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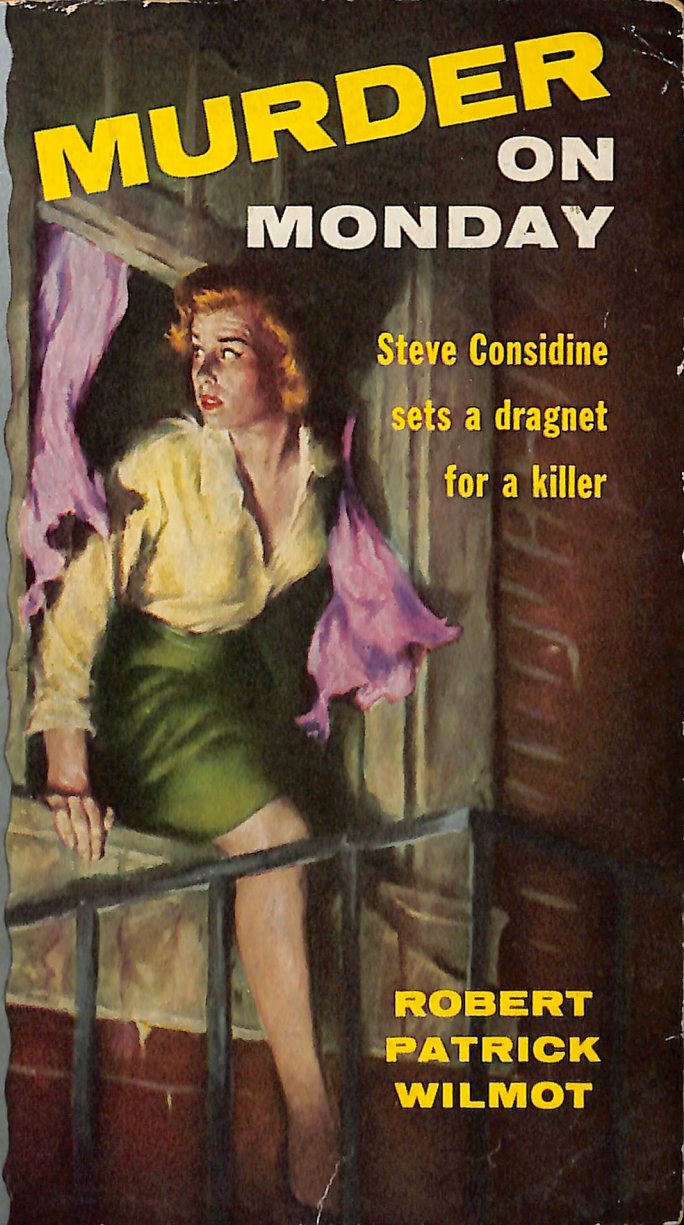
MURDER ON MONDAY

Steve Considine sets a dragnet for a killer



ROBERT PATRICK WILMOT

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"His hands were around my neck . . . crushing! I had to yell for help but the voice behind me snarled 'Try to holler and I'll break your skull.' Then I saw Deirdre come into the room. She was in her stocking feet, her dress off. Her breasts rose and fell with excitement. In her hand was a bronze statuette. She raised it and brought it down in a wide arc. The hands around my windpipe went suddenly limp. I tasted air. I was still alive!"

Private Eye Steve Considine and beautiful blonde Deirdre Wyatt get mixed up with blackmail, murder and each other in this rough-and-tumble mystery, originally published by J. B. Lippincott Company.

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Robert Patrick Wilmot

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*Published in a POCKET BOOK edition

MURDER ON MONDAY

Robert Patrick Wilmot

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MURDER ON MONDAY

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Steve Considine 1

He owned ten per cent of Confidential Investigations, and took ninety per cent of the risks.

Mike Zacharias 3

Boss of Confidential, with just enough surface polish to hide the tough guy underneath.

Bayard Justin Thorne 4

Senatorial aspirant, with a profile that would have looked good on an old Roman coin.

Carla Considine 5

She couldn't cook, but what man in his right mind would worry about that?

Deirdre Thorne Wyatt 9

She was too lovely to be married to a heel.

Murray Wyatt 10

Hoodlum turned gentleman, and understandably close-mouthed about his past.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Martin Bender 13
Twenty-odd years behind bars had given him lots of ideas.

Inspector Christopher Christie 31
Lumbering, grumbling head of Homicide, who was willing to co-operate with Confidential—up to a point.

Emma Gansil 33
The Thornes' gaunt housekeeper. She was unlovely and unloved, but she didn't deserve to die.

Max Ageld 42
Dapper graduate of the Chicago school of thugs and hoods.

Joe Carson 42
A mountain of pseudo-respectability, and an easy target for extortion.

Helen West 66
Deirdre's older sister. Not even brandy could drown her hatred.

Art Randall 127
Small-town big shot, who enjoyed being on the edge of danger.

Oscar Tollefson 137
A male nurse who carried a .32 calibre pistol instead of a thermometer.

MURDER ON MONDAY

→ 1 ←

MR. T. FARQUARSON Gibney got his girl friend's diamonds back at five o'clock that Monday afternoon. I handed them over in a rear booth in the bar of his Fifth Avenue hotel, and while T. Farquarson counted the pretties—a trifling ninety thousand dollars' worth of Tiffany ice—I drank a double bourbon, which T. Farquarson magnanimously charged to his bill. He was a long, lean drink of cyanide, with eyes like dum-dum bullets and a mouth that looked like a receptacle for used razor blades. A high-shot industrialist who did his work in Pittsburgh and his playing in Manhattan, T. Farquarson was a tough pickle, soaked in a brine of pure cynicism. But he was genuinely pleased and relieved at getting the diamonds back, and as grateful as a guy like him will ever be grateful for anything, until gratitude becomes a commodity that pays dividends to T. Farquarson Gibney.

"I think you've done a wonderful job, Mr. Considine," he said as I got up to leave. "And when I send your agency a check, I intend to include a nice bonus for you."

"That will be very kind of you, Mr. Gibney," I said politely. "Money is something we can always use at our house."

"I haven't any idea how you managed to recover the stuff so quickly after it was stolen," T. Farquarson said. "And I don't intend to ask any questions—it's quite enough for me that you got the diamonds back, without any publicity, and without the police being called in. But I am curious about one thing."

"About two things, you probably mean," I answered. "Two mink coats. Well, I'll stretch a point and tell you this much, Mr. Gibney. The guy who snatched the stuff—the burglar, if

we may call him that—had already disposed of the minks, by the time I caught up with him. It appears that he has other girl friends, besides yours."

Gibney's gray, angular face went white around the mouth. "Other girl friends?" he asked. "You mean to imply that it wasn't a real robbery—that it was one of these inside jobs?"

"And how, as the saying is," I answered. "And if I didn't dislike puns so much, I would make you a really lousy one." I pointed at the briefcase into which Gibney had stowed the loot. "I wouldn't give those rocks back to Miss Smith, if I were you. She might decide to be robbed again, if the right burglar came along."

I took a step out of the booth, buttoning my overcoat, and then I looked back at him, disliking him a lot, but almost pitying the guy, too. "Cheer up, Mr. Gibney," I said. "I'm sure if you really try, you can find another lady to hang those baubles on. Or, if you've lost your taste for that sort of fun and games, you can always hock the stuff. Any honest pawnbroker will give you more for them than most guys earn in a year."

I turned and walked out, without looking back, and as I went I told myself that I could kiss Mr. Gibney's bonus goodbye.

I didn't care much; I was too tired to care. I was tired because I'd spent most of the past eight hours in the company of Gibney's girl friend, a red-haired lovely named Eunice Smith. Eunice, who combined the appearance of a slightly over-blown angel with the moral attributes of an East Indian Thug and the rapacious instincts of a hungry barracuda, had handed Gibney's diamonds over to her current boy friend, a guy called Sweet Charley Palmer, and had sought to pass this gesture of affection off as a robbery by force and violence. It had taken me the better part of the day to convince her that I was unconvinced by her story of the "robbery," and to sell her the sordid idea that prison gaped for the exquisite Palmer, unless the loot was returned.

I'd got everything back, finally, except for the two mink coats that Sweet Charley had disposed of before I entered the scene. When the soiled affair was done with, and I'd left

Gibney with the jewels and the bad news about his girl friend, I felt older than the hills, and twice as dirty. A few hours spent in the company of people like Eunice and Sweet Charley and T. Farquarson always have that effect on me, and it takes a lot of fresh air to make me reconcile myself to the way I make my living.

I wanted to go home to my wife and have a hot bath and a drink and dinner and read a book that didn't have a thief or a chiseler or a babe-on-the-make in it, on any page; but I couldn't go straight home, because I had to go back to the office first.

I'm a private investigator associated with the Confidential Investigations Company, Limited, which I own ten percent of, thanks largely to the generosity of my boss and pal, Mike Zacharias. Mike owns the other ninety percent, and so he should; working almost single-handed, he built Confidential up from a small-time outfit into one of the largest and most successful private investigation agencies in the world. Mike numbers statesmen and high-shot industrialists and foreign potentates among his clientele, and most of his staff—even including myself—are college graduates. If you are a Maharajah, and you've lost your jewels or your favorite wife, Mike will find your valuables for you, with a minimum of embarrassment to everybody concerned—unless somebody tries to push Mike or his operatives around, or attempts to stop him or his boys from buttoning up a case. The years have put a considerable amount of polish on the Zacharias exterior and Dorothy Kilgallen once called him "the Chesterfield of Private Eyes," but with big Mike it's strictly the iron hand in the silken glove, and he isn't above slipping a pair of brass knucks on under the silk, whenever such ungentlemanly procedure seems necessary.

The light was on in Mike's office when I went into the outside waiting room, which is a very refined chamber indeed, elegant in a conservative manner, like the waiting room of a high-class bucket shop or a Park Avenue psychiatrist. Miss Spilsbury, the blond receptionist, was powdering her pretty nose when I came in; she had her hat and coat on, ready to

leave, and as I walked through the outer door, she jerked a thumb eloquently at the door of Mike's private office.

"He's waiting for you, Mr. Considine," she said. "Something rather important, I think, because he had me try to reach you at Mr. Gibney's hotel. I called three times."

"If you'd worked here long enough to know my disgusting habits," I told her, "you'd have had them page me in the hotel bar."

