse Culpepper.

I was still hammering when I got my second break of the day. Pinter and his big black Imperial whooshed into sight.

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I stepped back from the door, lit a cigarette, and waited for him to reach me.

He parked beside my wagon and came toward me with that hard-hitting, choppy stride of his. He stopped a few feet away and glared. He didn't look as if he'd slept well.

"The place is closed on Saturday's." His tone wasn't gracious.

I said, "That shouldn't keep you and Culpepper from answering a few questions."

He brushed by me and unlocked the door. "I told you everything I could yesterday."

"You didn't tell me where you were last night," I said.

He swung the door open and then turned slowly. His eyes were ugly, hating me. He stepped backwards, into the office. I followed. I wondered why he didn't try to keep me out when he obviously didn't want to talk.

He stood by the door until I was well into the room. Then he snapped the lock and turned to face me. His fists were doubled into rugged-looking knots. I stared at him. This clown had let me into the office because he wanted to fight!

IX

I DIDN'T FEEL like brawling; I needed Pinter's cooperation, not his antagonism. But he didn't give me time to tell him so. He moved in on me, his fists cocked.

He was very quick. I managed to get a forearm in the way of his left but his right scored on the side of my head. The punch was solid enough, but it had the label of the athletic club boxer on it. And that made Pinter strictly an amateur.

I backpedaled. "Cut it out before you get hurt."

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He paid no attention, but came after me with a lot of fancy footwork. I kept backing away. Then the edge of a desk across my spine stopped me. It was fight or let him chop me up. I fought.

I said, "I told you to lay off." He swung. I went inside his guard and bloodied his nose. He shook his head and swung again. I slammed a left against his temple, twisting my knuckles and tearing the skin at his hairline.

He went to one knee, head hanging and blood dripping to the asphalt tile floor. I said, "Now behave yourself."

He got up slowly, pressing a handkerchief to his nose. "Get out of here, Zane," he said thickly. "I have work to do."

"Enjoy hating me all you want," I told him. "Just be sure you can afford the luxury of it."

My fists hadn't hurt him badly. His eyes were clear as they narrowed at me. "What is that supposed to mean?"

I said, "Maybe you can afford to throw away the money and time you invested in this outfit. But if you can't, just remember that Culpepper's getting knocked off will net you nothing. The insurance money won't bring him back and it won't put his process into production."

He just looked at me. I said, "Or maybe you've thought of a way to get your hands on that insurance dough. Maybe you figure doing that is more of a sure thing than waiting for Culpepper to really come up with something valuable."

Bloody nose, sore head and all, he charged me again. I sidestepped and let him bounce off the desk behind me. He hit it hard and sat down with a grunt of pain.

I said, "Use your head. This is the kind of question the law will ask you if anything happens to Culpepper."

Pinter got up and found a chair. He lowered himself into it and daubed the handkerchief against his nose again. He said in a thick voice, "That's insane. I scraped together every cent I had to help Mrs. Leonard start this plant. And I love her. Why should I do anything to jeopardize her chances of getting back into a solid financial position?"

He found another handkerchief and held it to the side of his head. "You just aren't being logical."

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I said, "But you are being logical—by trying to keep me from helping Corliss too?"

I had to give Pinter credit. He seemed able to use his head as well as his fists. He grimaced. "You made your point," he admitted reluctantly. "Go ahead and ask your damn questions."

I asked them, but I didn't learn much. Pinter had only met Culpepper when the plant opened. And all he knew of the man was what Corliss told him. As a matter of fact, he hadn't known Corliss herself too long. They'd met at a yacht show about four months ago. Corliss admired one of Pinter's designs; they got to talking; and the next thing Pinter knew, he was designing a campaign to make the widow Leonard into Mrs. Pinter.

I had a picture of Corliss looking over the males on display at the yacht show and then setting her sights on Pinter. And how easy he must have been to shoot down for someone with her marksmanship!

I said, "You made a crack a while back about helping Corliss get back in a solid financial position. What makes you think she needs any help?"

Pinter said coldly, "If you're thinking of milking her to get paid for this investigation, Zane, forget it. She hasn't got the money. She asked me for financial help because she needed it. I should think that would be obvious."

I could have told him what was really obvious—that Corliss was too smart to use her own cash when she could get someone else to do the job. But I'd had enough of fighting with Pinter. I switched the subject and asked what he'd done last night.

"That's none of your business," he answered shortly.

"Everything connected with this plant is my business," I told him. "You said you'd answer my questions. So do it."

We played glaredown for a minute, and then he told me that he'd got mad at Corliss last night, driven away from here, and gone to his club. A steak dinner mellowed him and he decided to call Corliss and apologize. He tried three or four times without getting any answer. Finally he drove to her

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apartment. He saw my wagon parked in the basement garage and went back up to the street to wait and see just how long I stayed.

I couldn't very well pin him down any closer without mentioning Nocky's death. I tried another angle. I said, "When did you learn that Corliss was planning to hire me?"

Pinter said, "After the bomb was found. She thought we might need some help. She decided to hire you."

He obviously hadn't liked that idea; he still didn't. But I didn't much care what Pinter liked. I said, "If you didn't find out Corliss was looking for me until then, you weren't the one who hired Orval. Is that right?"

All I got for that attempt to set a trap was a blank stare. I said, "What does the word Finney mean to you?"

"Nothing." He stood up. "I have to get to work."

"What's important enough to make you work Saturday night?" I asked him.

"We're running a hull test tomorrow," he said. "There's a good deal of preparation to make."

That interested me. I said, "I didn't know you went along on those tests."

"I don't as a rule," he admitted. "But since the attacks on Culpepper, I decided I should go along."

I told him I thought he was being sensible. I didn't tell him that I intended to join the testing party. Pinter didn't look as if he was up to the prospect of more Zane right now.

I left him and went to rouse Culpepper. I leaned on the bell for nearly five minutes before he opened the door and peered out at me."

"I'm busy," he said in his screechy voice.

I shouldered my way into the lab. He didn't try to stop me this time. He just glared. I said, "We can talk while you work."

"Talk about what?"

He didn't wait for an answer but headed briskly for the door leading into the boat shed. I stayed on his heels.

I said, "About Orval and his brunette ladyfriend."

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He stopped long enough to give me the same kind of blank stare Pinter had. Then he went on again.

I said, "What does the word Finney mean to you?"

He didn't break stride. "What it means to anybody that spends thirty years fishing for a living."

I thought he was trying to be funny, but when he stopped to open the door, his face showed only irritation. "If you ain't got sensible questions to ask, leave me be."

I said, "Orval is the character who drives the dirty green car. He and a woman boobytrapped me after I left here last night. They wanted to know what I could tell them about Finney."

Culpepper opened the door and stepped into the big, barnlike boathouse. He said, "All right, ask your questions."

He didn't sound particularly curious about Orval or Finney. He walked toward the far end of the boathouse, leaving me to follow.

It was one big room, about eighty feet long, shadowy and dim even with a dozen reflector lights hanging from the high, open ceiling. The near end of the place was a clutter of wooden molds, boat frames, stacks of material, pots and jugs and cans.

Beyond the clutter was a cleared wooden floor that ended abruptly about forty feet from the door. The rest of the space was nothing but harbor water. As I followed Culpepper, I saw that the shed had been built so that the whole after end was on pilings. Metal sheeting nailed across the pilings extended down out of sight, well below the waterline. The rear of the shed was cut off from the harbor by huge, garage-type doors that also disappeared below the waterline. A model boat hull about four feet long blobbed gently on the quiet surface of this indoor lake.

I said, "How do you get the doors open when you want to sail something sizable out of here?"

Culpepper stopped at the water's edge and fiddled with something that looked like a radio set. "Hydraulic hoist," he said briefly. He twisted a knob and the boat model began

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to move slowly shoreward. He was a great one for gadgets.

I said, "What time did you come back here last night?"

He lifted the boat out of the water. He said, "I don't pay no attention to the time."

"Were Corliss and Pinter still here when you got back?"

"Their cars was in the lot. I didn't see them," he said.

If he was telling the truth, he had come back before eight o'clock, while Nocky was still at the gate. He carried the model boat toward the lab. I tagged after him, wondering what he was up to. He took the boat to the big workbench and laid it keel up under a bright light. He squinted at it, grunted, hit the keel with a rubber hammer, grunted again, and then carried the boat over to the electric furnace.

I said, "Is this a model of the hull you plan to test tomorrow?"

He put the boat into the furnace and snapped the door shut. "Where'd you hear about the test?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Pinter told me. What difference does it make?"

He turned to the furnace control box and began twisting dials. "It's private," he said. "I don't want nobody snooping."

I said, "Corliss told me you were in a sweat about industrial spies. And maybe you have a right to be. But that doesn't mean you have to get pathological about it."

"I know what that word means," he said in a sharp voice. "You think I'm crazy. Well, think again. Last night I seen one of them girls from the front building snooping around Corliss' office."

"Last night when?" I demanded.

"I don't know when. I told you I don't pay no attention to the time."

I wondered if he was trying to be exasperating or if it came naturally to him. I said, "You told me you aren't crazy, but you aren't making much effort to prove it. When did you see this girl? Try to remember. It could be important."

He straightened up from the control box. "You always got an argument, ain't you, Zane. All right, it was maybe thirty, forty minutes after I come back. I went into the other building

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to see Corliss. But she was gone. The place was dark except for the night light. And I seen this girl coming out of the woman's restroom. She was closing the door real quiet like. I yelled at her and she ducked and ran into the storeroom. It's between the toilet and Corliss' office."

I said, "What's so strange about that? Maybe the girl was staying late to do some extra work."

"With the lights all out?" Culpepper demanded scornfully. "Anyway, the girls don't stay late. I gave orders they all got to be out before five-fifteen. If they ain't checked through the gate by then, the gatekeeper's supposed to tell one of us partners."

I felt excitement start its motor inside me. I was thinking that if Culpepper's time sense wasn't too badly warped, this had all happened before eight-thirty.

I said, "Can you describe the woman?"

"It was pretty dark," he said, "and she moved quick. I seen she had dark hair and that's about all."

I said, "If you didn't see any more than that, what makes you so sure she was one of the office girls?"

Culpepper cackled as if he'd managed to score some kind of victory over me. "Because the switch for the fence alarm is in the storeroom, that's why. And only somebody who works here'd know that."

I had to ask more questions to learn that the alarm he was talking about was a gadget he had hooked to the high, woven-wire fence surrounding the plant. When someone put weight on the fence, a siren let loose and floodlights came on. The only control for the alarm was in the storeroom next to Corliss' office.

Culpepper said, "I followed her right into the storeroom. But she was gone and the window was wide open. Then I saw the alarm was off. I figured she threw the switch afore she left at five o'clock so she could get in and out of the place by climbing the fence."

His eyes glittered behind his glasses. "For all I know, she mighta thrown that switch every night! There's no telling who coulda been prowling around here."

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His own words drained the color out of his face. He looked physically sick. "And no telling how much they mighta overheard," he whispered.

X

I SAID, "What's to overhear at night?"

Culpepper got back a little of his color. "Plenty!" he snapped. "When Corliss and I got anything important to talk about, we do it here at night."

I said, "The only way anybody could be sure and pick up everything you say in here would be to bug the room and feed into a tape recorder."

Culpepper's mechanically inclined mind followed that easily enough. He began to walk around the room, peering suspiciously at every shadowy spot on the walls.

I said, "In a place the size of this one, the chances of a single mike being in the right place at the right time are pretty slim. Even a sensitive mike over by that workbench wouldn't pick up much if you were talking near the furnace."

Culpepper kept on peering. "What would you do if you wanted to bug this room?" he demanded.

I tilted my head back and focused my eyes on a dark spot between the rows of fluorescent lights hanging down from the ceiling. "I'd put a lot of mikes right up there," I said.