I walked past her and pushed open Mike's door and went into the office. He was sitting at his desk with his wrestler's shoulders hunched forward and his blue-black jaw propped on hairy fists that were as large as my face, a tough, neat, handsome guy of forty-five, and big enough to catch grizzly bears by hand. "Where in hell have you been?" he growled around a cigar that was filling the air with expensive smoke. "I had Spilsbury call that flea-bag of Gibney's, three times I had her call, and they said he was out, and—"

"And so he was," I interrupted. "T. Farquarson couldn't receive me in his hotel suite because Mrs. T. Farquarson blew in from Pittsburgh this afternoon, unexpectedly. So we met in the hotel bar."

"He get the stuff back?"

"Ninety thousands' worth," I said. "T. Farky hasn't anything to worry about, now—except, of course, the possibility that Miss Eunice Smith will blackmail the shirt off his back."

"As far as I'm concerned she can take the hide off the guy's back too," Mike said. "I'd tell you what I think about slobs like Gibney, if I didn't have something more important on my mind. You ever hear of Bayard Thorne?"

"I read the newspapers when I can't find any better way of depressing myself," I answered. "Certainly I've heard of Thorne. An old blue blood they're grooming to run for United States Senator. Bayard Justin Thorne. One editorial writer went so far as to call him 'the Chevalier without fear and without reproach.' After an earlier character named Bayard, a guy who wore a tin shirt and was very hot with a sword."

"This Bayard may be without reproach," Mike said, "but he isn't without fear. He called up about an hour ago and asked

me to come right down and see him. He said he was somewhat worried about what he called a difficult situation."

"With a man like Thorne, that could mean he was scared as hell," I said. "He's the type who would deal you euphemisms."

"I wouldn't know what euphemisms were if I found them in my shirt," Mike Zacharias said, "but judging from everything I've heard, this Thorne is a right guy. A great lawyer, and a great liberal. Mind you, I don't mean a screw-ball idealist, or a pinko, or a bleeding heart, I mean an American liberal in the finest sense of the word. A real fighting piece of goods, this Bayard Thorne."

"You're really long on him, aren't you?" I asked. "Well, coming from you, praise like that is beyond price. And almost beyond belief, too."

"It's just that I admire integrity," Mike said, grinning at me. "Maybe because I so seldom encounter it. Of course, if everybody was honest, you and I would probably wind up digging ditches, but I don't think we need to worry about that, not for a while. As long as things are like they are, it's safe for me to cheer a little for a guy like Thorne."

"I'll cheer a little, too," I said. "A little little."

"The trouble with you is you're just cynical." Mike switched off his desk lamp and heaved his bulk out of the chrome-and-leather chair. "Better call the missus and tell her you may be late for dinner. I want you with me when I talk to Thorne."

I telephoned Carla and told her, and she wasn't exactly pleased. We'd been married ten months to the day, and I knew that she'd planned something special for the evening, because we always pretended that we were celebrating a yearly anniversary when another month had passed. She said, no, of course she didn't mind me being late, but to please come home as soon as possible—as if I wouldn't—and my ear was filled with her sigh when I hung up.

"You've got one consolation, anyway," Mike said as I dropped the receiver back into its cradle. "If Thorne keeps us long, we'll get some chow in a restaurant. Luchow's maybe, because Thorne lives on Gramercy Park, and it isn't far. We

eat at Luchow's and you won't have to eat Carla's food, at least tonight. Don't ever say that Mike Zacharias doesn't give the hired hands a break, whenever possible."

The maid who answered the door was as straight as a ramrod, and almost as thin. Her dress and her face and her hair and her eyes were gray, and when she looked at us her pale lips were drawn into a tight, disapproving knot. Mike told her who we were, and said that Mr. Thorne was waiting for us, but I got the idea that she knew who we were, all right, and that she didn't like us any better on sight than she had in expectation.

The gaunt woman moved out of the doorway without speaking, and Mike and I walked into a long hall, a dark-paneled, heavily carpeted corridor, immensely silent and steeped in shadows into which dim overhead light seemed to fall with the heaviness of sound. There was an old-fashioned coat-rack against one wall, and the maid pointed a bony finger at it and made a rasping noise, deep in her skinny throat. "You can go right in," she said, as we got out of our coats. "It's the second door on the left." Her voice was a hoarse and unfriendly whisper; a clock, ticking somewhere in the shadows, seemed loud compared to the dry and resentful rustle of her voice.

I thanked her and she nodded briefly and moved soundlessly away. A steep and narrow staircase rose sharply from the hall and disappeared into absolute blackness above; the woman went up the stairs very fast and melted into the shadows, as though jerked aloft by invisible wires. "Boy, what a set-up!" Mike rumbled, standing beside me in the gloom. "A perfect spot to audition a show like *Arsenic and Old Lace*."

I hung my overcoat on a wooden hanger and tossed my hat onto the top of the rack. Across the hall, an oil portrait of a red-faced, choleric man glowered in the semi-darkness, staring at me with bilious eyes. I moved away, out of range of that baleful glance, and leaned against a wall, tugging at one of the rubbers that encased my feet. The wall seemed to give way behind me; I rolled around on one hip and fell, crashing, on my hands and knees, into a dark cavern that smelled of brass

polish and musty old carpeting and—curiously enough—of some heady perfume. Jolted, half-stunned by the fall, I rose to my knees and looked about me, and after a moment I realized that I had fallen through the open door of an unlighted self-service elevator. It was an ancient contrivance, without the solid front door such as most modern elevators are equipped with; a mobile cage of wrought-iron bars in a shaft that was sheathed in sheet-iron on three sides. The thing was probably safe enough, but so old that the first man who rode in it must have felt as adventuresome as Blériot or Orville Wright.

Mike's laugh started as a growl in his throat, and rose to a basso profundo roar. "Why, you fiddle-foot!" he rumbled, "you Keystoner."

The door at which Old Ramrod had pointed—the second door on the left—swung open, and a tall man stood framed in rosy light that spilled across the threshold. I got to my feet, cursing silently, and my elbow must have touched a starter button; the iron bars of the elevator door clanged shut, and with a convulsive jerk and a groan, the cage began to lift, climbing through darkness that grew more intense with every foot.

I shot a worried look downward as the elevator mounted slowly to the level of the tall man's head. I recognized Bayard J. Thorne from the newspaper photographs I'd seen of him, but none of the news pics had done him justice. The old boy's fine-boned, ruddy face was almost too handsome to be real. He had a cameo profile, a fighter's jaw, level black brows and fine dark eyes, and above his domed forehead a mane of thick hair gleamed in the lamplight like polished silver. Here was an Old Roman, I thought, the kind of guy whose features once would have been stamped on coins; and the coins would have been good, too. Lines of worry and weariness were crimped into the firm flesh around his eyes and mouth, but there was no trace of weakness in Bayard Thorne's face. He wore a rumpled tweed suit and a bow tie and he appeared to be about sixty years old.

"Don't tell me that damned light has gone out again!" he exclaimed in a deep and pleasant voice. "Well, sir, if you'll

light a match, you can see the stop button, and the return button for this floor, and—" his voice trailed off as the cage lifted me out of sight, and Mike Zacharias' rude laughter echoed in the silent hall.

I fumbled in my pockets for matches as the elevator creaked upward. It was as dark as a Commissar's mind, once we were above the hall; the elevator climbed through utter blackness. I found a packet of matches, finally, and made myself a light just as the cage jolted to a stop on what I judged was the fourth floor of the old house. My finger was on the first-floor button when I heard the click of an electric light switch, and I stood blinded by the glare of hard white light that poured from lamps set in the walls and ceiling of a small hallway.

Three yards away from me a big, repulsive-looking ape crouched in an iron cage similar to the one I occupied, with a match burning in his right hand. Then my own match laid a flaming tongue on my fingers, and I yelped and bumped my head on the iron grillework of the elevator door, and realized that the big guy I saw was my own reflection, caught in one of the mirrors that gleamed on all four walls of the hall. The mirrors were peach-colored—I repeat peach-colored—and they didn't do much for a person like me. I was staring stupidly at my reflection when a door opened between two of the mirrors, and a girl came through the door and stood looking at me with a faint, inquiring smile.

She was a small girl, but as Mike Zacharias might have said, she was a lot of girl too. I don't believe any sculptor ever carved a figure as good as hers, because she had the kind of figure that would have kept any sculptor's mind off his work. She was wearing a simple dinner dress of some clinging green stuff that displayed all of her rounded surfaces to distinct advantage, and didn't do badly by the semi-rounded surfaces either. Her hair was a warm honey-gold color and her mouth was full and red and her eyes were dark and long-lashed and enormous in a heart-shaped face. She was like a half dozen stage and screen lovelies rolled into one—and how beautifully rolled—and I stood gaping in astonishment and appreciation until she herself broke the conversational ice.

"Good evening," she said. Her voice was low-pitched and musical and as impersonally personal as a letter from the Draft Board. The tone of her voice was one she might have used in addressing a slightly backward child or a guy who had come to repair the plumbing.

"I—uh—came up accidentally," I said, finally. "That is, I came with Mr. Zacharias, to see Mr. Thorne."

"Oh, you're one of Daddy's detectives?" She made it a declaration, as well as a question.

"I got caught in the elevator," I said. I didn't seem to be able to think of anything better to say, at the moment.

"It's a brute," the girl said. "But I know that my father intends to bring you up here, anyway, so if you'll unload, I'll send the elevator down for him, and you won't have to risk your life again."

I clawed my way out of the cage. The perfume she wore was the same heady stuff that permeated the elevator. I stood beside her, inhaling; she thrust a rounded arm into the dark interior of the cage and pushed a button and yanked her arm out quickly as the door slid shut. "That thing has killed more men than whisky," she said as the elevator began to descend.

"I'm Steve Considine," I told her. "My boss, Mr. Zacharias, is downstairs with your father."

"They'll be right up, I'm sure," the girl answered. "I'm Deirdre Thorne Wyatt, and it's about my husband that Daddy wanted to talk. We'll wait inside, if you don't mind."

I hadn't seen any of the house downstairs, except the gloomy front hall, but I'd have made book that the rest of the house was as unlike Deirdre Wyatt's living room as pigs' knuckles are unlike French ice cream. The room into which I walked was enormous, running half the width and depth of the house. Three of its walls were painted a crackling bone-white, the fourth was the color of lumpy chocolate. There was a modern fireplace, ornamented with painted sea-shells, a lot of Charles Eames furniture balanced precariously on cocoa-colored rugs, and in the north side of the room, overlooking Gramercy Park, there was one of the largest windows that I had ever seen.

A medium-sized guy in an expensive gray suit sprawled in an armchair in front of the window, beside a coffee-table on which there were glasses and bottles and an ash-tray overflowing with half-smoked cigarettes.

"My husband, Murray Wyatt," the girl said. "Murray, darling, this is Mr. Considine, one of the detectives."

The man sat up and blinked at me, and I thought I saw resentment in his pale blue eyes. He had a raddled, good-looking, sullen face, the face of a man who might have been thirty-five, or forty, or even older; it was the sort of face that didn't tell you a lot of things, including its owner's age. He stared at me for a moment, then looked away, reaching down for a glass that stood on the floor beside his chair. Lamplight shone on his head, and I saw a considerable expanse of bare skull, gleaming through his slicked-down dark hair.

Wyatt lifted his glass and drank, then pulled a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped his lips. "I didn't ask for detectives," he said deliberately, "I didn't want any detectives at all."

"The State of Georgia didn't ask for General Sherman, either," Deirdre said, laughing, "but he got there just the same." She turned to me, pivoting beautifully on her flawless legs, and the red lips smiled. "Do sit down, Mr. Considine. And let me give you a drink."

I sat down on a frail chair and politely declined the drink. "But in the movies," the girl said, "private detectives always drink. What are you trying to do, Mr. Considine, make a bum out of Hollywood?"

She giggled—and it was one of the few musical giggles I'd ever heard—and then Murray Wyatt's voice, loud and harsh, flattened the echoes of her laughter. "For God's sake, Deirdre!" he shouted, "be serious!" His washed-out eyes brooded on her for a moment, then moved to meet mine. "I'm sorry," he said. "Did my wife's father tell you about the mess I'm in?"

"He didn't," I said. "I haven't met him yet. I didn't have time."

"Mr. Considine was having an affair with an elevator," Deirdre Wyatt said.

I leaned back, fumbling for a cigarette, and thinking about the elevator, and after a moment I heard the monster, creaking and groaning, beyond the door into the hall. A few seconds later, Mike and Bayard Thorne walked into the room. Thorne graciously introduced Mike to his daughter and son-in-law, and Mike graciously introduced me to Thorne. I got up and shook hands with him, and with the amenities concluded, I sat down again. The tall man leaned against the narrow mantel of the fireplace, looking tired and uncertain—a man either deeply worried or a man giving one of the best imitations of deep worry that I had ever seen. He looked like a very handsome elder male version of Deirdre, I thought—from the neck up.

There was a long moment of silence before Thorne spoke, and when he did the deep voice sounded hesitant, almost shy. "I don't know exactly how to begin," he said finally, "but I want you gentlemen to know that I wouldn't have asked you to come here if the matter hadn't been urgent."

Mike nodded, his cigar dead in a corner of his mouth. Bayard Thorne cleared his throat and looked at Murray Wyatt, who was pouring himself another drink from one of the bottles on the coffee-table. "Perhaps," Thorne said, "it would be better if my son-in-law told you the story himself."

"Nonsense!" Deirdre Wyatt said in a bright voice. "Murray's a little tight, and he's resentful about Mr. Considine and Mr. Zacharias. I'll tell you myself, just as soon as I've fixed a drink." She flashed a provocative smile at Mike. "Mr. Considine said he didn't want anything, Mr. Zacharias, but perhaps you'll strike a blow for Liberty?"

Mike grinned at her. "I never said no in my life," he said, the big louse.

"Scotch, bourbon or rye?"

"A little scotch, if you please," Mike said, "and a little soda. And no ice."

The girl walked towards the coffee-table, moving with the prowling grace of an animal, and Mike's bull-brindle eyes dis-

robed her as she walked. Mike is a happily married guy, and a reasonably faithful husband, but he's human, too. . . . Murray Wyatt's sprawling legs blocked the approach to the coffee-table, and Deirdre kicked him gently on one ankle. Her husband drew up his knees, and Deirdre mixed two scotch-and-sodas and came back and gave Mike one, and then seated herself in a chair by my side.

"Murray's in a frightful mess," the girl said, in the tone of a person determined to be cheerful. "A hell of a mess, and I'll get to the heart of it, as soon as possible." She looked at Wyatt for a moment, the long lashes veiling her dark eyes, then turned to Mike. "For your information, Mr. Zacharias, my husband wasn't always the semi-respectable character he seems to be now. Years ago, when Murray was a kid, he was very naughty. Very naughty indeed."

Mike smiled at her around his cigar. "Most kids are naughty," he answered in his most amiable growl.

"Well, Murray was a bit on the crooked side, too," Deirdre said. "Inconceivable though it may seem to my father, everybody isn't born with the advantages, financial and otherwise, that we Thornes are blessed with. And poor Murray seems to have been born in Roughtown, in the last house on the last street."

Mike looked at her in a positively benevolent manner. "And just where is Roughtown?" he asked. "Geography was a subject I never made much headway in."

"Chicago," Deirdre answered, "good old Chi. And my husband was, believe it or not, a very tough Chicago boy, in the nineteen twenties. An out-and-out hoodlum, as a matter of fact. A bootlegger, among other things."

Mike hunched his shoulders in a deprecatory shrug. "When you speak about bootlegging in the twenties, you are speaking about America's largest industry."

"But Murray didn't stop at bootlegging," Deirdre said. "He appears to have gone in for other sports, including armed robbery." Bayard Thorne sighed heavily, standing by the fireplace. Wyatt sat very still, staring into his glass, his eyes almost hidden under puffy lids.

Mike's grin remained on his face, but it was a wary grin now. "So," he asked softly, "so?"

"So Murray drove a car that was used in a bank hold-up in a midwestern state," Deirdre answered. "In 1929. Two policemen and one of the hold-up men were killed, and another of the robbers was sentenced to life in the Minnewaska State Penitentiary. But Murray got away."

Wyatt set his glass carefully down upon the floor and looked at everyone and at no one, his eyes staring into space. "You've all got to understand," he said, with a desperate urgency in his voice. "I was a wild, crazy kid. But that deal scared me so badly that I—well, I've gone straight ever since. You've got to believe me, because it's true, so help me God."

Mike looked at him with expressionless eyes and relit his cigar. "About the guy who drew the life sentence in Minnewaska," he purred. "It could be, I suppose, that he's out?"

Wyatt's faded eyes widened and bulged; he stared at Mike for a moment, open-mouthed with astonishment, and then smiled a bitter smile. "You're a pretty shrewd article, Zacharias," he said. "You don't miss many tricks, do you?"

"What's the guy's name?" Mike asked imperturbably.

"Martin Bender," Murray Wyatt said. "One of the real old-time mobsters. He wasn't over twenty-six or seven when they got him, but he was already a veteran criminal. I was only eighteen years old, myself."

"And how much does he want?" Mike asked. "How much is he trying to shake you down for?"

"Just fifty thousand dollars," Deirdre said bitterly. "Just a mere fifty thousand, the blackmailing swine."

Wyatt picked up his glass again, and I saw that his hand was shaking. "Blackmail in a sense, I suppose," he said, avoiding his wife's eyes, "but in a way, Bender's only asking for what's due him. Because you see I got away with all the money from that bank—nearly one hundred and ten thousand dollars."

Mike blew a thoughtful puff of cigar smoke and frowned at the floor. "There's no statute of limitations on murder in that state," he said. "But even if the authorities decided not

to prosecute at this late date, Bender could expose you as a one-time criminal. You couldn't take that, hunh?"

"Of course he couldn't take it," Deirdre Wyatt snapped, her voice deadly serious now. "Murray's a member of one of the most respectable exporting firms in New York. If the senior members found out that Murray had been a crook, they'd go off their rockers. Not to mention what it would do to Daddy."

Bayard Thorne's rich voice cut across the silence that followed her remarks. "I am not asking for any consideration," he said clearly and sharply. "I want that distinctly understood. If Murray is exposed, and I suffer from the adverse publicity that accompanies such an exposure, so be it. I won't deal with blackmailers in order to save my own face.

"I'd hate to see Murray go to prison for a crime that was committed when he was little more than a child," Thorne continued, "and he has given me his word that he himself was not even armed at the time of the robbery. But he took the money! He *did* take the money!" A look of terrible revulsion crossed Thorne's face as he spoke the last words.

Deirdre smiled tenderly at her father, and then turned the full candle-power of her gaze on Mike. "Always the noble, Dad," she said. "Actually, truthfully, if he doesn't get the nomination for United States Senator it will break his heart. But what he's worried about most is me—about the effect it will have on me if my husband is exposed as a former crook."

Mike, the slobbo, bowed with ponderous gallantry. "If I were your father I'd worry about you, too," he said. "Matter of fact, I'm worried, as only just an investigator, or shall we say advisor in this instance?" He gave me a look from under his black brows. "What you think, Steve-o? Care to call a shot or two, at this point?"

I took my eyes off the bottle of Haig and Haig on the coffee-table, and pretended to be deep in thought. When I answered, I spoke in what I hoped sounded like an oracular tone. "This Bender will be out of Minnewaska on parole, I presume. By attempting to extort money from someone, he's violating the terms of his parole. So, we send him back to Minnewaska."

"And no more job for Murray," the girl said, "and no senatorial nomination for Daddy. Because even if Bender goes back to prison, he'll talk first." There was a note of scorn, pure and unadulterated, in her voice. "Maybe you're still lost in our elevator, Mr. Considine."

"Maybe," I answered, "but your only alternative is to pay him fifty thousand dollars. The first fifty, that is. Because a bird like Bender won't stop with one painless extraction. He'll go on bleeding you forever."

"I think you're wrong about that," Murray Wyatt said, somewhat to my surprise. "Bender's a hood, but he always had the reputation of being a square crook, a guy who would keep his word. He told me he wanted fifty thousand because he figured that was his share of the loot from the bank. He said he didn't want any more or less—just the fifty grand that was coming to him. And he said that if he got it, he'd never bother me again."

"When did you have your last personal contact with Bender?" Mike asked.