Culpepper wasted no time getting an eight-foot stepladder from the boatshed. He brought a flashlight, too. He held the ladder while I climbed up and balanced myself on the little platform at the top. One flash of the light in the darkness was all I needed.

There they were, a cluster of tiny mikes aimed to cover

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the room. They were placed in such a way that the fluorescent fixtures would hide them from below.

I climbed down. "That's it."

He began to look sick again. "You reckon she bugged the whole plant?"

"If she did a thorough job, she bugged everyplace she figured would yield information," I told him.

The gadget part of his brain started to click again. "And then fed everything into one of them voice-activated tape recorders!"

He snapped his fingers. "That's what she was doing in the toilet, Zane. She come back to get the tape recorder."

I said, "You make a pretty fair detective. But she probably left the recorder and just changed tapes." I started for the door. "If I can find the thing, I'll erase what we just said."

"Erase it? You ain't going to bust it up?" He sounded suspicious of me again.

I said, "We'll leave everything just the way it is. Or can you think of a better way to give the lady a tapeful of misinformation?"

Culpepper cackled and slapped his knee. "That's a good idea," he gasped. "I'll lead her down the garden path, all right."

His voice dropped. "If it ain't too late already," he said.

I said, "Let me do the worrying about that. You get on with your work."

I left him to tend his furnace and went back to the main building. Pinter's office was dark now. The only light showing was a dim one over the front door. I used it to guide me down the hall to the woman's restroom.

I stepped inside and turned on the overheads. The row of booths along the left wall looked like the best bet.

I found it in the last booth, tucked behind the flush tank. It was one of those modern electronic miracles, a miniature tape recorder not much bigger than a large, pocket-sized transistor radio. I flipped open the lid and studied the roll of tape. It had only unwound a short way, just about enough to have recorded the conversation I'd had with Culpepper.

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I ran the tape backwards, erasing it. I slipped the recorder back behind the flush tank. I pushed open the door and stepped out of the booth—into the muzzle of a gun.

Behind the gun was the brunette I'd spoke to when I first got here last night, the one with too much eye shadow and the tight skirt. She was still wearing both.

I said, "Sorry, the plumbers have the men's room all ripped up."

"I thought you'd find it as soon as you talked to Culpepper," she said. Her voice wasn't quite as chilly 'as it had been last night, but she still wasn't in any mood to love me.

By it, I assumed she meant the tape recorder. I said, "You thought right. How many pick-ups do you have feeding into that gadget?"

She said abruptly, "Enough." She shifted the gun and took a step backward. She had obviously learned last night not to get too close to me.

I grinned at her. She was in a very briny pickle right now. She could shoot me, but that wouldn't get her the answers she thought I had. Answers about Finney and such. I could see her eyes cloud up as she ran through a list of possible things to do to me—and as she rejected them all.

I said, "Let's make a deal. You tell me what you know and I'll tell you what I know."

For an instant, she looked almost eager. Her tongue moved out, moistening a very ripe pair of lips. I leaned back against the corner post of the booth and admired her figure while I waited for an answer. Close up and with good lighting, it was a figure worth admiring. She wasn't put together quite the same way as Corliss. But then how many women were?

She stopped looking eager. "I don't trust you," she said flatly.

"You haven't got much choice, considering what I just found in this booth," I pointed out.

She grimaced and backed toward the door. "I'll have to think it over," she said.

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"Do that," I told her. "But before you leave, let's get a few items squared away. Like names."

"I already know yours," she said.

"And I can find out yours," I answered. "All I have to do is describe you to any male around this place. Not every man in love like Pinter could miss what you're packing around."

She liked that. She smiled at me, a nice, warm smile. She moistened her lips again, but in a different way this time. And when she spoke, her voice had a thread of a purr in it.

"The name is Sherry Barker," she said. "The rest of what you want to know is in my employee file in the office."

"Including your statistics?"

She smiled again. "What kind of a deal did you have in mind, Zane?"

"We'll put that question on the agenda for the next meeting," I said. "And when is it, by the way?"

"I'll get in touch," she murmured. "I know where you live."

I said, "And you'll drive up in a new brown Mercury."

She looked surprised. I said, "You tried to cross me up by following me today yourself instead of letting Orval do the job in his green jalopy. That's how you knew I'd be here, talking to Culpepper."

"My technique is slipping," she said sourly. "I'll go home and take a tuck in it."

She backed to the door, opened it, and disappeared. I could have gone after her. I could have caught her, too. She went into the storeroom and out the window. I could hear her. All I had to do was get to the alarm switch and, when she reached the fence, turn it on. If the noise the sirens made was half what Culpepper claimed for it, she probably would have come galloping right back into my arms.

But I didn't want her caught. Not just yet. I had a lot of questions that needed answering. From the way she'd acted, I expected to have those answers before the night was over.

I did go into the storeroom. But I left the alarm switch

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strictly alone. Instead I leaned out the window and watched her dip in and out of shadow until she reached the wire fence. She picked a point near the edge of the water. She stopped long enough to put her gun and high heels in the oversized shoulder purse she wore. Then she gave her skirt a hike that rode it right up to her waist. She went up the fence and down the other side without any trouble at all. It was quite a display, even if I did have only starlight to see by.

Once on the other side of the fence, she disappeared behind a low dune. I could hear her car start up. A moment later I saw headlights flare against the sky. Then they turned in another direction and disappeared.

I left the storeroom and went to find the employee record on Sherry Barker. It told me quite a bit, now that I knew what her real business was.

She had given her age as twenty-eight—which I judged to be about right. She had been born and raised in the Sacramento Valley, and had got married there. Five years ago she left the old homestead and—I presumed—her husband and migrated to southern California. She had a number of jobs at first—model, TV extra, file clerk, and finally typist. She then went to business school at night for a few months and graduated to being a “secretary-bookkeeper.” Three years ago, she went to work for a sport clothes manufacturer, quit that after eight months, and tied in with an electronics firm. Six months of that was enough for her. She signed up with one of those agencies that specialize in part-time and short term secretarial help. From then until the spring of this year, she was employed in a half dozen jobs. None of them lasted more than six months; most were of shorter duration.

That was a beautiful gimmick, I thought. By working through an agency that specialized in short term help, no one would question her having held so many jobs for such brief periods. And the reason for the many jobs and the frequent changes was obvious. Sometime in her career she had tied in with a firm that specialized in industrial spying. They put

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her on a job and kept her there only long enough to dig up whatever information they wanted. Then she moved to another spot.

I took down her address and telephone number and put the file away. Then I went back to the lab and told Culpepper everything was taken care of.

I said, "Just remember, every time you open your mouth, be sure and say nothing important."

"I'll remember," he said. He was looking worried again. "Now go away and let me work."

I went. A strange old man was handling the gate duties. He looked suspicious when I stopped my wagon and walked to the far side of his guard station.

I said, "Pete get you to fill in?"

"Yes, sir." He scuffed the ground. "Anything I can do for you?"

I was looking toward the harbor, along the line of the fence. I was thinking that Sherry Barker's car parked behind a dune just might have been visible from this spot. And I wondered if she would have had time last night to get away from Culpepper, drive around to the gate, get Nocky, and take him to my office.

It was possible, I decided, but with the fog slowing down driving, she wouldn't have had much leeway. I filed the idea for future consideration and went back to the wagon.

I said, "Just admiring the view. Good night."

I left him staring after me. I drove toward the airport road, trying to figure the best way to get Sherry Barker to tell me what she had learned from the tape recorder. I had the feeling she wasn't going to be an easy mark. She might panic when someone took a gun away from her, but in other respects, she was definitely a pro at her work.

I thought of a lot of other questions that needed answers too, but they went out of my mind when I was within a quarter mile of the turn-off onto the airport road.

My headlights picked up the dirt-stained rear end of a green sedan. It was sitting in my lane, lights out, waiting for me.

XI

I HEARD myself yelling, "Orval!" I gunned the wagon eagerly. He shot the sedan ahead suddenly. It had a surprising amount of soup. He had it wound to sixty before I could pull even. His stoplights flared as he braked at the junction.

I expected him to head for town and I steered to my left. He crossed me and swung right. By the time I got behind him, he was barreling in the direction of the airport.

He was running without lights. But the night was clear, starlit. I had no trouble keeping him in sight. My trouble lay in trying to guess what he was up to. Going to the airport made no sense; he couldn't get away from me once he was there.

He crossed me a second time. He made a sudden, hard right turn and shot onto the dirt track that led out to the Spit. And that made even less sense as a destination than the airport did. The road was a narrow, straight track to the shore of the harbor. Then it took off south, winding and kinking high along a cliff face, and finally dropping down to sea level again to deadend on the long tongue of sand that gave the Spit its name. In the summer people picnicked there and on warm nights kids drove out to enjoy the moonlight and solitude. It was great for that and maybe for Culpepper's tests, but it was a hell of a place for Orval to run if he was trying to get away from me.

I chased him all the way to the end of the road before I realized what he was up to. He wasn't trying to get away; he was pulling me into a trap.

He reached the Spit three minutes before I did. That gave him time to turn around and face me. I braked hard,

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but I was already in the wide, turnaround area. All Orval had to do was shoot forward a dozen feet and stop where the road narrowed. He had me blocked but good.

I backed the wagon around and slapped my high beams on the rear of his car. I drove to within a dozen feet of it and stopped. I could see into the driver's seat now. It was empty.

I left my lights on, cut my motor, and reached for my tire iron. Then I got out of the wagon and waited to see what Orval would think up next. I wasn't worried about his shooting me. He was a knife man, and knife men seldom play with guns.

Besides, I had an idea he wanted to ask me some more questions. I was pretty sure he had been close by, waiting when Sherry Barker drove away from the plant. She would have told him to pull me into a trap and try to find out how much I knew.

If she could do that, then I'd have nothing left to bargain with. And when it came to making a deal, we'd have to play with her dice.

I was right about Orval. He didn't try to shoot. He wound up and pitched a ball of wet sand at me. It smacked the ground by my foot. A second ball burrowed out of the darkness and caught me on the shoulder. He was trying to blind me again. I decided to help him.

I angled toward the rear of his car, stepping into the backwash of light from my headlamps. Now I made a fair target for him. He was pretty good. The third ball of sand caught me on the chest. I threw up my left hand and clawed at my face. I cursed in the kind of shrill, frightened voice a man suddenly unable to see would use. He gobbled the bait. Through my spread fingers I could see him surge toward me.

Steel glinted in his hand. He was close enough for me to see the foam at the corners of his mouth. He was already tasting the pleasure of using that knifeblade on me.

He was a little overeager. He came in too fast. I dropped my hand and stopped playing blind. He tried to pull up short, but I was already moving his way. I lifted the tire

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iron and took a cut at his wrist. He spun aside with that quick way he had of moving. The tire iron slashed down through nothing. It slipped out of my hand and bounced on the sandy ground.

Orval gave a grunt of pleasure and came at me again. I did a shuffling fake to the right and jumped to my left. He tried to move with me, hacking with his switchblade. The tip nicked the side of my coat. Then I was past him.

I reached his cab and opened the door. Now I was squarely in my own headlights, a perfect target for him. I said, "Come and get me, little man."

He came dancing forward, the knife held at belly level with the blade straight out. I kept my position until I could see the light reflecting off the hone marks on the edge of the blade. Orval thrust, out and up, trying to rip me. I pulled to one side and laced my fingers in a double fist. His thrust carried him forward. I rammed my fist against the back of his neck. He kept going, headfirst through the door of the cab.

He swung his arms wildly in an effort to keep his balance. His knuckles hit the doorpost. The knife slipped out of his fingers and thudded to the hard dirt.

I picked up the knife and grabbed Orval by the leg. I pulled him half out of the cab so that his feet were on the ground and his body bent over the front seat. I put the point of the knife against his spine.

I said, "Now I'm going to ask questions. And I'm going to get straight answers. Is that clear?"

Hatred choked his voice. "I'll carve you for this, Zane. If it takes the rest of my life, I'll carve you!"