"I've had no personal contact," Wyatt said. "I've only talked to him on the phone. But a personal contact has been arranged."

"Arranged for when?" Mike asked quickly, his eyes sharp on Wyatt's face.

"For tonight," Deirdre's husband said, raising his glass again. "Martin Bender's coming here at eight o'clock tonight."

→ 2 ←

MIKE ZACHARIAS stood with his thick legs wide-spraddled on a cocoa-colored rug, a sandwich in one hand, a tall glass of scotch-and-soda in the other. At a quarter of seven, Deirdre Wyatt had rung for the gaunt maid, and a half hour later Old Ramrod had brought in a tray of sandwiches. It was now ten minutes after eight, and Martin Bender had not appeared.

Sitting there in the vast, chi-chi room, in mounting tension so thick you could have sliced it with a dull knife, I decided that the old-time hoodlum wasn't going to appear. At least not that night, I told myself; not with Deirdre's living room all cluttered up with insensitive meatballs such as Mike and myself.

"I don't think our friend is going to show," Mike was saying, as though reading my thoughts. "He was probably staked out down on the street below, and when he saw us, he probably decided to cancel his personal appearance, at least for the time being."

Murray Wyatt shrugged wearily. "He said he'd come. But he warned me not to call in any cops. He said if the cops were informed, I'd really regret it."

Mike bit a chunk out of his sandwich, washed it down with whisky, and regarded Wyatt with a saturnine leer. "If I didn't know that you were overwrought, Mr. Wyatt," he said, "I might be offended at you calling us cops. A couple of high-class security agents such as we are." He turned towards Bayard Thorne, the levity gone from his voice, and spoke quietly. "Tell me, please, Mr. Thorne, why did you call my agency in on this thing?"

Thorne was seated on a sofa beside his daughter; he looked dead tired, drained of vitality, and his strong jaw hung slack beneath an irresolute mouth. "I don't know, exactly," he said finally, with a gesture of utter weariness. "I suppose I should have called upon the regular police. But I thought perhaps you could suggest something—anything—that would help us."

Mike's look of sympathy was genuine, I thought; he admired Thorne, and he wanted to help him, if it were possible to do so. "As matters stand, Mr. Thorne," he said, "you can do either one of two things. You can buy this character Bender off, or you can have him slung into jail. That's about all the choice you have, isn't it?"

Thorne nodded his silver head, staring miserably at the floor. Mike took another belt at his whisky glass, cleared his throat and spoke almost diffidently. "Of course," he said, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully, "there are certain procedures

that do occur to me. But they're all somewhat less than legal, or orthodox, and—"

He trailed off, frowning at the floor, his eyes avoiding Thorne's tired but hopeful stare. I squashed out a cigarette in an ash-tray on the arm of my chair, and spoke gently to Deirdre's father. "Mike's trying to tell you that he doesn't want the case, Mr. Thorne. Because there isn't any case—for us. This is for the police. If you're as wise as I think you are, you'll take your son-in-law and go over to the nearest precinct house, and tell them everything."

"And let my husband go to prison, or be disgraced?" the girl asked bitterly. "There must be some other way out, some better way than that."

"I'll tell you something," Mike said, "even if what I tell you isn't exactly ethical either. Nobody's going to believe Bender, nobody's going to take the word of an old con, not against the word of a respectable businessman. Mr. Wyatt can just hang tough and swear that he never knew anybody who even looked like Bender, and everybody'll think that Bender is crazy, just a guy who went simple from too many years in the pen. Unless—"

Mike paused, his brows pulled together in a frown. "Unless what?" Murray Wyatt demanded.

"Why, unless you got a criminal record yourself," Mike replied. "A known criminal record. By any chance, did you ever do time?"

"Never," Wyatt said positively.

"Arrested a few times, though, maybe? Fingerprinted?"

"I was only arrested once in my life," Murray Wyatt said. "A kid deal—just a prank. They didn't even take my fingerprints."

"Okay," Mike said. "So then who's going to believe a stir-happy ex-con like Bender? Just lie artistically, and you'll wind up in the clear."

Thorne stood up, his jaw set. "I'll abet no perjury on the part of my son-in-law," he said.

"Look, Mr. Thorne," Mike said soothingly. "I've always admired you a lot, and admiration for other people is something

I'm mostly fresh out of. But I think there's such a thing as being too strait-laced, if you don't mind my saying so. Why don't you just let your son-in-law tell his own story to the police?"

"Yeah," I put in, "why not let him do his own talking? If he chooses to give the impression that Bender is crazy, and that he never even knew him, what does it matter to you? You've got your daughter's happiness to consider."

"Right," Mike said, "and just in case you think Steve and I are going to remember anything about this, you can put your mind at rest. We've forgotten it already." He swallowed the remainder of his sandwich, licked butter delicately from a big thumb, and turned to me. "All right, Steve, let's go. I'd kind of like to take a gander at this Bender number, but obviously the guy isn't coming. He isn't that crazy."

At that very moment a bell chimed softly beyond the living-room door.

Deirdre Wyatt had been sitting quietly on the sofa, her lovely legs crossed, her hands folded in her lap. The sound of the bell brought her to her feet in one lithe, incredibly swift gesture, but as she lunged towards the door, Murray Wyatt moved too. He moved very fast for a guy who was more than a little tight. His glass shattered against a wall, kicked there by one of his flying feet, and he caught Deirdre by an arm just as she put her hand on the knob of the door.

"For God's sake, honey," he gasped, "what do you think you're going to do?"

"Go down and bring up Bender," she said calmly. "Bring him up here and have it out with him."

"Don't bother," Mike Zacharias said, and the big ape sounded amused. "Steve-o will go down and get him. Steve has a special technique for handling things like this."

I cursed Mike silently, heading for the door. The big guy would remain there in the bright room, with the whisky and the beautiful girl, and I would climb into a mobile Iron Maiden and sink down through pitch darkness to welcome a prohibition era gunman who might have killed two men, and, possibly, even more. It was a nice deal, I thought resentfully,

a swell deal; I owned ten percent of the business, and in this instance I was taking ninety percent of the risk.

Deirdre Wyatt had left the light on in the hall of mirrors, and I got the elevator started without any difficulty. The lower floors seemed even darker than they had when I'd come up, and I felt that I was descending a great deal faster than I'd risen, possibly because I had so little enthusiasm for the flight downward. The cage settled itself into place on the first floor with a grinding thump, and I heard Old Ramrod's hoarse voice as I stepped out into the dimly lit hall.

The maid was talking into a telephone. It was evidently a house telephone connected with the upstairs apartment, and Old Ramrod was speaking words into the instrument that sounded somewhat cryptic, to say the least.

"Mr. Bender," she said, "by appointment, he says. . . . Mr. Wyatt, he says. . . . Oh, he's not in? He's *not*? . . . Oh, he is? But, I don't think. . . . Very well, Miss Deirdre, if you insist. Yes, I'll tell Mr. Considine to bring him up."

She hung up, replaced the telephone on a teakwood stand and turned to face me as I came out of the elevator. Her harsh, angular face was bone-white, and drops of sweat glistened on her narrow forehead. "Miss Deirdre says you should bring the gentleman up, please," she said to me, "at once, please, if you don't mind." Her voice cracked nervously on the last word, and she made a vague motion with one of her skinny hands.

I looked over her bony shoulder and saw the guy standing in a deep pool of shadow, just beyond the rack on which Mike and I had hung our coats. His face was a pale and shapeless blob of flesh, half lost in the dim light, and it seemed to hang in space because the man's dark clothes blended with the gloom of the hall.

"Mr. Bender?" I asked, in a tone that aimed at heartiness and missed by a county mile. "Mr. Wyatt is expecting you. Will you please come this way?"

The man's eyes came at me first—or so it seemed. The illusion that his eyes preceded the rest of him was probably due to the fact that his eyes were large and slightly protuberant,

the most distinctive feature of his pale, thin, handsome face. The illusion was given added substance by another circumstance that gave me little pleasure: Mr. Bender, if the guy was indeed Bender, was quite obviously junked up to the eyes, as high as a man can get and still stay out of the stratosphere.

I am no expert on such matters, but on the basis of past experience, I judged that Bender was packing a load of heroin, the stuff that can make a guy named Milquetoast imagine that he's Hercules, and frequently behave like the mythological muscle-boy, too. Bender's eyes had that out-of-this-world look, half zombie, half genius, that a man's eyes take on when he's loaded with heroic dust; he was definitely feeling no pain, and he was absolutely feeling no fear.

Subtracted from the heroin, he was just a shabby, medium-sized, underweight guy, whose eyes made him a little too good-looking to be real. Staring at Bender, I remembered a Doré drawing of the fallen angel, Lucifer, in an old book the family had owned when I was a kid; Bender had just such a face of evil beauty as the one depicted in the book. He was as pale as a peeled picnic egg, and he had a light, quick, graceful walk, like the rhythmic strut of a ballet dancer or a pug.

Old Ramrod came close to me as Bender moved down the hall, and I felt her gaunt fingers digging into the flesh of my arm. "Be careful, for God's sake!" she said, and her voice was an almost unintelligible whisper, a rustle of sheer terror. "See that Miss Deirdre isn't—see that he doesn't—see that he doesn't hurt *her*."

"What are you telling him, old girl?" the man asked, coming down the hall. He had a heavy voice, deep and resonant, out of place in that slight body. He pushed his way rudely between Old Ramrod and myself and stood staring up at me, his eyes barely level with my chin. "Oh, a copper, huh?" he asked, in a voice more disdainful than angry. "I suppose I might have known."

"You're mistaken, Mr. Bender," I said politely. "I'm a

member of the family, sort of. I'm Mr. Thorne's second-cousin. Second-cousin Gilbert."

"Sure you are," Bender answered, with the grandfather of all the sneers that were ever sneered. "You're Gilbert Filbert, from Pecan Falls. Or you're Lester De Pester, or Gismo Pete." He stood for a moment looking up at me, a smile carved on his white face. I have seen more mirth in the muzzles of shotguns than there was in that smile. "Now let's cut out the crap," he said, the smile fading. "Where's Murray Wyatt?"

"Upstairs," I said, and waved a hand at the elevator.

"You think I'm afraid to go up, don't you?" Bender asked. "You think I'm afraid of a bunch of cops?" He spat contemptuously. "Well, I ain't—I ain't afraid of all the stinking cops in the world. Because I'll tell you why, mac. Because I ain't got anything to lose, see. So now let's go see my old pal, Murray. Why not, huh?"

"Why not indeed," I said, and pointed again towards the elevator. Bender swaggered into the cage, and I turned to Old Ramrod. "You wouldn't have a flashlight, I suppose, would you?" I asked. "It's pretty dark in that cage, sweetheart."

"I'll get a light," the maid said. She took a half-dozen long, quick paces, and flitted out of sight through the door beneath the stairs. Bender, just barely visible with his back against the rear of the elevator, snorted derisively. "What's the matter with you, flatfoot? Don't tell me a big man like you is a-scared of poor little me."

I stepped into the elevator, pretended to slip, and drove my elbow into his Adam's apple—hard. Bender made a strangling sound, and I jerked my knee up into his middle, not very hard. I caught his thin wrists in my hands, and spun him around, and jammed his face into the rear of the elevator. "I'm sorry," I said in what I hoped was a polite tone, "but I find this a necessary precaution. If you move, I'll kick you clear through this cage. Even as skinny as you are, you won't go through without losing a little skin."

"I'll kill you for this, loogan," the little man gasped.

"I'll bet you will, at that," I said, "but later, Bender, not now. Now you're just going to stand still, like a good boy."

I let go of his wrists and ran my hands over his thin body. I felt of his armpits and patted his breast and hips and thighs without affection. I slapped the pockets of his coat and trousers and ran my hands over his arms and legs, feeling for a gun or knife that might have been strapped to his limbs. I didn't find any gun or knife. . . . Old Ramrod came back into the hall, carrying a big nickel-plated flashlight, and thrust it fearfully into my hand. I played the beam of light on the back of Bender's neck as I started the elevator.

"I'd cut you to pieces," Bender rasped as we rose into the darkness. "I'd make you look like hamburger went through a small grinder, if I had my knife."

"*If* you had your knife," I answered. "You must feel practically naked without it, hey, kid?"

"Go on and laugh," Bender said. "I'll check it to you, later. Right now I got something better to do. Right now I got to collect fifty grand."

"That's at least a reasonable attitude," I said. "Please try and remember your manners when we get upstairs. You and I can settle up later, as you say, but Wyatt's living room is no place for violence. You'll understand, when you see it."

Bender had recovered his hopped-up composure by the time we reached the top floor. I kept a firm grip on the flashlight, resolved to feed it to him if he tried anything un-funny, but he didn't try anything. The cage thumped to a stop, and I waved the man out of it with the flashlight. The preposterous character stripped his lips back, smiling that mirthless smile again, and strutted—positively strutted—across the hall, and into the room beyond.

Wyatt, sitting on the edge of a chair, stared tensely at Bender, his blue eyes wide. Mike, standing by the big window, watched impassively; Bender might have been a bellhop or a room-service waiter, for all my boss seemed to be concerned. Thorne, in the center of the room, stood very still, a look of shocked revulsion on his handsome face. Deirdre leaned against the sofa, very pale, with a hand raised to her mouth. Looking at her fleetingly, out of the corner of an eye, I saw that she had put on a long, full-skirted housecoat while

I'd been gone. It wasn't very warm in the big room, but I thought that the temperature wasn't the reason for the housecoat; the girl was trembling from head to foot with fear and excitement.

Bender ignored everyone in the room—except Murray Wyatt. He stood for a moment just inside the door, smiling his terrible smile, and then he swaggered straight to Murray, his heels clicking on the floor between the brown rugs. He came to a halt a scant two feet from the blue-eyed man, and his deep voice came out of him in an explosive growl. "Well, scum! Well, rat! So you went and hollered copper even after what I told you."

Wyatt lifted his hands in a helpless gesture. "My father-in-law called them in," he said, pointing to Thorne. "I—I had to tell him about you, Martin. I didn't have the fifty grand, myself."

Bender flicked Bayard Thorne with a lightning glance, then looked back at Wyatt. "Okay, you had to tell him. So now where's the cabbage? I get it, don't I?"

"Maybe you get it, Marty," Mike Zacharias said, quietly and conversationally, as though he had known the junky all of his life.

Bender didn't even glance in Mike's direction. "I'm not talking to any coppers," he said. "I'm talking to you, Murray." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at me. "I got worked over in the elevator by this big goon. I got pawed by an ape like that. I call that one hell of a reception for you to cook up for an old pal."

"I tell you I couldn't help it," Murray said wildly, his hands shaking about another whisky glass. "I didn't have anything to do with it, Marty, I give you my word."

"All right," the man said, "you didn't have nothing to do with it. So then just slip me the moola, sweetheart, and I'll be on my way."

"Please," Deirdre Wyatt said quietly, "please!" I turned to look at her as Bender gave her a quick glance; she was still trembling, but her face was calm and there was no fear in her

eyes. "Will you listen for just one moment while I say something, Mr. Bender?" she asked. "Will you please listen?"

Bender's fixed grin widened as he leered at her appreciatively. "Well, why not, since you put it so nice and polite? I don't know who you are, lady, but when they put you together, they didn't leave nothing out."

"I'm Deirdre Wyatt," she said, graciously, like a woman speaking to a social equal instead of to a junked-up killer. "Now will you please sit down, while we talk this over? Sit down, and let me give you a drink."

"I never touch hard liquor," Bender said, "but you can gimme a glass of ginger ale, if you got one. And I'll take a sitdown, too."

He walked to a chair near the door, moving with a matchless swagger, and sat down. He took off his battered dark hat, and I saw that his hair was almost entirely white. He laid the hat in his lap, and stripped the cheap glove off his right hand, and put his index finger into the crown of the hat and moved the hat about in slow circles. Deirdre went to the coffee-table and filled a tall glass with ginger ale, and tonged an ice cube from a silver bowl on the table.

"No ice, honey," Bender said, in the voice of a man who was immensely enjoying himself. "I haven't even got a lousy overcoat, as you can see, and I got a hell of a chill, coming here."

Deirdre carried the glass across the room and handed it to him politely, like a woman performing a service for an honored guest. As she bent over him, Bender took the glass in his gloved left hand, removed his right hand from the hat and smacked the girl soundly on the bottom. I heard Deirdre suck in her breath in a sound of outrage, and then Bayard Thorne's voice roared in the stillness of the room.

"That's enough of this farce! I'm calling the police, now!"

Bender looked at him, imperturbable as a figure of stone, the grin still fixed on his pale face. "So suppose the cops take me," he sneered tranquilly. "I go back to Minnewaska, if the worst comes to the worst. I can live with that pen. I must be able, because I done it, since 1929." He chuckled, toying with

the hat again. "On the other hand, Mr. Thorne, think what happens to you if you turn me in."

"I don't give a damn what happens to me," Bayard Thorne said harshly.

"Your daughter, then," Bender said in a tone of exaggerated patience. "Don't tell me you're not gonna think about her, Thorne. She winds up without her pappy going to the U.S. Senate, and without a nice husband like my old pal, Murray, too. Because if you rap me, Murray goes to Minnewaska himself. I never sung on nobody before in my life, but now I will. I'll tell everything. Like I'll tell them that it was Murray who knocked off one of them cops in that bank job. Murray, and not me nor Dots Kiley, our pal who got killed."

"No!" Deirdre Wyatt exclaimed in a voice that rose and shrilled, "no, you can't do that!"

"Why can't I?" Bender asked, "what I got to lose? I can't get a decent job on the outside, and I ain't well enough to hold one even if I got it. I'm sleeping in flophouses, eating in hash joints, mooching for dimes. All I got is plenty of nothing, the way it is."

"I'll tell you one thing you've got," Mike growled amiably. "You've got an expensive habit, at least. How long you been out of Minnewaska?"

"Ten days, Shamus. Ten days, if it's any of your damn business."

"Ten days," Mike said. "Ten days you've been out, and you show up here junked to the eyes. You got your old habit back fast, didn't you, Marty?"

"I never lost it," Bender said equably. "You can always get a fix in a joint like Minnewaska, if you know your way around."

The man took a swig of ginger ale and fixed his eyes on Deirdre's face. "You tell me no," he said, "you tell me no when I'm asking for dough that's due me—dough that Murray owes me, my rightful split on that bank heist. He helps me tap a jug and goes free, and I pull a half a lifetime of time. You call that fair, sister? You call that right?"

"Maybe not," the girl answered, "maybe it's all wrong, and

we'll make it right—someway. But we—Murray and I—we haven't got fifty thousand dollars. We haven't anything like that amount."

"I feel so sorry for you," Martin Bender sneered, "so sorry, when everybody knows your old man is worth millions." He turned and cast a malevolent look at Thorne. "Now I'll tell you something, pop."

"You will tell me nothing," Bayard Thorne said.

"I think I will, at that," Bender answered. "I'll tell you what I got planned. The minute I get pinched—*if* I get pinched—a friend of mine delivers the whole story to all the newspapers, including the ones that don't think you'd make a good U.S. Senator. We don't leave out a single detail, either."

Thorne sighed, a long sigh of anger and disgust, and turned to Mike. "Will you take charge of him, Mr. Zacharias, or should I telephone the police?"

"We'll drop him at the nearest station-house," Mike said. "You and Mr. Wyatt had better come along, to prefer charges." He took a step towards Martin Bender and spoke in an entirely impersonal voice. "Okay, Marty, let's go."

Bender set his empty glass down carefully on the rug beside his chair, and his grin turned into a snarl. "You kidding, peeper?" he asked. "Go where?"

"Why, back to Minnewaska, eventually," Mike said, "but to the police station first. Come on, boy, on your feet."

Bender gave him a long glance of pure hatred. "I said I *could* live in Minnewaska," he said in an insolent drawl, "but the more I think of it, the less I like it." His bare hand was beneath the shabby black hat, inside the crown; his gloved hand moved, almost languidly, and lifted the hat away from the bare hand. The bare hand held a pistol, a black .32 calibre automatic that gleamed in the light, and there was nothing languid about the gesture with which he whipped the weapon up and leveled it at Mike's head.

"Okay, Gilhooley," Bender said in a brisk and professional voice, "get over against the wall. And put your hands up—way up." I moved slightly, balancing myself upon my toes, and Bender made a gesture with the gun, and I stood still. "You

too, ape," he said. "Over against the wall, with your little pal."