I dropped the knife and pulled him up on his feet. I swung him around and drove a fist just above his belt buckle. He doubled forward and into my knee. I could feel his nose give under the impact.

He sat down in the dirt. I picked up the knife and stepped away from him. I said, "What makes you think you've got any life left?"

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He turned his head aside and snorted to clear blood from his nose.

I said, "I never studied torture in college, Orval, but I think I can do a pretty good job on you anyway. Where do you want me to start?"

He turned his head sideways again. This time he vomited.

I said, "Tell me all about Sherry Barker."

"Go to hell."

I reached down and got the knife again. I touched the point to the inside of his leg, high up on the thigh. He jerked back and gobbled like a turkey.

"She's a dame from L.A.," he said quickly.

"I know that. I know what her business is too. So get to the point. Who hired her to work over the Leonard Company?"

"She's free lancing," Orval said. He sounded eager to be cooperative. "Two weeks ago she called me and told me to come down here."

"To do what?"

"To scare the old man. And a few days ago she told me to go to Mexico City and check you out."

"Why?"

"She didn't tell me."

I nicked him with the knife.

"I swear she didn't," he screamed. "She just said tag you and find out what you learned about Finney."

"Who is Finney?"

"I don't know," he panted. "She don't know. And that's the truth."

He made it sound as if it was the truth. Sherry didn't tell him her business. She hired him when she needed a persuasion job. That was Orval's way of making a living—persuading people.

I said, "Don't tell me you don't try to find out what Sherry is up to so you can beat her time."

"Jesus, no!" Orval said fervently. "She'd crucify me. All I know is she's got hold of something pretty big. She keeps talking about fifty thousand, maybe more."

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"Fifty thousand?" I repeated. "How does she plan to get that kind of money around here?"

He shook his head. I said, "Did those attempts to kill Culpepper have anything to do with her collecting fifty thousand? Did someone hire her to have you do that job?"

Orval stiffened as if I'd rammed the knife into him. "I didn't try to kill nobody!" he shouted. "I never knocked a guy off in my life. So help me. You can't hang no attempted murder rap on me, Zane."

I said, "You weren't driving this dirty heap the two times Culpepper nearly got killed?"

"He wasn't close to getting killed," Orval babbled at me. "I was only supposed to scare him, soften him up."

"Soften him for what?"

"Make him talk, I suppose. Sherry didn't tell me."

I said, "Was planting a bomb that would have blown him and the lab into orbit part of the softening process?"

Orval's head shook sideways hard enough to send a spray of spittle off his lips. "That wasn't me or Sherry," he whispered. "I swear, Zane. She was madder'n hell when she heard about that bomb. She don't want Culpepper dead. She says he ain't worth nothing to us dead."

"But he's worth at least fifty thousand to you alive. Is that it?" I said.

"I don't know. I ain't learned that much about this deal. And that's the truth!"

I was tired of him trying to convince me about *the truth*. I said, "What about Nocky? Where does he fit into this?"

"I don't know no Nocky."

"The night gateman."

Orval stared at me and shook his head. I said, "What about Pinter?"

"Sherry says he's a creep that the Leonard dame suckered. He don't count."

I said, "How much does Sherry pay you for a job like this?"

"I get a cut of what she makes."

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I said softly, "Including a piece of the gas chamber when the cops pull you both in for murder?"

Orval came apart at the seams. "I didn't kill nobody! It wasn't me. I was doing time when it happened. I was two thousand miles from Mexico City."

I hadn't meant much with that threat. I was only trying to loosen Orval up a little more by playing on his obvious fear of getting tangled up in a murder. But it looked as if I'd pulled the plug on a new part of the sewer he used for a brain.

I said, "When were you doing time, Orval?"

"When it happened, four years ago." His voice was down to a pleading whisper. "So help me . . ."

I said, "Is that when the killing in Mexico City happened—four years ago?"

"What other one is there?" he squeaked. "Ain't that why you went there—to find out about the murder and about Finney?"

"Tell me more, Orval."

"What's there to tell that you don't know. Sherry figured you was in Mexico City seeing about Finney and a killing that happened there four years ago. That's all she told me. That's . . ."

I didn't say anything. I just held the knife up so he could see the sharp edge of the blade. I waited for him to stop protesting and give me what else he knew. I had a piece of something here; I wanted the rest of it.

He whispered, "I can prove I wasn't there, Zane." He reached a hand back for his rear pocket. "I can prove I don't know no more about it."

I thought I had Orval on the run. That was a mistake. He came up with a handful of old-fashioned straight razor. He whipped it at me. I jumped back. The blade laid my trousers open from crotch to knee. I lost my balance and went down on my tail. Orval swarmed all over me.

I kicked and caught his wrist with my toe. The razor sailed off into the darkness. Orval didn't go after it. He

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dove for his car. He got it rolling before I could get up. He shifted into reverse and gunned backward, straight at me.

I flipped to the right. Orval's wheels spat sand into my face. Then his rear bumper smacked into the front of my wagon. The fender folded up against the tire. Orval shifted again and gunned forward. I sat in the sand, watching his taillights disappear.

XII

ORVAL'S BUMPER had done a first rate job on my wagon. The fender wasn't only crumpled against the tire, it was driven right into the rubber.

I wasted a few minutes cursing Orval, and then went to work. I was fitting the top end of my jack against the torn fender when headlights swept around a curve in the road and sprayed over me. I picked up my jack handle and moved behind my opened rear lid. I squatted down and waited.

The car came carefully down the road and swayed to a stop beside me. It was Corliss' big blue Caddy. I straightened up and walked toward her. She climbed out and stumbled to me.

"Martin! Did you see it? That old green sedan. It nearly ran me off the road!"

Her voice climbed toward hysteria. I grabbed her and clamped my fingers down hard on her arm muscles. She made a whimper of protest as the pain got through to her mind. I felt her lose tension.

I said, "What are you doing out here?"

She began to shake. She pulled free of my hands and moved closer to me. She wanted to be held. I held her. She

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whispered against my coat-front, "We're running a test tomorrow night. When Ezekial called and told me what you'd found, I came right out to the plant. I saw lights down here and I was afraid it was that horrible man. And I was right, wasn't I? He was doing something here, wasn't he?"

Her voice was climbing again. I said sharply, "Take it easy. He was here, but he wasn't doing anything connected with your test. He was trying to give me a bad time."

I held her away from me to get the backwash from the headlights on her face. Her blond curls were mussed, making a kind of disheveled halo around her head. Her gray eyes were glassy with fright.

I said, "You're either a very brave woman or a damned fool. What did you expect to do if you had found Orval here?"

"I have a gun in the car," she said vaguely. Her voice stiffened. "And I'd like to use it on that Sherry Barker! She's worked for me for months and I never even suspected. . . ."

She broke off. "How could she do that to me?"

I said, "That's the way she makes her living. Now calm down."

She pulled free of me again. "I'll try, Martin. Only—it's all so crazy and mixed up."

I went back to work on my fender. She stayed as close to me as she could without interfering with my movements. I said, "It might not be so crazy if I could get the answers to a few questions."

She didn't say anything. I worked the jack. The fender screeched protestingly and then began to ease away from the torn tire. I said, "Did you take Nocky's body away from his house?"

She gasped. "Did I *what*?"

I told her of my talk with old Pete. She whispered, "Martin, what does it mean? Do you think Sherry or that man . . . ? But why would they?"

I said, "The simplest answer is that someone plans to use Nocky to frame me."

I let that go and asked my next question. It came out hard; I think I was a little afraid of the answer I might get.

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I said, "Tell me about Finney and Mexico City four years ago."

I stopped working long enough to look up. Corliss had her back to me. She turned and stared with those wide gray eyes. "Tell you what?" she demanded. "You keep bring that word up—Finney. Ezekial told me you asked him about it too. What are you trying to prove, Martin?"

I said, "I'd like to prove that you didn't ring me in on this affair to make a patsy out of me. But you aren't giving me much help."

"What do you want me to do? What do you want me to say?" Her voice was rising again.

"You can start by telling me where you were four years ago."

"Four years ago? For heaven's sake. I . . ." She stopped and moved back a step. "You don't trust me at all, do you, Martin?"

I said, "We settled that point yesterday. Now answer the question."

She said stiffly, "Four years ago I was in San Francisco, going to business school."

I thought I could check that easily enough—if I had to. I said, "What about Culpepper?"

"Good heavens, how would I know? Fishing or inventing something, I suppose."

She moved farther away from me. "You sound as if you thought Ezekial and I were some kind of—of criminals."

I said, "I haven't got enough information to think much of anything yet." I went back to the jack.

She was silent a moment. Then she burst out, "Believe me, Martin, I want to help. Only—what can I do?"

I had the fender as far from the tire as I was going to get it. I pulled the jack free and stood up. "Right now, you can go home and get some rest. You look like you need it."

I dropped the jack and took her arm, steering her toward the Caddy. She slid docilely behind the wheel and tugged her skirt down. "Will you come to my place when you're through here?"

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Her face was tipped up to me, eyes wide and soft, lips parted. I felt as if someone had kicked me below the belt-buckle.

"Please, Martin. I can't stand your acting this way—so suspicious. Not after . . ."

Cold air chilled the sweat popping out on me. I put my hands on the car door and squeezed the edge of the metal into my fingers. My voice sounded like it belonged to someone else. "Let's get one thing straight. Last night didn't change anything. I'm still trying to do a job—for Ted Winters. And for Nocky. Nothing else matters until that's finished—not your feelings or mine or anybody's."

Corliss started the motor. I let loose of the door and pushed it shut. She said in a low, level voice, "Will you come to the test tomorrow night? I'd feel better if you were there."

"I'll be there," I said.

"We usually leave the plant about ten o'clock," she said. "By that time the Spit and the road are clear."

I said, "All right."

She rolled up her window. I stepped aside to give her room to turn around. I watched as she drove slowly away. A half mile or so up the road, her lights disappeared as she rounded a high shoulder of cliff.

I went back to work.

I had my tire changed and most of my tools put away when I had another visitor. This time it was Sherry Barker.

I wasn't too surprised. I had half expected her to come after me sooner or later. She couldn't be very happy about what I'd done to her stooge.

She turned her car around before she stopped. She opened her door and domelight came on. The whole back seat was filled with suitcases and clothes.

I said, "Going somewhere?"

"I should give you the deep six," she said. But she didn't sound as sore as I expected. Her voice hit me in sharp mimicry of my own words. "Let's make a deal. You tell me what you know and I'll tell you what I know."

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She said a short, vulgar word. "Orval told me the kind of questions you asked him. And you don't know much of anything about this case!"

I threw the last tool in the back of the wagon and dropped the tailgate. I said, "Is that why you set Orval on me to-night—to find out how much bargaining power I have?"

"I always like to have a few high cards handy," she said. Her voice sharpened with suspicion. "But I don't like to play against a stacked deck."

I said, "So I'm operating blind in this case. How do I know you aren't trying the same gimmick on me?"

"I'm not talking about that," she said. "I had an idea you'd call Corliss about me. So after I got my things out of my apartment, I checked on her."

I realized that Sherry must have followed Corliss from town to the plant and then part way here. She had run into Orval, heard what he had to say about me, and then waited for Corliss to leave so she could move in on me.

I said, "You really get around, don't you? Only you're a little mixed up. I didn't call Corliss; Culpepper did."

Sherry said stubbornly, "I don't care who called her. She came straight to you. What did she want?"

"Culpepper is testing a hull tomorrow night. Corliss thought Orval was out here planting a bomb or something."

Sherry said coldly, "If anyone plants a bomb, it won't be Orval. It will be Corliss Leonard!"

I said, "Or Pinter or Culpepper."

"I'm serious," she said angrily. "That first bomb she planted was a deliberate dud. But the next one won't be. Sooner or later, she'd going to kill Culpepper."

I said, "Why? Can't he get his process perfected fast enough to suit her?"

Sherry must have known I was deliberately goading her into talking but that only seemed to make her want to prove her point.

"Because Culpepper is blackmailing Corliss!" she snapped. "He's forced her into financing his experiments."

I grinned at her. "Corliss is a pretty smart girl. If anyone

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is blackmailing anyone else, I'd say it was the other way around."

"If you don't believe me," Sherry cried, "come and listen to the tapes I collected."

"I'll do that," I said.

I should have been pleased with myself. I had pushed Sherry right into the corner I'd picked out for her. But I wasn't happy. Sherry had sounded very sure of herself.

And I didn't want to believe her.

XIII

WE DROVE to my boat. Sherry had planned to go to a motel but she hadn't got around to checking in yet. She had moved out of her apartment because she was afraid of Corliss, now that she had been exposed.

I led the way to the boat. Sherry carried a portable tape recorder and a box of tapes. Inside the main cabin, she set them down and took a look around.

"Cozy," she said.

I wasn't interested enough in her opinions to be polite. I said, "I'm tired and dirty and hungry. I'm going to take a shower. If you feel up to it, you can put something on to cook."

She seemed more relaxed than before. She gave me a half amused glance. "Yes, Captain."

I showed her the galley and then went through the wheelhouse to the forward cabin. I was stripped to my trousers when I looked up and saw her standing at the top of the companionway.

"Where do you keep your coffee, Captain, sir?"

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"In the locker aft of the sink," I said. I reached for my belt and stopped. She hadn't moved.

"Don't mind me," she said. "I like a man with muscles."

"They're my muscles," I told her. "I'm particular who I show them to."

She wasn't going to let me irritate her again. She laughed at me. It was a warm, pleased laugh, and a little exciting. "Yes, sir. Or should I say aye, aye?"

She went away. I took my shower. When I came out I could smell coffee and chili con carne. She had the dinette all set with the food and a stiff drink waiting for me.

She sat on the opposite side of the table. "Do you want to hear the tapes while you eat?"

I gulped down my drink and spooned up some chili. "Afterwards," I said. "Right now I want to know where you stand in this set-up."

She fished a cigarette from her purse. "So far you've gotten all the answers," she said. "What kind of a deal do you call that?" She didn't sound particularly put out.

I said, "I may not know much yet, but once I get a few leads I can tap sources of information you can't reach."

She grimaced. "You win. And, as you told me earlier tonight, I don't have much choice anyway."

I said, "You could have cut out."

"And run away from the first chance I ever had to make big money?" she demanded.

I said, "Orval talked about fifty thousand dollars. How do you expect to collect that much?"

"Legitimately," she answered. She lit the cigarette she'd been holding. "Let me give you the whole story. Then you won't need to ask so many questions."

I ate while she talked. She explained that she originally went to work for Tom Leonard when an eastern boat company planted her in his office. They wanted to know what his new line for the coming season would be. Before she could learn very much, Leonard died. The eastern company cancelled out Sherry's contract.

She stayed at the Leonard plant because she had no

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other job in sight at the moment. Then she stayed because she caught the smell of money.

She had Leonard's telephone tapped. When Corliss took over after her husband's death, Sherry left the tap. That's how she picked up the conversation between Corliss and Culpepper.

I scraped the last bean from my bowl of chili. "Did Corliss call him or did he call her?"

"Culpepper called her," Sherry said. She got up from the table. She had the tape recorder set up and now she turned it on. "Listen for yourself."

I listened. Sherry's little pick-up machine didn't have much fidelity, so the playback was pretty distorted. I couldn't catch voice nuances, but the words came through clearly enough.

Too clearly for me. Culpepper said, "I hear you ain't married no more and you're having a little trouble down there. I think you better come up here and have a little talk."

Corliss answered, "Haven't you done enough already, Ezekial?"

He said, "Now don't you give me no argument. Just get up here."

That was the end of the conversation. I said to Sherry, "What did Culpepper mean by saying Corliss was having a little trouble? Was it financial?"

"She was trying to straighten things out," Sherry said. "And she seemed to be doing all right as far as we could tell in the office. I really don't know what he meant. But I know a blackmail pitch when I hear one—and that's what Culpepper was giving Corliss. She did what he told her too. She went north the next day. And when she came back, she got busy, sold the plant for the first solid offer she received, pulled Pinter into her orbit, and made arrangements to move down here. She set up that expensive lab—just for Culpepper."

I said, "Where does Finney come into this?"

Sherry turned on the tape recorder again. "I picked this up a little over two weeks ago from the laboratory."

Culpepper must have been moving something around the

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room. At first there was a lot of scraping noise. Then that died out and his voice came through clearly. "Don't forget Finney," he said. "Even if it was four years ago, they can still open a murder charge. All they got to do is start believing what that little Mexican told 'em."

Corliss said, "How can I forget? I've hated the thought of Mexico ever since."

Culpepper sounded like he was laughing at her. "Shucks," he said, "you got to see some right pretty country. And we coulda done worse than come back with ten thousand dollars."

Corliss said, "I'd rather not talk about it, Ezekial, please."

He said, "Then you listen to what I tell you."

She said, "You don't trust anybody, do you?"

"Not any more, I don't," he answered.

And that ended that. Sherry glanced at me and put on another tape. She said, "I recorded this after the time Orval made a pass at Culpepper with his car."

I said, "What was the idea of having Orval scare Culpepper that way? Did you think the old bird would soften up and tell you who Finney was?"

"I hoped so," she said. "But he's tough."

She flipped the switch. I listened to Corliss and Culpepper arguing about hiring me to find out who was after Culpepper. He was convinced an industrial spy planted by a rival company was trying to keep him from perfecting his process. He wanted me to find out who the spy was. Corliss didn't like the idea at all.

"What if Martin should find out about Finney?" she demanded.

"How could he?" Culpepper asked. "That ain't his job. Besides, if he does get to snooping, you oughta be able to take his mind off most anything."

Sherry was watching me. I winced when Corliss answered, "I suppose Martin would be the safest person to hire." She added worriedly, "If he'll do it. He does most of his work for Marine Mutual."

"You just be sure he does," Culpepper said. "And don't

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let him think it was my idea; make it sound like it come from you."

Later, on the same tape, was the record of the phone calls Corliss made in an effort to locate me. Then I heard something that explained why Sherry had sent Orval to Mexico City after me.

Corliss actually found out where I was through that first series of telephone calls. And then she told Culpepper, "Martin's in Mexico City. Do you think Marine Mutual sent him there to find out about Finney?"

"How would they know about Finney?" Culpepper demanded.

"I don't know, but we're carrying an awful lot of insurance," Corliss said. "Ted Winters might have checked more than I thought. I'm afraid, Ezekial."

"It seems to me you're afraid of just about everything these days," he said.

Corliss lost her temper. "You haven't given me reason to feel any other way!" she snapped at him.

"Now you stop getting feisty with me. It don't do any good and you know it," he said. "Your job is to get that Zane fellow back here—and quick."

But she hadn't been quick about getting me back here, I thought. She had found me five days before she actually came to Mexico City. And she had lied about that. I wondered why.

I said to Sherry, "Did you think Marine Mutual had sent me to Mexico City to check out Finney?"

"I wasn't sure," Sherry said. "But I couldn't take any chances. I couldn't afford to have anyone else find out about Finney."

She put another tape on the machine. "I think Finney is the key to Culpepper's blackmail. I think Corliss killed Finney for ten thousand dollars. Culpepper saw her or found out about it and put the pressure on."

My chili wasn't setting very well. I drank a glass of water to quiet it down. I said finally, "All right, let's assume all

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this is true. Let's assume Corliss even planted that bomb in her first real effort to get Culpepper off her back."

I added to myself, "And let's assume that she killed Nocky because he caught her doing something—like putting the bomb in the lab."

I drank some more water. It didn't help much. I said, "Assuming all of this, what good is it going to do you?"

"It's going to get me at least fifty thousand legitimate dollars," Sherry said. "And it's going to protect me. I made a mistake having Orval scare Culpepper with his car. Those attacks have given Corliss a perfect out. Now if anything happens to Culpepper, she can lay the blame on Orval. And if the police catch him, he'll open up like a steamed clam—and implicate me."

She fiddled with the tape recorder for a moment. She said, "Listen to this. They talked together on the phone yesterday."

I listened. Culpepper and Corliss were arguing again. She asked him why he couldn't hurry up his experiments. He said, "I told you all along it takes time. Now stop pestering me. The earliest I can guarantee anything is six months. And maybe it'll be a year."

"I can't wait that long!" she exclaimed. "And Martin isn't being as cooperative as I thought he'd be. He's already asking about Finney. And now Dorian is acting up too."

"Try a little harder," Culpepper ordered her. "I don't know what you can do with Pinter. Be careful. I don't trust his type."

Sherry shut the machine off and closed the lid. She said, "Corliss is getting desperate. I'm afraid she'll kill Culpepper before he can get his process perfected. I want to stop her."

I said, "If you do stop her, you'll be saving the insurance company money, not making any yourself."

She said, "When Culpepper has his process ready, I want to be in a position to sell it to the highest bidder. Lots of companies would pay me big money to give them first chance at a new way of handling fiberglass."

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"What makes you think Culpepper would let you handle his process?"

Sherry said quietly, "What choice would he have once I find out what he's using to blackmail Corliss? Besides, he should be grateful for my saving his life."

I said, "I thought you were going to get this money legitimately. Is that what you call blackmailing Culpepper? That's what you'd be doing."

Sherry said blandly, "In this case, the end justifies the means. What's more legitimate than preventing a murder?"

Ethically, she and I were poles apart. But I was in no position to argue with her. She and her tapes were the only things I had to back me up in case the law picked me up for Nocky's murder.

I said, "Pete told me that Nocky, the night gateman, disappeared. Have you heard anything about that?"

She shook her head slowly. Her eyes widened. "Do you think his disappearance has something to do with this case? Maybe he saw Corliss put that bomb in the laboratory—and she got rid of him."

Her words were too much like an echo of my thoughts. I said, "We aren't sure Corliss did plant that bomb."

"Who else had a reason?" Sherry demanded.

I didn't say anything. I didn't have any answer.

XIV

SHERRY FINISHED tucking her tapes back in their box. "Well, Zane, where do we go from here?"

I said, "I don't know about you, but I'm going to L.A. tomorrow and check through some four year old newspaper files."

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"I already did that."

I said, "You checked the Mexican papers?"

"Of course not," she said, "I can't read Spanish."

"I can," I told her. I picked up the recorder and started out with it. "Let me know what motel you'll be at so I can get in touch."

She gave me a wry, half smile. "I've never had such a thorough bum's rush before."

I said, "I need to do a little thinking. Two of us in my bunk wouldn't make that easier." We reached her car. I put the recorder inside.

Sherry stood on tiptoe and searched my lips with hers. She settled back and got into the car. "There's always later," she murmured. "Good night, muscles."

I heard her laughing as she drove away. I didn't feel like laughing with her. I went back to the boat, scrubbed off her lipstick, and climbed into my bunk. I lay for a long time, listening to the lap of water against the hull. It wasn't as soothing as usual.

It wasn't soothing at all.

I said, "What the hell do you care, Zane? You stopped loving Corliss a long time ago."

I said, "That doesn't mean I hate her enough to enjoy thinking of her as a murderess."

I said, "How much did you ever really hate her?"

I yelled, "Shut up!"

The telephone rang. I scrambled out of the bunk to answer it. Sherry's cool voice said, "I'm at the Tropicana Motel, Cottage Number Eight." A thread of soft derision ran through her voice. "You can park in the alley. It's dark there."

I hung up. To hell with it, I thought. I went back to my bunk. I looked at the bedclothes I'd kicked into a tangle.

I pulled on my clothes and went out to the wagon.

I drove from Sherry's motel to the LaPlaya airport in time to catch the noon shuttle to L.A. International. From there it took the limousine an hour to get me to the library. I refused to worry about the time; the test wasn't scheduled

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to start until ten o'clock. I could read a lot of newspapers between now and the eight o'clock return shuttle.