I walked towards the chocolate-colored wall, and so did Mike. As I went, I saw Martin Bender rise swiftly to his feet, coming up as though there were springs in the chair on which he sat. Ten feet away from him, Deirdre stood as though frozen, and Thorne was a tall statue, his face as white as Bender's hair. Murray Wyatt sat rigidly on the edge of his chair, the whisky glass gripped in his hand.

"I told you I wanted the money tonight," Bender said softly to Wyatt as Mike and I lined up against the wall. "The money tonight, and no cops. You know any reason why I shouldn't blast you, you double-crossing rat?"

"Marty, for God's sake!" Wyatt whimpered, "listen to me a minute, Marty! I tried to get the dough—I didn't want the cops here. Give me another chance to get the money—I'll raise it, someway."

"I'll give you a chance," Bender said, and it sounded as though he were speaking through clenched teeth, "I'll goose you fulla lead, you rat bastid."

"Marty, Marty," Wyatt pleaded in a choked voice, "let me talk to you—just for a minute."

"Maybe I'll take you along with me when I go," Bender said, and sounded pleased with the idea. "Yeah, maybe I'll just take you along with me when I leave." His voice rose, snapping at the rest of us. "Now listen, everybody! Me and Murray are going for a little walk. The rest of you are going to stay right where you are, for maybe ten minutes. You don't call no cops, you don't do nothing except just stand still. You all get that?"

"Why, sure," Mike said softly, standing with his arms upraised, close to my side. "We understand, Marty, we'll do just what you say." I couldn't have uttered a word, occupied as I was with a gruesome speculation, wondering how a .32 slug would feel, tearing into my back.

"Okay," Bender said. "You better get over to the wall, too, Mrs. Wyatt, and you too, pop." I heard Deirdre and Bayard Thorne's footfalls, muffled on the carpets, loud on the bare floor, and then Bender's voice went on. "Me and Murray are

going to talk things over for a minute, out in the hall. If I like his story, I'll take him with me and turn him loose soon's as I get safe away from here. If I don't like what he's gotta say"—the voice paused significantly, and then resumed—"well, you'll find out what I'll do then. The point is, none of you will know when I leave the hall outside, and if any of you come nosin' out there before I've powdered, I'll blow your head off. You get that?"

"We get it, Marty," Mike said soothingly.

"You better get it," Martin Bender said. "Okay, Murray, let's blow outta here. Take that flashlight the shamus had—it's there on the chair—and maybe you'd better fix the telephone, too. Just give that cord a nice, hard yank, kid. . . . Come on, goddammit, move!"

Murray Wyatt made very little noise, disrupting the telephone communications. A moment later I heard two pairs of heels click on the floor between the rugs, and then the door of the living room slammed shut. "If I were any one of you," Mike whispered, "I'd just remain perfectly still, at least for a while. Like me."

"Like me too," I said.

I stood with my arms up and counted slowly to sixty, and then, for the sake of variety, I counted up to one hundred and twenty. I was finishing the second count when Mike dropped one of his ham hands on my shoulder. I jumped a foot in the air, and when I lit, he spoke to me in a corner-of-the-mouth whisper that barely reached my ears. "Let's get over by that door, hey, Steve-o? One on each side of the door. On our toes, and rug to rug, like island to island."

I turned and took one long, cautious step towards the door, and beyond it, in the hall, the sound of gunfire smashed the silence in a stuttering, reverberating roar. I felt Mike's hand on my shoulder, restraining me, and then Deirdre Wyatt screamed as the door flew open and Murray Wyatt lurched across the threshold, doubled over, holding his belly with both hands. I took a stride towards him and he raised a face splattered with blood from a gaping wound in his cheek, and although his bleached blue eyes were wild with pain and

terror, their predominant expression was one of utter disbelief. He stared at me for a moment and then slowly fell, sprawling on his face at my feet as Deirdre screamed again, her voice shrilling across the room in a rippling horror of sound.

"Take care of him, Thorne!" Mike shouted, and pounded towards the door. He went through it in a headlong rush and I trampled on his heels, bringing up the rear. The hall was empty, and the elevator was in its place, but a door stood wide open between the peach-colored mirrors, and it was obviously through the door that Bender had gone. Light from the hall flowed thinly through the doorway, onto a stair landing and a banister that curved sharply downward into a stairwell as dark as the morning before Genesis.

I started for the stairs, but Mike caught me by the arm and hauled me back. "My turn this time, kid," he said. "You get back in there and get a window open and yell like hell." He let go of my arm and plunged out onto the landing, going down the banister hand over hand. He had no gun, I knew; Confidential agents seldom pack hardware unless they know in advance that they're going on dangerous assignments. However, I thought, since Bender had a flashlight, there wasn't much chance that Mike would overtake him, having no knowledge of the locations of light switches in the unfamiliar house. The Thorne menage was certainly one of the most deficient households in New York, in the lighting department. The old patrician may have had money to burn, but he wasn't wasting any of it with Consolidated Edison. I thought that Old Ramrod, the maid, was probably to blame for the lack of illumination; she had the look of a dame who'd go around switching off lights, probably in the hope that some hapless guy might break his neck in the darkness.

I turned and raced into the living room. Deirdre, with her back to me, was kneeling beside her husband, and Bayard Thorne was standing in a far corner of the room with a telephone—*another* telephone—in his hands. "The one that they tore out was only a house telephone, a service telephone," he said in a voice that shock had dulled to a pathetic and weary monotone, "I'm calling the police, the regular police."

"Right," I shouted, sprinting across the living-room floor. The big window wasn't the kind that opens, but there was a smaller pane in the wall on one side of it, and I yanked it open and shoved my head out into the cold night air and whooped like a drunken Comanche. I yelled "police" and "stop thief" and "help" as loudly as possible and sucked air into my lungs and yelled it again. The only people in sight below were a fat man and a fat woman, walking a Boxer dog along the sidewalk next to the park. They both stopped and looked up at me, and I was encouraged enough to shout even louder; they looked like figures painted on a Christmas card, standing motionless against the iron pickets of the park fence, with the snow-patched grass and shrubbery of the park behind them. I kept on yelling, and finally the man lifted an arm and waved and began to move at a lumbering trot towards the lighted door of an apartment house. The woman stayed where she was and screamed, and the Boxer tugged at the leash, and howled.

I pulled my head in, and I heard Bayard Thorne speaking into the phone. " . . . have someone come at once, please? I'm afraid there has been a shooting." He gave them the address and murmured a word of thanks, and hung up, his anguished eyes seeking the man on the floor. "A doctor, too," I shouted, moving away from the window, "call a doctor, too, for God's sake."

"I am afraid that it's too late for a doctor to do any good," Thorne said in a hushed and broken voice.

I looked over Deirdre's shining head, bowed above Murray Wyatt. Her husband had rolled over on his back, and it was probably the last act of his life, because Murray Wyatt was as dead as Nebuchadnezzar or five cent beer—or as dead as either one or both of the policemen that he *might* have rubbed out in Minnewaska, back in 1929.

→ 3 ←

INSPECTOR CHRISTOPHER CHRISTIE, of Homicide, puffed on a cigar that smelled like a wet woolen mitten, and blew two smoke rings through his puckered gargoyle mouth. He blew a large ring first, and then he exhaled a smaller one that stabbed neatly through the first and floated over Mike Zacharias' black head like a lop-sided halo.

It went well with Mike's face, at the moment; he had a lump as large as an egg on his forehead and there was a swelling bruise on his left cheekbone. Both of the injuries had been sustained when the big guy had crashed into a statue, somewhere in the darkness of Bayard Thorne's second floor. Bender, needless to say, had got away.

We were sitting in the breakfast nook of the kitchen in Deirdre Wyatt's apartment, and it was almost midnight. I was wearing no halo, either real or imaginary, so far as Christie was concerned. The old man's sad cow eyes had been brooding upon me for hours while cops from the crime lab swarmed over the apartment and Old Ramrod and Deirdre and Bayard Thorne had been questioned, and Mike and I had submitted to one of Christie's caustic interrogations. Deirdre had been given a sedative and had been put to bed in her father's care; the medical officer had gone, and all that remained of Wyatt had gone, too, and now Christie and Mike and I were alone in the kitchen.

"So you frisked this guy, Bender," the Inspector said to me, in the tone of a man who has been betrayed by his best friend. "You went over the fellow with a fine-tooth comb, and you found him clean as a whistle."

He'd said the same thing, with slight variations, a dozen times, and I was pretty tired of it. I opened my mouth to snarl at him, and Mike cut in quickly. "Look, Chris," he said, "you ride Steve any longer, you're liable to get saddle boils. The

gun was in Bender's hat, for my money. Taped to the crown of the hat. It's been done before, although I admit it would be difficult for the guy to twirl the hat around on his finger, the way he did, with a hunk of lead in the crown."

Christie sighed and cracked the knuckles of one gaunt, liver-spotted hand. "Well," he said, "I guess it doesn't make a helluva difference, anyway, so long as the guy had the gun. So why did Bender kill Wyatt? You think he did it just because he was mad at him for letting you boys in here?"

"Maybe," I said, "but that doesn't seem like motive enough, to me. If the guy was that kind of a homicidal maniac, I think he'd have blasted Mike and me too."

"I think," Mike said, "that Bender knew he wasn't going to get fifty thousand, or any part of it, from Wyatt or Thorne."

"Well, then, don't that sound like he did it in a fit of anger?" Christie said. "Just a big mischievous boy, who got a little piqued."

"I'll tell you what I think," I said, "even though you're probably too dumb to appreciate it. I think Bender killed Wyatt because he knew that Wyatt knew where to find him. He knew that Thorne was going to go to the police. He couldn't stop that, unless he rubbed us all out. But he could—and did—stop his old pal Murray from telling the cops where Marty Bender could be found."

"Maybe the boy's got something there," Christie said to Mike, as though it hurt him to say it.

"Junior can be quite bright at times," Mike said. "And if you'll get that scowl off your puss, I'll tell you something that's occurred to me, too, Chrissie."

"Do," the Inspector said, "and, damn it, don't call me Chrissie!"

"It could be that a character like Bender has more than one name on his shake-down list," Mike said. "Let's say that Murray Wyatt couldn't pay, and that his father-in-law wouldn't, but that the others on the list could—and would—if they were scared enough. By killing Wyatt, Bender gave them a lot of incentive to pay-off—a hell of a lot of incentive."