That's what I thought. But it was four hours and a pair of wornout eyeballs later before I found the magic word—Finney. I was reading in *El Mercurial*, the only big Mexico City daily I could get out of the reading room on Sunday. I started with the August first issue of four years back, on the theory that Culpepper's use of the term "four years" could mean anything from three and three-quarters to three and one-quarter years.

I was wrong. The first mention of Finney's name was in the November 3 issue. It was buried on Page 3, under the heading "TOURIST DIES IN AUTOMOBILE ACCIDENT." The story stated that a man carrying a tourist card bearing the name John Lowther died when his car plunged off the old Cuernavaca highway into a canyon. Although the car carried Texas license plates and was registered in the name of one Albert Finney of El Paso, the police dismissed the possibility of theft. Lowther had a bill of sale made out to him by Finney.

The name Finney disappeared from the following stories. For a time they made bigger headlines than the first one had. The story of November 4 was on Page 2. It was headed: MYSTERY ON CUERNAVACA HIGHWAY." And now one Juan Bernillo stepped into the picture. He reported voluntarily to the police that he was sleeping on the other side of the canyon when the screech of brakes woke him up. He opened his eyes in time to see one sedan deliberately push another sedan off the edge of the road to the canyon bottom a good hundred feet below.

For a minute I thought I had what I wanted. But according to the story of November 5, the police had discounted all Juan Bernillo's evidence. They had a point. Juan was a booze hound and the afternoon of the accident, he had been sleeping off a load. Besides that, he claimed that when the first car had gone off the road, the second car stopped and an angel got out. The angel looked down into the canyon, returned to the car, and drove on. The road at this point

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kinked down into the canyon. Once at the bottom, the second car stopped again. And this time not only the angel, but the devil himself, got out. They hurried to the wreck, spent a few moments there doing something Juan Bernillo could not see, and left.

The Mexican police were thorough. Before they threw Juan Bernillo's story out, they made a complete check. They put him back on the hillside, poured a few mugs of booze into him, and then restaged the accident, leaving out only the bit about the lead car going over the cliff. They had a blond girl and a baldheaded man with tufts of gray hair sticking up around his pate in the second car.

They discovered first that from Juan's angle two cars following one another closely appeared to be locking bumpers. But actually they never came within a dozen feet of one another. They also discovered that Juan Bernillo was angel and devil happy. When the blond stepped out of the second car, Juan shouted, "There she is! *Madre de Dios!*" fell to his knees and began to pray. When the old man made his appearance, Juan crossed himself fervently and prayed harder.

The reporter on the story pointed out humorlessly that the combination of liquor and afternoon sunshine had undoubtedly made the blond appear to be wearing a halo and also gave the man fiery eyes by reflecting off the lenses of his eyeglasses. Add to the burning eyes tufts of hair that stuck up with a horn-like appearance and Juan's devil was explained.

The police closed the case.

I opened it all over again. But then I had an advantage over the Mexican police. I could remember Corliss standing in the late sunshine, the wind ruffling her fine blond hair into a halo. She had looked a lot like an angel to me, too.

I returned the newspaper file to the librarian and hurried to a phone booth. I called Ted Winters, and this time I caught him at home. I told him to stay there until I arrived.

Winters was standing in the doorway to his apartment when I got off the elevator. He looked the perfect vice

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president—from his florid complexion and ulcer haunted expression to the stiff drink in his hand.

He said thickly, "Have you found out anything yet?"

We went inside. I mixed myself a drink and lit a cigarette. I talked; he listened. I laid out everything I knew to date.

Winter gulped his drink and poured himself a straight shot. "She'd do that?" he whispered. "She'd really kill someone to get a few crummy bucks?"

I said, "It looks as if she already has killed someone—for ten thousand of those crummy bucks. And if she can manage to blow up both her partners and the lab, she'll collect another three hundred and fifty thousand.

Winters whimpered and reached for the bottle. I said, "Where in hell have you been? I've tried to reach you every few hours."

"Asking questions," he said. His hand shook as he poured another drink. "I put two of our top San Francisco operatives on Corliss and Culpepper—to get their backgrounds."

I said, "Stop shaking and sit down. You can tell me what you found out in a few minutes."

He sat down. I went to the phone and put in a call to Tom Blane, a private detective friend who has offices in both Mexico City and El Paso, Texas. It was after six now in L.A. and two hours later in Mexico City. Blane wasn't easy to locate. I told the operator to dig him out and call me back.

I hung up the phone and turned to Winters. "Let's hear it."

He was on his fourth drink, but this one he nursed instead of gulping it. He said, "Corliss is about broke. When Leonard died, he was trying to expand his line. He over extended himself. The wolves moved in. They wanted the plant and one of them got it."

Winters wiped a sheen of sweat from his face. "Corliss is a good business woman and a tough fighter, but she didn't fight at all this time. She took the first solid offer and went to LaPlaya."

I said, "How does that tie in with her relationship to

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Culpepper? Could he have blackmailed her into moving to LaPlaya?"

Winters nodded. "That's the way it shapes up," he admitted. "My operatives didn't have much trouble getting most of the picture on either Culpepper or Corliss."

He painted that picture for me: Corliss and Culpepper were first seen together four years ago this past summer. He had sold his first money-making invention in the late spring and gone off to San Francisco to have himself a blow-out. There was no trace of him during the summer, but in October he and a young blond who used the name of Corliss Finney took a trip to Mexico together. They came back the first week in November. Culpepper went up north and invented some more gadgets. Corliss, who now called herself Morgan—the name I first knew her by—started business school in San Francisco.

She finished school and got a job with Tom Leonard. A short time later, Culpepper's gadgets were being bought and manufactured by Leonard on a royalty basis. Then, finally, a guy by the name of Zane came into the picture.

I said, "You can skip the rest. Get down to this bit about Corliss being broke."

Winters emptied his glass and poured it full again. "When Corliss sold out the L.A. plant and paid off all the creditors, she had just enough left to open the LaPlaya place. The operating capital came from Culpepper and Pinter, as near as I can tell. And that didn't add up to much in these days of high costs."

I said, "She's been counting on Culpepper perfecting his process soon so they can pick up a government research contract."

"With the little capital she started with, she's taking an awful gamble," Winters said.

I said, "You know Corliss better than that. She never gambles. She only plays sure things."

Winters wiped his face again. "Then you don't think she had any idea of promoting Culpepper's process into a government contract?"

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I said, "She knows how much money and time research takes. So she couldn't have been planning to collect on Culpepper's invention."

I stubbed out my cigarette. "She must have figured out from the beginning how she could get Culpepper off her back and collect a pile of loot at the same time."

Winters emptied his glass of whiskey. "By murder," he muttered.

"That's right," I said. "With a bomb."

XV

WINTERS SAID, "Are you really sure? I mean, Corliss! She's so damn lovely; so . . ."

I almost hit him. But the phone rang. The operator had Tom Blane on the line. He wasn't in Mexico City; he was in El Paso.

I identified myself and said, "I'm checking back four years on a character named Finney or Lowther." I explained the set-up to him.

The accident on the Cuernavaca road had happened before Blane opened Mexico City offices, so he knew nothing of that. But he did know of an Arthur Finney.

Blane said, "He's your boy. One of his aliases was John Lowther. He was a small time confidence man around El Paso six or seven years ago. He specialized in the fixed horserace gimick. You know, the one where a young, good-looking girl hooks a sucker and introduces him to a man she says is her father. They sell the mark a bill of goods about knowing a bookie who has a longshot fixed to come in first. They promise the mark a fortune if he'll give them the

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money to make a bet, collect a big wad off him, and then disappear."

I said, "How old was Finney?"

Blane said, "When I last saw him, he was just short of fifty. He left El Paso and went west. The last I heard he was hanging around San Francisco."

"Bless you," I said. "Send the consultation charge to Ted Winters, Vice President, Marine Mutual Insurance, Los Angeles."

Winters didn't even squawk.

Blane said, "I'll file it under favors owed."

We shot the breeze for a minute or so and I hung up. I looked at my watch. It was after seven. I figured I had just enough time to make the airport and the eight o'clock shuttle. I called a cab.

Winters poured himself another shot. "I'll ride to the airport with you," he said.

He wasn't in shape to go anywhere, and for the first half of the taxi ride, he sat glassy-eyed and silent. Then, all of a sudden, he opened up.

He said, "Not Corliss, damn it. Pinter maybe, but not little Corliss."

I clenched my fists and said, "Shut up."

He was looking straight ahead. "Can you imagine her driving the car that pushed Finney off a cliff and then going down and taking money off the body? Can you imagine her luring a poor old man like that Nockheimer to your office and running a knife into him? Can you imagine her deliberately blowing up Culpepper and maybe even the man who wants to marry her? Can you imagine Corliss doing all that?"

The taxi reached the airport and stopped. Winters turned his head in my direction. "Little Corliss," he said. "Beautiful little Corliss."

I swung on him. He folded down in a corner of the seat. I said to the driver, "Haul him back where you got him." I shoved money at him, turned and ran for my plane.

I almost fouled up. I missed the eight o'clock shuttle and had to take the one at nine-thirty. I grabbed a sandwich

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and then tried calling Sherry. She wasn't in. I rang my answering service in case she'd left a message.

She hadn't, but someone else had. Orval. The girl at the answering service said, "A man who said you'd know him because he drives a green jalopy called, Mr. Zane. He wants to meet you as soon as possible."

"Did he leave a name?"

"No, sir. He said you'd know who he is. Is there any message? He sounded terrible concerned. He's going to call back around nine o'clock."

I said, "Tell him to meet me at my boat some time after midnight."

I spent the rest of my waiting time wondering what Orval could want to see me about. I thought about him for a while on the plane too. He wasn't worth occupying my mind with, but when I stopped thinking about him, I thought about Corliss. Right now, Orval was easier to take.

I made LaPlaya with my watch reading ten-fifteen. I got my wagon out of the parking lot and barreled toward the Leonard plant. I was lucky. They were just getting ready to leave. Pinter and his Imperial were nosed toward the gate; Culpepper, driving a pick-up with the loaded boat trailer behind, was second in line; and Corliss in her Caddy came last.

I swung my wagon behind Corliss. My lights hit her rear tires; the left one looked as if it was going flat. I beeped the horn and climbed out of the wagon with my tire gauge and bent down by the rear wheel.

Corliss put her head out the window. "What is it, Martin?"

The tire gauge registered eighteen pounds. I said, "You're getting a flat."

Culpepper yelled from up ahead, "Damn it! We been delayed long enough already. Come on now. You can lolly-gag with Zane later."

I didn't take the time to explain to him. I opened Corliss' door. "Use my wagon. I'll change your tire and catch up."

She gave me one of her bright smiles. "Thank you, Martin,

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but I'd rather wait and drive my own car. I'm more used to it."

I said, "You'll be going slowly. There's nothing to worry about."

She frowned but she got out of the Caddy. "Do hurry," she said.

I said I'd hurry. They drove off. I called the gateman over to help me change the tire. I didn't hurry, figuring I could catch up easily enough. Culpepper wasn't going to make much time hauling a trailer over the road to the Spit.

I saw them after I made the turn where the Spit road started along the cliff face. Corliss was well back, moving cautiously the way some people will when they handle an unfamiliar car. I pulled up within thirty feet of her and hung there, my lights on dim to keep from blinding her by putting their reflection in the rear-view mirror.

With a mile still to go, she slowed down. A minute later, her arm came out of the window and made a frantic motion, waving me forward. There was a fairly wide spot just ahead. I swung the Caddy left, toward the bank, and gunned alongside my wagon. Corliss called something I couldn't hear.

She swung her head toward me. Terror stamped itself on her face as the wagon's steering wheel twisted sharply right, as if an invisible, giant hand had reached out and given it a violent wrench.

Corliss screamed as the wagon shot toward the edge of the road. She must have slammed on the brake. Its nose went over the edge; then it stopped suddenly and hung delicately on the soft sand. Headlights swept out over the dark water thirty feet straight down.

I heard myself yelling, "Jump, damn it! Jump!"

The sand began to crumble under the wagon. It started sliding forward. I stared helplessly, praying for her to jump, and afraid she had no time.

The door came open with a wild swing. The movement of it sent the wagon sliding faster. Taillights speered straight into the night as the car's nose went steeply down. Corliss

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made a scrambling leap just as the last of the sand crumbled away. She landed stomach down on the edge, her legs thrust out into nothing.

The wagon struck the sheer cliff once on its way down. There was a rending crash and then a violent splash as the water met it. I was barely conscious of the sounds. I was fighting my way out of the Caddy in an effort to reach Corliss.

She was scrabbling with her hands, trying to find purchase on that soft, swiftly melting sand before the weight of her slipping body pulled her down to the dark water.

I was within ten feet of her when she disappeared. I reached the edge of the road and looked down. Her body was a dark mass against the white sandy face of the cliff. She rolled like an avalanche down the first dozen feet. Then the cliff thrust out a shallow finger before it dropped away sheer to the water. She struck the finger too fast for it even to slow her momentum. Her body shot out and then plummeted straight down. Her arms and feet flailed crazily as she rushed toward the water. Then, suddenly, her body straightened out. She struck feet first and disappeared.

I pulled off my coat and pants. I had a brief glimpse of Pinter's Imperial backing up, edging past Culpepper's truck and trailer, as it worked toward me. I didn't wait for him. I stepped over the edge and started sliding down the perpendicular slope.

I couldn't see any sign of my wagon in the water. I couldn't see any sign of Corliss either. I didn't have time to look very hard. I hit the finger of hard sand that had launched her away from the cliff. I tried to keep my balance long enough to jump straight out, but my foot slipped and I found myself flailing the cold night air in a frantic effort to straighten out before I hit the water.

I struck as Corliss had, feet downward. The water beat at me violently and then sucked me down into itself. I thought I would keep going forever, and then I hit bottom. I kicked and shot to the surface. I broke water with salt stinging my eyes and a spatter of brightness over the surface of the

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water. One of the cars above had been turned so that its headlights washed down onto the harbor.

The light let me see Corliss. She was less than twenty feet from me, splashing feebly. I kicked off my shoes and swam to her. She was fighting to stay on the surface, but she couldn't have been aware of what she was doing. Her face was chalk white; her eyes had the glaze of shock over them.

I reached out to catch her under the armpits and pull her shoreward. She twisted around and clawed wildly at me with both hands.

I ducked and tried moving in on her again.

As soon as I touched her, she turned into a crazy, whirling dervish. Her fingernails scored on my cheek, drawing blood.

I said, "Sorry," and hit her as gently as I dared.

She blacked out enough for me to get the grip I wanted. I held her head in the crook of my arm, against my chest, and backstroked through the cone of bright light to the near darkness against the shore.

The tide was out enough to give us a two foot strip of wet sand to lie on. I flopped Corliss onto the sand and knelt down beside her.

She was breathing well, but her wide open eyes still held that patina of shock. I slapped her cheeks lightly until warmth began to come back into them. Slowly, brightness ate away the glaze in her eyes. She lifted her head out of the sand and stared at me.

She whimpered like a puppy and wriggled up into my arms. I held her, stroking her soggy hair. What else can you do at a time like that?

She shivered violently. She moved her lips against my bare shoulder. "The steering acted funny. Then something broke," she whispered. "I felt it and tried to stop. But it was too late."

I said, "Why didn't you jump sooner, for God's sake?"

"I couldn't get the door open. I kept twisting the window handle instead. It was awful!" Her voice wasn't very strong,

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but she didn't sound too bad. In some ways, she was pretty tough.

I said, "Forget it and relax. Someone will toss a rope down in a minute and you'll be back where it's warm."

I twisted my head and looked upward. The cliff went straight up at this point, giving me a good view of the edge. But I couldn't see anything except car lights—no face peering down, no one in sight.

I opened my mouth and shouted. Only the gentle stir of water lapping toward our feet answered.

We had been left alone here with thirty feet of sheer cliff between us and the road.

XVI

WE HAD A CHOICE. We could walk or we could stay where we were and hope someone would find us before the bone-drilling cold gave us both pneumonia. We walked.

It was a mile to the Spit, the closest place where the road met the water. At first the going wasn't too bad. Then we lost the narrow strip of sandy shore and had to pick our way over rocks. Finally we reached the shoulder of cliff that pushed out into the harbor, blocking our view of the shore beyond and of the Spit itself.

Corliss sagged wearily to the ground. "What do we do now?" she asked plaintively.

I said, "We swim. It's easier going on the other side."

She was shivering violently in the cold air. I caught her under the arms and pulled her up. "Come on. It's warmer in the water."

She said, "All right," and stepped away from me. I stayed close to her, afraid the shock of being in the water might

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make her hysterical again. But she swam steadily enough, and when we reached the sandy shore below the cliff, she began to walk almost briskly.

Neither of us said anything about what had happened. We were too busy walking fast to keep warm. Then our energy ran out and we had all we could do just to keep walking.

We were within a hundred yards of the shore end of the Spit when the gutty roar of an outboard motor shattered the silence of the cold night air. The sound grew louder as a small boat shot away from the far tip of the Spit. It angled toward us for a moment and then swung away.

Corliss said in a puzzled voice, "That was Ezekial in the dinghy!"

I shouted, "Culpepper!" but my voice was lost in the roar of the motor. There was no way for Culpepper to hear me—even if he'd wanted to.

The tiny boat bobbed around the shoulder of cliff and disappeared. Corliss whispered, "What does it mean, Martin? What is he doing?"

I could see the dark blob of the pick-up truck ahead now. I took Corliss' arm and urged her forward. "We'll find out later."

The truck was well out on the Spit, the trailer carrying the fiberglass hull still attached to it. A long gouge in the damp sand showed where Culpepper had dragged the dinghy to the water's edge. Right now I couldn't have cared less about Culpepper. All I wanted to do was get us into the warmth of that truck cab.

I found two old blankets Culpepper had used as padding for the dinghy. I gave one to Corliss. "Strip down and wrap this around yourself," I ordered.

I went around to the driver's side of the truck and peeled off my stiff, half dry shirt and shorts and wrapped the blanket around myself. I climbed awkwardly into the truck, started the engine, and switched on the heater.

Corliss climbed in beside me. We sat there in silence, matching each other shiver for shiver until the wonderful warm air began to take effect.

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Corliss turned toward me. "Martin?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

I couldn't take that. I felt myself come apart. I wanted to hit her, to hurt that beautiful, lying mouth; to destroy the expression on that lovely face. I clamped both hands down hard on the steering wheel. Words burst out of me like steam from an exploding boiler.

"Is that why you tried to kill me—because you love me?"

"Martin!"

I shouted, "You didn't want to drive my wagon. You knew just how much strain the steering could stand before it broke. Because you fixed it that way, hoping I'd go over the edge of the cliff. When did you do it? Tonight while I was in L.A.?"

Corliss stared at me with those wide, luminous gray eyes. "Why would I want to kill you, Martin?" Her voice was flat, empty.

"I was getting too close to the truth!" I yelled. I fought my voice down to normal. "You figured that out last night after you found I'd made contact with Sherry Barker. After you realized I was going to find out everything about Finney."

"Finney?" she whispered.

"The man you worked with when you conned Culpepper out of his money," I said. "The man you ran over a cliff in Mexico—for ten thousand dollars."

She made a whimpering sound. "I didn't kill Arthur. It was an accident."

I said, "Sure. That's why Culpepper's been able to blackmail you the past four years. That's why you decided to kill him too—because Finney's death was an accident!"

She said quietly, "What else do you know, Martin?"

"Damn near everything," I answered harshly. "I know that Culpepper blackmailed you first into getting his gadgets marketed by Leonard. I know that when Leonard died, Culpepper forced you to set him up down here. And I know you killed Nocky. Why? Did he see you plant that bomb in the lab?"

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My voice was rising again. I fought it down. "And I know that if you don't get some money soon, you'll be back where you were—with no penthouse, no fancy car, nothing!"

"Can I tell my side now, Martin?"

The cool emptiness of her voice tore at me. I said, "Go ahead. It should be a good one. Your stories always are."

She said, "Five years ago I went to San Francisco. I was a small town girl with a headful of dreams and one good dress in her suitcase. I wasn't trained to do anything useful, but I thought I could be a model or an actress or—or something glamorous. I ended up waiting tables in a pancake house."

She took a deep breath. "That's where Arthur Finney found me. I thought he was something from another world. The few men who'd tried to date me had all been cheap and flashy—vulgar. Arthur was polite, a gentleman. He treated me like I was very special. I—I thought he really felt that way about me. After we'd been out together a few times, he told me I should be a television actress and that he'd help me—pay for acting lessons and everything."

I said, "Five years ago you were twenty-one. I'm supposed to believe you fell for that line?"

She said simply, "You don't know how lonely it can be for a girl alone in a city."

I didn't answer that. She said, "He taught me how to walk and talk and act. We were together a lot but he never tried anything."

I said, "The real noble type."

Her voice faltered. "Four years ago this summer, he told me I was ready to be an actress."

I said wearily, "I can give you the rest. He wanted to test your ability before he turned you loose on the public, so he told you to pretend to be his daughter or niece or something. Then he introduced you to his mark—Culpepper, most likely—and before you knew what was happening, you were mixed up in a racetrack con."

"Yes," she said. "He introduced me as his daughter. And by the time I learned what Arthur was doing, he had taken

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nearly seventy thousand dollars from Ezekial, and we were on our way to Mexico City in a car Arthur bought in El Paso."

"I'm supposed to believe you were that naive?" I demanded.

"You would if you could see the little mountain town I came from," she said. "I didn't really realize what was going on until I saw Arthur's tourist card with the name John Lowther on it."

Her eyes pleaded with me to buy her story. I just looked at her. She went on, "I—I took some of the money Arthur got from Ezekial. All I could find—thirteen hundred dollars. I ran away and went back to San Francisco. I found Ezekial and told him my story."

I said, "And he swallowed it?"

"He said he did," she answered levelly. "He took me with him to find Arthur. He was in Mexico City. I mean, he had been. By the time we located his hotel, he had left to drive to Acapulco. We rented a car and followed. We met him at a gas station on the old Cuernavaca road. He got away from us and we followed. He drove too fast and went off into that canyon. I was driving a good twenty feet behind him when it happened."

I said, "Tell that to Juan Bernillo. He saw the whole thing."

Corliss said, "I studied Spanish in high school. I could read the newspapers enough to follow the stories. That's why we didn't report the accident. When we went down to the wreck to help Arthur, we saw the little man up on the hill watching us."

I said, "Watching you prowl the body."

Her lips tightened. "Arthur was dead. Ezekial was just looking for his own money. And he only found ten thousand. We still don't know what happened to the rest."

"Finney probably sent it to his widowed mother," I said savagely.

She ignored me. "When we got back to San Francisco, Ezekial insisted I use some of the money to go to business school. He—he treated me like a daughter. And when I

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went to work for the Leonard company, I tried to repay him by getting some of his inventions manufactured."

I said, "So Culpepper is just another big-hearted benefactor to a little lost country girl."

She lost her control for the first time. "That's all he ever was!" she cried. "When Tom died and Ezekial heard the company was in bad shape, he offered to help me with the fifty thousand dollars he'd saved. I knew he needed all his money to work on the fiberglass process. It was his dream. And then I saw a way to help him. That's why I sold the plant in Los Angeles and moved down here. That's why I—I half promised Dorian I would marry him. I needed his money for Ezekial's research. And I knew we still might not have enough capital, but I hoped—and I still do—that Ezekial would get far enough along in his research for us to get a loan."