"I kinda thought you'd think that," Christie answered, "be-

cause I already thought of it myself. It sounds kinda far-fetched, but hop-heads are babies who do far-fetched things for normal. . . . Maybe Mrs. Wyatt can tell us something useful, when she's able to talk."

"I think the maid could tell you something," I put in. "I got the impression that she was pretty frightened of Martin Bender, more frightened than she would have been if she knew nothing about him, or had never seen him before."

Christie sighed and called out: "Forbes!" The kitchen door swung open and a red-haired detective came into the room. "Get the maid back," Christie said, "send her in here."

The red-haired cop went out again, and Christie scowled at the end of his cigar. "The old girl's name is Emma Gansil," he said, "and she didn't tell me much when I talked to her before. She's been with Thorne twenty-three-four years, ever since his wife died. Thorne says she's absolutely devoted to the family."

"She hear the shots?" Mike asked.

"Just faintly," the Inspector said, "at least according to her. She was in the kitchen, fixing some supper for the family to eat later. Thorne's got a cook, too, and another maid, but they're off on Mondays."

The red-haired detective brought in Emma Gansil. She gave me a long, lingering look of malevolent dislike, and then turned to glare at Christie, her broomstick arms folded on her flat chest. "I already told you everything I knew about all this," she said in a sullen and defiant voice.

Christie pointed at me with the ragged butt of his cigar. "Mr. Considine's got an idea maybe you didn't," he said, mildly. "He thinks maybe you knew this fellow Bender—that you've seen him before tonight."

The woman lashed me with another glance of loathing. "Him!" she snorted contemptuously. "I asked him to be careful, I almost hit him with a board, trying to tell him I thought this Bender was dangerous. And he let him come up here and kill Wyatt. A fine detective he is."

"You're probably right," Mike said agreeably. "But tell me one thing, please, Mrs. Gansil. That is your name, isn't it—Mrs. Gansil?"

"Miss Gansil," Old Ramrod said, but her eyes were less hostile as she looked at Mike.

"Well, why were you so afraid of Bender? On sight, I mean. If you didn't know who he was, or know anything about him?"

She lifted her knife-blade shoulders in a shrug. "I can't say, exactly. I—I just didn't like the looks of him, is all."

"I don't suppose," Mike said in an elaborately careless manner, "that you know a narcotic addict when you see one?"

The woman's gray eyes batted, and her tight mouth gaped for an instant. "You're a pretty smart man,'" she said finally. "I *do* know an addict when I see one. Before I came to the Thornes, I worked in a hospital that treated alcoholic and narcotic patients."

"You don't think any of the people in Thorne's family are using the stuff?" Mike asked her casually.

"Certainly not," Emma Gansil snapped. "It would be ridiculous to think that either Miss Deirdre or Mr. Thorne would use narcotics."

"And the late Mr. Wyatt," Mike purred, "how about him? It isn't likely that he was using dope, because booze was evidently his weakness. But you didn't think much of Murray Wyatt, did you, Miss Gansil?"

The woman's thin lips opened and words gushed forth. "All right!" she blurted, her voice rising to a shrill tremolo. "All right, I will say it! Murray Wyatt was no good. He was an alcoholic—always half soused—and he didn't treat Miss Deirdre right, either. What was he, anyway? Riffraff, that's all he was —someone she only knew four days before she married him."

"Well," Christie rumbled as Emma Gansil came to a sudden full stop, "at least that's an opinion. You think maybe Wyatt and this Bender were peddling dope, or something like that?"

"I wouldn't have put it past Murray Wyatt," the woman said, "because he wasn't any good. He was just what I said—riffraff, that's all."

"All right, Miss Gansil," the Inspector said, "I guess we won't keep you any longer. We know where to find you, if we want you."

She gave me one more murderous glance and flitted out of

the room, her lips shut so tightly that they seemed to be crimped into the gray flesh of her face. "Alfred Hitchcock could probably use her if Thorne ever fires her," Christie observed. "She wouldn't even hafta wear make-up. . . . The woman ain't exactly fond of you, is she, Steve?"

"Which doesn't quite add up, either," Mike said thoughtfully. "She blames Steve for letting Bender up here with a gun, but if she hated Wyatt as much as she seems to have hated him, you'd think she'd be glad that he got killed."

Christie shook his balding, egg-shaped head. "I think she's peeved at Steve because Mrs. Wyatt might possibly have got hurt. Thorne told me that Emma has looked after Deirdre ever since she was a baby. An old, unmarried fright whose frustrated maternal affections all went to Thorne's kid. Thorne says he's been worried, because Emma's affections seemed to be kinda abnormally intense."

"Thorne tell you anything else important?" Mike asked. "Anything you thought was important, that is?"

"Maybe yes, maybe no," Christie answered. "Like Emma says, Deirdre only knew Wyatt a few days before they got married. She met the guy at some party, and fell for him, and just as soon as the law allowed, they got hitched."

"But he must know something about Wyatt's past," I said.

"He don't know much of anything, at least to hear him tell it," the old cop said. "He told me Wyatt told him once he was raised in an orphanage, in Chicago, and that he came to New York as a young man. Never mentioned anything about relatives, if he had any. Never talked about his past, at least not to Thorne."

"Well, you know what he told *us* about his past," Mike said. "Hardly the thing a guy would care to invent about himself. So, now all you've got to do is to find Marty Bender."

Christie heaved out an immense, wheezing sigh. "Yeah, that's all I got to do, just find Bender. A guy who hasn't been in New York in the last quarter century—if he ever was in New York. There probably ain't a stool pigeon in this town even remembers who the guy is."

"He has to get his stuff from somebody," I pointed out.

"The stoolies don't exactly bend my ears," the Inspector said with heavy irony. "They don't break my door down to tell me things. I'll get some help from the Narcotics Squad, sure, but how much? A handful of overworked cops, trying to stop the biggest drug traffic in history, like trying to dry up the Atlantic with a sponge."

I reached for a cigarette and found my pack was empty. I wadded it up and tossed it onto the kitchen table, and stood up. "I'm going home and go to bed," I said, "unless you can think of any other silly questions to ask me. You don't object to an honest citizen sleeping nights, do you, Inspector?"

"I wish you would do all your sleeping nights," he grunted savagely. "You, the shamus can't even find a gun on a guy you frisk."

The red-haired detective came back into the kitchen. "Hanson said to tell you there aren't any prints on the glass Bender drank the ginger ale out of," he said. "That is, the lady's prints are on it, but that's all."

"I tried to tell the Inspector that Bender held the glass in his left hand," I said sweetly, "and that the guy was wearing a glove on his left hand."

"We can get all the prints we want of that hoodlum," Christie bawled, "and you shut up! Go on home to bed, like you said."

"Mrs. Wyatt's awake," the red-haired cop said. "I guess that shot the croaker gave her didn't do much for her. Anyway, she's awake, and asking can she please see Considine and Zacharias."

Christie swore and leapt to his feet, his tangled gray eyebrows bristling with indignation. "Considine and Zacharias!" he shouted. "Who in hell does she think is running this show anyhow? She can see them, if she doesn't care what she looks at, but she'll damn well *talk* to Christie. It ain't amateur night around this place any more."

"I only told you what the lady said," the cop answered in an aggrieved tone, and walked out of the room.

As Christie lunged angrily out of the breakfast nook, I pointed at the floor, at the old man's shoes, which he had r

moved sometime before. "Don't forget your brogans, Inspector. I don't think you ought to go into a strange lady's room in your sock feet. Especially with your big toe sticking out of one of the socks."

Christie glared balefully at me for a moment, smothered an oath, and then sat down and began to put on his shoes. "Dammit the hell," he said, stamping a big foot into one of the old-fashioned shoes, "it seems like the older I get the worse deals I run inta. Fifteen, twenty years ago about half the cases I got was busted before I ever got there."

"How else would you ever have got to be an Inspector?" I asked softly.

The old boy ignored my remark. "A few years back," he grumbled, "at least half the cases were open-and-shut. Somebody'd bump somebody else off, and we'd find more prints than a two-year-old kid could leave on a white wall. We'd go looking for a guy who'd knifed somebody, and we'd find him still holding on to the knife, as though he was afraid it was gonna fall out of the corpse. Now what do we get? Jigsaws like this!"

"If you ask me, this is a very simple case," Mike said, with a wink at me. "And besides, if you get stuck, you can always call on us."

"When I got to call on you for help, I turn in my badge," Christie snarled. He stood up, both shoes on, but only half laced, and flung his cigar butt into the kitchen sink. "Okay," he said bitterly, "let's go in and see Wyatt's missus."

We followed him out of the kitchen and across the living room into a bedroom beyond. The walls of the room were half covered with mirrors—also peach-colored—and I decided that somebody, and probably Deirdre, was suffering at least mildly from a Narcissus complex. I wondered what it would be like to occupy a room in which practically everything you did was reflected back at you, and decided it wouldn't be too bad, if you were as lovely as Deirdre Wyatt.

The girl was lying on one of the beds, propped up by several pillows. The other bed looked very empty. Bayard Thorne, his face haggard and old, sat by his daughter's side,

holding one of her hands. The girl's enormous eyes were dry and her face was a tragic mask of composure that, I thought, had been achieved by force of will alone.

I didn't enjoy looking at the girl at that moment, and I let my eyes rove about the room, avoiding her gaze. I saw, among other things, a low bookshelf between the two beds, and read the titles of some of the volumes that stood upon the shelf. I was surprised to see, among other somewhat weighty tomes, a copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* by Friedrich Nietzsche. I had come into contact with Herr Nietzsche's maunderings as a college freshman, and I decided that either the late Murray or his wife had very strange tastes in the way of bed-time reading. As I remembered Friedrich, he was a guy with a super-man complex, who finally went as balmy as most super-men, before and after him, and judging from what I'd read of the dour German's writings, none of his books would have been much fun to curl up with, except perhaps, in a morgue.

"Well," Christie said in a cheerful croak, like the voice of a prison guard on a death watch, "I hope you're feeling better, Mrs. Wyatt."

"The medicine the doctor gave me didn't work," Deirdre said, her eyes looking beyond Christie at Mike and me. "I tried to sleep, but I couldn't."