I said, "All right, so everything is hearts and flowers between you and Culpepper. *Then why did you plant that bomb in his lab?*"

Corliss said simply, "Ezekial and I planned that together. After I located you, I realized you might not want to help me. I didn't think you'd help just because of those two attacks that man Orval made on Ezekial. But I hoped you would if you actually saw the bomb. Ezekial put it in the lab. I didn't."

I said, "Sure, he's on your side. That's why he took out of here tonight—because he loves you. The hell he does. He's scared silly. When my wagon went over the edge, he figured out what you tried to do to me. He thought he'd be next."

She said, "If that's what you believe, Martin, there's nothing to do now but turn me over to the police."

It was a good bluff, but I wasn't buying it. I got out of the truck and put on my shorts. I unhitched the trailer and drove up the road. Corliss was silent for the first half mile. Then I heard her crying.

I didn't say anything. I'd said enough. I was drained. And I was sick. All I wanted to do now was dump this case on the cops and get away from LaPlaya for a while.

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We broke around a curve into a blare of bright lights. I slammed on the brakes. The road ahead was jammed with men. A big wrecker was winching my wagon up onto a cleared space. Two carloads of cops were running around. Pinter was there, waving his arms as he talked to the one policeman I didn't want to see—Lieutenant Stolz.

Pinter saw us as my wagon settled with a thump to the roadway. The tailgate and the hood were both up. Water dripped from every joint. The whole left side was caved in. I didn't feel much of anything when I looked at what had been my fine, new car.

Pinter was running toward us, an arm stuck out. "Culpepper," he shouted, "where the devil have you been?"

I stuck my head out the window. Pinter pulled up as if he'd been lassoed.

"Zanel!" he shouted. "Lieutenant, there he is. There's the man who deliberately ran Mrs. Leonard off the road. There's your murderer."

Corliss stepped out of the truck, wearing the blanket like an Indian. She said, "Don't be a fool, Dorian!"

I don't know what Pinter would have done next. Nobody had a chance to find out. Just then one of the cops standing behind my wagon let out a shout. "Lieutenant, there's a dead body in the back. An old man. He's got a funny looking knife in him."

XVII

I DIDN'T WAIT for Lieutenant Stolz to identify the murder weapon as my letter opener. I shot out of the truck and down over the cliff.

The first ten feet I could hear Stolz shouting orders and

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Corliss crying out, "Wait, Martin!" The second ten feet I was too busy stumbling to hear anything. The third ten feet I was flying through the air.

I hit the water face down this time. My wind gushed out and I went under. I thought I was going to drown before I managed to surface and get some air into my lungs. Then I wondered if drowning wouldn't have been easier. Spotlights from the bank above had me pinpointed. Guns opened up.

I went under and swam as long as I could hold my breath. When I came up again, I'd gone farther than I expected. I was well past the glare of the spotlights. I realized that the tide was running out now. I lay on my back and let it pull me along.

For the first time I had a chance to do a little thinking. I'd pulled a sucker's trick by running. But I knew I'd do the same thing over again if I had a choice. I didn't think Stolz could pin Nocky's body on me but he could charge me with moving the body. And even without a charge, he could hold me forty-eight hours before I had a hope of being turned loose.

I couldn't afford to lose forty-eight hours. I couldn't afford to lose any time at all. I wouldn't rest easy until Culpepper was somewhere safe.

The spotlights on shore reached out for me. I went under water again. I surfaced with my chest aching. I discovered that the currents were working me closer to shore. I lay on my back and let them carry me along. At the angle I was moving, I'd be swept close to the beach just south of the Leonard plant. I couldn't think of a more likely place to find Culpepper right now.

The way he had that lab protected by alarms, it was almost a fortress. I was sure he'd go there instead of to his little beach shack where anyone could get to him.

I was close enough to shore now to see headlights streaming north along the road from the Spit. I even caught the howl of a siren now and then when the slosh of waves stopped beating my eardrums. I turned over and began swimming.

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I touched bottom a hundred feet or so south of the plant fence. It ran parallel to the lab and the big boathouse, ending in a jumble of old pilings sticking up well beyond tideline. I could see the quiet water in front of the boatshed. My heart did a double jig. The little dinghy Culpepper had escaped in was bobbing at a small dock. I looked landward, past the upper end of the lab. I could make out the entire parking lot and even a corner of the guardhouse by the gate.

My heart stopped jiggling. The parking lot was empty. Culpepper's old car was gone. I swore at him for leaving the one place that guaranteed him some safety.

Sirens began to howl again. Lights glowed along the road leading to the plant. I didn't wait around to find out what Lieutenant Stolz thought he'd find there. I went back into the water and swam again.

This time I had it easier. I knew where I was going—to Culpepper's dinghy. I worked my way around the pilings that marked the end of the fence and into the quiet water in front of the boat shed. I hauled myself into the dinghy, untied the painter, and grabbed the starter rope on the outboard.

The motor was warm and it responded to the first pull on the rope. I headed noisily into the harbor. The racket the outboard made didn't worry me. Stolz and his sirens were enough to drown out any sound short of an atomic blast.

Once I was past the north fence, I hugged the shoreline, working my way toward Culpepper's little beach shack. It was in a summer area along with a number of others. None of them showed any lights. I expected that. In November most of them would be vacant. I beached the dinghy and trotted over the dunes to the shack Corliss had pointed out as Culpepper's.

I went around to the front and stopped. Culpepper's car wasn't here either. But fresh tire tracks in the usually wind-scoured sand showed me where someone had backed up almost to the front door.

I tried the door. It swung open. I found a cord dangling from the ceiling and turned on the lights. A five second

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look was all I needed. The room looked like a hurricane had come in one window and gone out the other. Culpepper had been here, all right—just long enough to pack his personal things and take off.

This was the biggest jolt I'd had all evening. I went back to the dinghy and worked my way up the harbor. I shivered as the cold night air bit into my bare skin. I huddled miserably in that eight foot cockleshell and wondered where I went from here.

The answer to that hit me just as the motor gave a cough and died. I was out of fuel. I was also within two hundred yards or so of my own dock.

So I'd go home. Home where I could find dry clothes. And where I could find Orval. Until now, I'd forgotten all about my appointment with Orval. Suddenly he meant a great deal to me. He had two things I needed badly—a car and the answers to a whole new set of questions.

The dinghy lost the last of its momentum. I went into the water again. I didn't play footsie with the tide this time. I was in too much of a hurry. Sooner or later Stolz would send men to my boat. By then, I hoped to be long gone.

Two hundred yards isn't much distance with a boat under you. But it's a long way for a cold, weary man. I swam the last fifty feet wondering if I was going to make my dock or save Stolz and everyone else a lot of trouble by going quietly to the bottom.

My shoulder rammed a barnacle covered piling. I put my arms out and hugged it. I could hear someone sobbing loudly. It was me.

After a few minutes I revived. I let loose of the piling and caught a stringer. I went along it hand over hand to the edge of the dock. I pulled myself up, padded down to my boat, and dropped into the cockpit. I stood there a moment, watching the lights of cars splay along Harbor Way. I looked at the big, warm honeycomb of brightness where Corliss' apartment house thrust up into the night sky.

I needed long seconds to understand what I was seeing—

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the penthouse was lighted too. But Corliss hadn't had time to get home yet, even if Stolz had released her by now.

I yelled, "Culpepper!"

I was eager to get moving again. I stepped to the hatch, trying to think of something I could use to pry the padlock loose. I stopped thinking about that when I saw the hasp dangling by one screw. Someone had already found a way.

Orval? I slid the hatch open and stared down into warm darkness. If he was here, he wasn't letting anyone know it. I reached my hand carefully forward and found the light switch. I snapped it on.

I stared down into the cabin, at my easy chair, at the back of a man's head: a head with dirty, lank yellow hair on it. A hand dangled over the side of the chair. A few inches from the hand was a two-thirds empty bottle of my best Canadian whiskey.

I went down the companionway. "This is a hell of a time to get drunk," I said.

Orval didn't answer me. I picked up the bottle and stepped around in front of him. I took a good, long look at his bony face, at his staring, glassy eyes, at his loosely gaping mouth—and at the handle of my best butcher knife sticking out of his chest.

I uncorked the bottle and had a deep drink.

I looked at Orval again. Nothing had changed. He was still dead.

Orval was dead. I wasn't but I might as well be if I let Stolz find me here. Another drink thawed me out enough so that I could move in a hurry. I slapped on some clothes, substituting swim trunks for shorts just in case. Then I picked up the telephone.

I called Corliss' apartment. Nobody answered. I let the ringing go on. After twenty rings I wondered if I was wrong about Culpepper being there. Then he answered.

I said, "This is Zane. Get out of there and back to the lab. And hurry up!"

He gave a grunt as if he couldn't believe I was still alive.

He said, "Where's Corliss? What happened to Corliss?"

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I said, "She's all right. She's alive and before long she'll be running around loose. And you know where she'll go. Now get out of there before I come up and haul you out."

I slammed down the phone. I had to use the phone book to find the number I wanted next—the Tropicana Motel. Sherry answered on the second ring.

I said, "I'm in trouble. I need help."

She sounded sleepy. "Martin? Where are you? What's the matter?"

I said, "I'm home. Orval's here with me. He's dead."

Silence. Then a whisper, "Did you kill him?"

"No. But I can prove who did, if I can get some help."

She sounded puzzled. "But I sent Orval to L.A. to—to check on you."

The wail of sirens in the distance ripped apart the warm quiet of the cabin. I said, "Tell me about it later. Right now meet me in the dunes by the plant. You know the place—where you hid your car that time you sneaked in over the fence. And keep an eye out for Corliss Leonard."

The sirens sounded only blocks away. Sherry said, "All right."

I hung up and turned to Orval. I took a deep breath and stuck my hand down in his trouser pocket. I found what I wanted—the keys to his car.

It wasn't much compared to my wagon or to Corliss' Caddy, but it ran. It got me away from the boat with the sirens howling now more than a half block away. I melted it into the traffic and drove to Corliss' apartment house.

I went down the ramp and into the garage. I stayed just long enough to see that Culpepper's old crate was nowhere around. I gunned back up to the street and headed south.

I went by my moorage. Three prowl cars filled the little parking lot. I could see one uniformed cop using his radio. I shuddered at the thought of what Stolz would do if he caught me now.

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XVIII

SHERRY WAS waiting for me when I reached the high dunes close to the north fence of the plant. I climbed out of Orval's heap and stumbled to her. She said, "Martin, what is this all about?"

I said, "I'm trying to catch a murderer before someone fingers me for the role."

I was looking past the dunes toward the front of the plant. I could see the guardhouse and a small corner of the parking lot from here.

I started walking away from the harbor. By the time I'd gone a hundred feet I could see the rest of the parking lot. Culpepper's old car was there all alone.

I went back to Sherry and borrowed a cigarette. We sat in her car and smoked. I talked; she listened. When I finished, she said, "I was on the right track!" No wonder Corliss and Culpepper were frightened that someone would connect them with Finney."

Her voice lost its excitement. "But why would she kill Orval? He wasn't much but . . ."

I said, "Orval was killed for the same reason old Nocky was."

I started to say more and stopped. Headlights were coming down the road toward the plant. I got out of Sherry's car and watched as the headlights drew closer. They dimmed as the car reached the gate. It opened. Corliss' Cadillac swept through.

I said, "Time to get moving. You've got your gun?"

Sherry touched her purse and nodded. I said, "If you have to, wave it around. But don't use it, for God's sake. Dead witnesses aren't worth much."

She gave me an odd look. "What do I do?"

I said, "Go over the fence. The racket from the alarm

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will stop whatever's going on inside long enough for me to get there."

"What are you going to do, Martin?"

I said, "I'm going for another swim."

She didn't ask any more questions but hurried toward the fence. I headed straight for the shore. The outgoing tide had left a wide strip of wet sand long here. I was able to walk all the way out to the first of the pilings marking the end of the fence.

I stripped down to my swimming trunks. I stared at the dark, cold water and hated it. I made myself go in all at once. Then it was better.

I turned and tread water while I looked back along the fence. Sherry was almost to it. I took a deep breath and started swimming.

My idea was simple. I was going to get into the boatshed by diving far enough down to swim under the big doors and coming up in the test pond that filled this end of the big building.

I thought it was simple—until I tried it. I reached the doors. I sucked in a lungful of air and went down. Complete darkness clamped over me. I lost my orientation. My feet hit bottom. My groping hands pawed out and touched nothing but water.

I surfaced to find myself facing north instead of east toward the doors. I went down a second time. And a third. I finally realized that every time I ducked under, the pull of the tide swung me around.

I began to shake. Not from cold. The water was a warm enough covering. But because I hadn't heard the alarm go off. Not ten feet in front of me murder could be happening. Time was squeezing itself out. And all I could do was dive and grope helplessly and dive again.

I went down a fourth time. But now I pressed myself against the doors and kept one hand on them as I kicked myself toward the bottom. A long sliver rammed into the heel of my hand. A nailhead tore a piece from my shoulder. I kept kicking.

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I lost contact with the door. For a sickening second I thought the tide had pulled me away again. Then I realized I was below the door. I gave a final kick and started swimming forward.

I couldn't see a thing at first. Then faint light filtered down into the water. I burst up and into brighter light. I blinked salt from my eyes and stared around the big barn-like room.

And stared right into the muzzle of a shotgun.

Culpepper wagged the gun at me. "Get back where you came from, Zane, or I'll put a load of buckshot in you."

I swam slowly toward the edge of the pool. "It isn't me you want to put a load of buckshot into," I said. "Corliss and Sherry Barker are in the plant. Corliss will get the spare key out of the safe and then they'll come here."

The barrel of the shotgun jittered at me as Culpepper took a shaky step backward. I climbed out of the water and pushed the gun aside.

"Stop shivering and start thinking!" I said. "You can't run and hide forever."

"What can we do?" he demanded.

The door from the boatshed to the lab was open. Both of us heard the sound at the same time—the rattle of a key fitting into a lock. I trotted to the door and pulled it shut carefully. Culpepper came slowly toward me, his seamed face a dirty white.

I said, "When she reaches this door, tell her you have a gun. Bargain with her long enough to give me a chance to get into position."

Sweat made a sheen on Culpepper's bald head. "I ain't sure I got anything to bargain with," he said.

I said, "Just talk."

We could hear the click of high heels now. They came slowly across the floor of the lab. They stopped at the door.

Culpepper shouted, "You there. I got a shotgun and I ain't afraid to use it!" His voice was edgy with panic.

Corliss said, "Ezekial. Please! I'm not alone."

"I know that!" he answered.

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I moved to the far side of the door, where I'd be hidden when it swung open. I whispered, "Let them in!"

Culpepper's head bobbed. His adam's apple bounced. "Come in," he called. "But you better have your hands empty."

The door swung slowly open. Culpepper backed away, holding his shotgun at belt level. Sherry stumbled suddenly through the doorway. Culpepper lifted his gun higher.

"Watch out!" she screamed. She flung herself sideways just as Culpepper's finger tensed on the trigger.

I didn't stop to wonder who he thought he was shooting. It didn't matter. He was so far gone he probably didn't know himself. I leaped around the edge of the door and knocked the barrel of the gun straight up.

Sound rocketed through the big room. Buckshot tore at the ceiling, sending down a rain of dust and splinters. Corliss was halfway through the door. She stopped and stared at us, one hand pressed to her mouth.

Culpepper let loose of the shotgun. I grabbed it as it fell. He stumbled toward Corliss. "Baby," he wailed. "I didn't mean . . ." He wrapped his arms around her; she wrapped back. They both blubbered like scared kids.

I swung the shotgun toward Sherry. I looked past it into the barrel of her pistol. She said, "Touching scene, isn't it, Zane?" The ice was back in her voice. She dusted at her skirt. "Don't try to bluff me with that. I know a single-shot, one-barrel shotgun when I see it."

I grimaced and dropped the gun to the floor. I said, "Where do we go from here?"

Sherry said, "You go for another swim—a long one this time." She frowned at me. "When did you figure out where I stood in all this, Zane?"

I said, "When I went to Culpepper's shack and saw he'd packed and run. Why would he do that if he was really afraid of Corliss? He couldn't even be sure she was alive after the accident. And I was sure when I found Orval. No one but you had a reason to kill him. What happened? Did he find out you killed Nocky because the poor old man spotted

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your car from the guardhouse when you hid it by the dunes?"

She said coldly, "The nosy old fool was waiting by my car when I came over the fence Friday night."

I had the picture now. I said, "So you tried to explain your actions by stringing him along—telling him you were working for me. That's the only way you could have got him to write that note and come to my office. Killing him there gave you a chance to frame me."

I felt a little sick. I said, "But you knew the frame had missed when you saw Corliss and me move Nocky to his house. So you took him away and hid him until you got a chance to hide him behind the backseat of my wagon."

She said casually, "You should look behind it once in a while."

I said, "He wasn't there last night when I got the tools out to fix my fender. You put him in later. Probably while Orval was gimmicking my steering—or just afterward."

"Yes, while you were sleeping in my bed." And she laughed!

I said, "Orval saw you juggle the body. And that's why he wanted to see me. He had a phobia about anything connected with murder. You found out he was going to try to deal with me, so you killed him."

"The crummy little fink," Sherry said. She stared at me with hunger in her eyes. "Do you think I'd let Orval—or you—stop me? This is the only big chance I ever had to get real money. I've taken dirty jobs, put up with dirty men, just waiting for this chance to come along." Her voice climbed shrilly. "Look at those two. They're scared sick they'll be arrested for Finney's murder. And they will if they don't pay me—and pay me and pay me . . ."

I caught her up short before she went to pieces and started whanging at everything in sight with her gun. I said sharply, "Why should they pay anything? They're innocent. It all happened just the way Corliss told me it did. If Culpepper had been blackmailing her, he never would have risked going to her apartment tonight. He never would have come back here to protect her."

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I shook my head. "He was scared tonight. Right up to the minute he almost shot Corliss by mistake. But he wasn't only scared for himself. He was a lot more scared for her. He has been all along—ever since those first attacks Orval made."

Sherry frowned. I said, "You can interpret those tapes of yours to mean Culpepper was trying to help Corliss, not hurt her."

Sherry said in a puzzled voice, "If you knew where I stood before you called me tonight, why all the pretense that you still thought Corliss was the one you wanted?"

I said, "I had to get Culpepper out of Corliss' apartment. He was too vulnerable there. And I had to get Corliss here with him." I stopped and glanced at Culpepper. "I was counting on your leaving a note, telling Corliss where you were."

Corliss said, "He did. That's why I came here." She made an effort to smile, but it didn't quite come off. "I'd have come sooner only first I had to convince that awful Lieutenant that I wasn't guilty of anything and then I had to get rid of Dorian. He was determined to stay up all night and hold my hand."

"Touching," Sherry murmured.

I said to her, "And the final reason I conned you into coming here with me was that I needed proof—and witnesses. Otherwise, I'd be spending the next six months convincing Lieutenant Stolz I didn't kill Nocky or Orval."

"You have your proof—and your witnesses," Sherry murmured. She laughed. "But you haven't got six months, Zane. You've got about six minutes."

Corliss cocked her head suddenly as if she heard something. I caught it now too—the slap of feet running across a floor. I looked through the door into the lab. Pinter came tearing in from the hall. He stopped, looked toward me, and charged forward.

"Zane!" he shouted. "Where's Corliss? What have you done. . . ."

I made a quick motion to Corliss and Culpepper, hoping

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they'd understand and keep quiet. They did. Pinter charged on. I didn't say a word. I just let him come.

Sherry stepped back so she could cover me and the doorway with her gun. I raised my hands over my head, slowly, deliberately. Pinter was almost to the doorway. He stopped and gaped at me.

Sherry called me a dirty name in a low voice. I said, "When you come through that doorway, Pinter, turn left and shoot fast."

Sherry's breath had a gusty sob to it now. I had to give Pinter credit; he thought fast in an emergency. He said, "Give the shooting angle, Zane," as if he was discussing target practice at the athletic club. He took a forward step, making his foot hit the floor heavily.

Sherry swung the gun toward the doorway. I made a feint in her direction. She swung back to me. I stopped. Pinter slapped the floor with his foot again. She screamed. She started to move the gun and stopped.

The little motion was enough. I dove for her. I saw the gun bear on me. I heard it go off. I felt the burn of the bullet. Then my shoulder caught Sherry across her thighs. She went over on her back.

The gun flailed through the air as she tried to bring the barrel down on my head. I caught her wrist. She gave a convulsive heave that brought her body writhing wildly up against me. We rolled in a tangle of arms and legs. I kept my fingers clamped on her wrist, forcing the gun muzzle away from me.

She shouted, "All my life I've waited for this chance. You aren't going to take it away from me!"

I had a glimpse of Corliss and Culpepper and Pinter all trying to move in and do something. But we were twisting too fast for them.

I put more pressure on Sherry's wrist. She cried, "Damn you! Damn you, Zane!"

Her free hand got loose. Nails raked down my cheek, laying it open. I swung my head. She found room to work her knee around. She drove it toward my crotch. I pulled

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away instinctively—and lost my grip on her wrist. The gun swung toward me.

I got a grip again. I twisted just as she pulled the trigger. She didn't have time to scream. The gun was aimed for her mouth when it went off.

I rolled away and got to my feet. I walked to a dark corner of the boatshed and threw up.

XIX

LIEUTENANT STOLZ wanted to hold me for the sheer sadistic pleasure of giving me a bad time. But the only satisfaction he got was watching me wince when the police doctor dressed the bullet burn on my arm and the scratches on my cheek.

Corliss and Culpepper—and even Pinter in a reluctant sort of way—did a snow job on Stolz. He didn't have a chance to hang anything on me. He hated to turn me loose but he didn't have much choice after they got through giving evidence.

The four of us left police headquarters together. A cold, foggy November dawn was breaking. We stood on the sidewalk and looked hollow-eyed at one another.

Pinter cleared his throat. "For the record, Zane, we're going to get a loan to continue Culpepper's work. A banker friend of mine told me yesterday afternoon at the club."

I said, "That's great." I shifted my arm where the sling holding it cut into the flesh. "That's a real touch of irony," I added. "If Sherry had known the truth about the company's financial condition, she might not have gone to so much trouble to try to milk you. But she didn't know you were nearly bankrupt."

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Corliss said, "Let's not talk about her. Please."

I could think of a lot of things I didn't want to talk about. But some of them had to be said. I looked at Corliss. "All those things I said on the beach last night . . ."

She interrupted me with one of her best smiles. "Let's not talk about that either, Martin. We both said things we didn't mean."

What had she said she hadn't meant, I wondered. Then she moved alongside Pinter and slipped her arm through his.

"I promised Dorian earlier tonight I'd marry him," she said. "Ezekial's going to give me away."

Her elbow moved, digging Pinter's ribs. He cleared his throat and looked unhappy. "Ah, Zane, we were—ah, wondering if you—ah . . ."

I said, "If you're trying to ask me to be best man, no thanks. I won't be around. As soon as I let Ted Winters know he owes me one new station wagon, I'm off to Acapulco."

An early morning taxi cruised by. I flagged it. I said to Corliss and Culpepper, "And this time, I'm not coming home in the middle of my vacation."

I climbed into the taxi and pulled the door shut. I said, "Home first, *amigo*. Then you can take me to the airport."

I looked back once. The three of them were still standing on the sidewalk. Culpepper had his eyes fixed on the lightning sky, as if he was embarrassed to watch the way Corliss mooned up at Pinter.

I thought, Why shouldn't she marry him? He got her a bank loan, didn't he?

The taxi turned the corner and headed for Harbor Way.

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