"You slept for a few minutes, my dear," her father said.

"A few minutes!" the girl said. "I wanted to sleep forever. I wanted to go to sleep and dream that nothing ever happened, nothing—" her voice broke off, and the staring eyes fixed themselves on Mike. "We—father and I—we want your agency to get him, Mr. Zacharias."

"I'm flattered, Mrs. Wyatt," Mike said gently, as the Inspector's wrinkled horse face twisted into a ferocious scowl. "I thank you for your confidence in our agency, but this case is now in the hands of the New York Police Department, where it belongs."

Christie grunted, and looked mollified. "The police will do all they can, of course," Bayard Thorne said, "we all know that. But Mr. Considine and you, Mr. Zacharias, you both

saw Bender, you know what he looks like, you'd have a better chance of catching him than anyone else would. I want that madman taken before he kills someone else. I don't care what it costs."

"I don't think that my friend Inspector Christie can object to us," Mike said, slapping a paw down on the old cop's shoulder. "After all, he's scarcely in a position to reject legitimate help."

Christie shrugged the hand from his shoulder. "I don't object to Confidential being retained to help," he said, "just so long as nobody withholds information—*any* information—from the police, or pulls any sort of caper that might interfere with us apprehending the criminal. That naturally includes you and your family, Mr. Thorne."

Thorne bowed. "Naturally," he said. "I want Bender taken as soon as possible. I will offer a ten thousand dollar reward for his capture, and I will double that amount if he is taken by the end of this week. This being Monday evening, you will have just five full days in which to earn the reward."

"That'll be attractive news to a lot of people," Mike said, "including my boys."

Deirdre sat up, leaning tensely forward from the pillows, and her eyes were on my face now. "Please, Mr. Considine," she said, her voice choked with emotion, "you will try, won't you?"

"We'll all try," I said. For twenty thousand bucks we'll try, I told myself. Maybe we'll put a little extra something into it for you, sister, because you're a lovely kid and a brave kid, and that junked-up murderer killed your husband practically before your eyes; but it's the big twenty grand we'll be pitching for mainly, kid, because that's the way the world is made.

I smiled at her, and then looked quickly away from her as she began to cry, soundlessly, her shoulders shaking, her face buried in her hands. Mike nodded at me and we walked quickly out of the bedroom. The red-haired cop shouldered his way past us, entering the bedroom as we went out.

The elevator was downstairs—Christie's men had been shoving the cage up and down for hours—but Mike said that he'd

wait for the beast, rather than trust his luck on the stairs. "I'm a burned child on that stairway," he said. "We'll just stand here and wait for the elevator, even if it does seem like wasting time. I suppose you got your share of the twenty gees reward money all spent, huh?"

"On this job, I'll settle for what I get in regular salary," I told him. "Something tells me that our friend Bender is going to make himself awfully hard to find."

"You can say that twice," Mike answered. "I've been trying to think of someone I know who was around Chi way back when Bender was hot stuff in that town. Can't think of a soul."

"I can," I said, "only it would be stretching a point to refer to the guy I'm thinking of as a 'soul.'"

"Where do we find him?" Mike asked, "and how soon?"

"Maybe tonight," I said, "maybe right now. Five days can go plenty fast when you're trying for twenty grand."

We rode down in the elevator and got our hats and coats and went out into the cold darkness and flagged a cab. I gave the driver the address of Paul Francisco's night club, in Greenwich Village, and we didn't talk much, riding down.

Francisco's Paradise Club was a basement hole-in-the-wall. We walked down a short flight of stone steps and through a door behind which a large bouncer with box-like shoulders was idly picking his teeth, and the nicely blended gin-and-sweat-and-tobacco odor of the place clawed at my nostrils like dirty fingers. In a corner of the room a three-piece combo was hitting some hot licks, and smoke lay so thickly across the room you couldn't see the décor, which was probably just as well too.

I out-wrestled a blond checkroom bandit for my hat and led the way among the tables that crowded close about a postage-stamp dance floor. In the rear of the room, at a corner table, Sweet Charley Palmer was sitting with T. Farquarson Gibney's girl friend, the curvaceous Miss Smith.

Palmer was a large guy, wearing a midnight-blue suit that had padded shoulders as big as hams. He had a cleft chin and an almost perfect profile, and oily black curly hair that crinkled up from his forehead like an astrakhan cap. When he saw me,

Sweet Charley half rose from his chair and scowled, wrinkling the white brow into a frown of almost genuine anger. "This is getting monotonous," he said as I approached his table, "it's getting really monotonous. So why don't you just shove off, creep, before you bring out the savage in me?"

Miss Smith dropped a lipstick-smeared cigarette into a highball glass half filled with melted ice, and composed her peony mouth into an elaborate sneer. "Him!" she rasped at Sweet Charley, pointing a finger at me. "The guy who made us give back the stuff. We certainly don't have to talk to the crum-bum, do we, Charley, angel?"

"I'm afraid you do," I said. "I've got a lot of seniority in the crum-bums' union, and it's a powerful organization." I sat down in a vacant chair and pointed at Mike, who had already seated himself and was regarding Charley with a hard professional stare. "This large gentleman is Mr. Zacharias, the president of the organized crum-bums' association."

"Well, tell him to never mind giving me that whammy stare," Sweet Charley said, avoiding Mike's eyes. "What you want, Considine, what you want with me again?"

"T. Farquarson is pretty unhappy about those two mink coats," I said.

"What the hell kind of guy is he, anyhow?" Sweet Charley asked indignantly. "He gets his rocks back, and he's beefing about two lousy mink coats. There's a monkey would want a ton of flesh offa guy, instead of a pound."

"Farky isn't mad," Eunice Smith said, "he isn't really mad. I talked to him tonight, and he says I can wear the diamonds again any time, just so long as he's with me."

"I just talked to him a few minutes ago," I lied, "and Farky has had a relapse—he's burned up all over again. But I think I can get him to forget all about the fur, on condition that Charley gives me a little useful information."

Palmer scowled ferociously at me. "You got the wrong guy," he said, "I'm no stool pigeon, I'm no rat." I didn't say anything, and Charley gulped the rest of the highball that was in front of him, looked cautiously about at the tables nearest to

him, and then sighed. "Okay," he asked in a forthright whisper, "what you gotta know?"

"You were around Chicago a lot when you were a kid," I said, "as well as around a lot of other places. Name me a few present residents of New York who were big shots in the rackets in Chi, in the twenties."

"You fooling?" Sweet Charley asked. "In the twenties I'm hardly born yet."

"Much as I hate to disillusion this young lady," I said, "you are forty-five years old according to the records of the Chicago police department, Charley. So, you old goat, name me a couple of New Yorkers who were hot stuff in Chi from 1920 until 1929."

"Listen, Mr. Considine," Sweet Charley said in an earnest manner, "those cops are lying about my age. They try to make it out like I'm a lot older than I am, because they don't want people to know how I pulled the wool over their eyes, the coppers' eyes, when I'm hardly dry behind the ears."

Sweet Charley closed his eyes with a pained look on his face, as though unable to bear the perfidy of the Chicago cops, even in retrospect. After a moment he raised his lids and murmured in an almost unintelligible whisper, "There's Grits Toselli, lives in Brooklyn. He useta drive for Capone."

"I know all about Toselli," I said. "I don't mean him or anyone like him. I'm looking for some guys with lots of cabbage and a certain amount of respectability, at least on the surface. Guys who are in legitimate businesses now, and would be worth shaking down."

Palmer squinted at the ruby ring on the little finger of his left hand, deep in thought. "There isn't many like that," he said finally. "The way those old-time hoods used each other for clay pigeons, they didn't leave any surplus. But, still, there's a couple of boys around would maybe fit your description. Like Max Ageld would fit it. Like so would Big Joe Carson."

"Would either one of them be likely to have known a gunnie named Martin Bender?"

Sweet Charley gave me a quick, cautious look and then

shrugged. "Maybe they would have, and so what? This Bender's out of circulation. He's doing it all, for a bank job, out west. He blasted a couple of fuzz while he was tapping a jug, and they threw all the books at him. I'm not old enough to remember him, personally, but I used to hear my old man talk about him."

"Bender's out," I said. "He's out, and he's here in New York, running a one-man collection agency. He put the permanent chill on a creditor who wouldn't pay off, just a few hours ago."

Charley's age-old eyes jumped in their sockets at this intelligence, but when he finally looked at me his face was impassive, and his hands made an elaborate gesture of unconcern.

"Would this Ageld and Carson have known Martin Bender?" I demanded. "Answer that one correctly, and we'll forget about the mink coats."

"Why wouldn't they know him? They run booze with him."

"Good. And where do I find these gentlemen?"

"I dunno about Max Ageld," Sweet Charley said. "He's mixed up in half a dozen operations, but I dunno where he hangs out. Big Joe owns a plush apartment hotel, up on Park Avenue. It's called the Aylewarde. Big Joe lives there."

"Buy our friends a drink," I said to Mike as I pushed back my chair, "buy them a drink while I go and talk to a man about a mad dog."

There was a telephone booth at the bottom of the stairs by which we had entered. I looked up the Aylewarde in the Manhattan directory, and went into the booth and telephoned the hotel. After a while a bored voice answered, and I said that I was Martin Bender, and that I wanted to speak to Mr. Joseph Carson.

"It's very late, you know," the voice answered.

"It'll be later for you sooner if you don't let me talk to Big Joe," I snarled. "This is important."

"Are you a friend of his?"

"If he has any friends, I'm one."

"Then you should call his private unregistered number, Mr. Bender. Surely you must know it if you're his friend."

"Listen, you twerp," I yowled. "My memory for phone numbers is bad, but my memory for voices is very good. If you don't put me through to Big Joe, I'm coming up there and spoil your permanent wave."

"I'll try to connect you," the voice said, and it didn't sound bored any longer.

I waited. I waited a long time, or so it seemed, before Carson got on the phone. His heavy voice sounded irritable, groggy, the voice of a big man who is half asleep. "Who is it?" he demanded, "who's calling?"

I imitated Martin Bender's deep voice as well as I could. "It's me, Joe," I said, "me, Marty Bender."

"It don't sound like you," the sleepy voice answered.

"You don't sound like you, either," I told him. "I guess we must have a bum connection."

"That was a helluva stupid thing you did," the man rumbled, his tone suddenly sharper, less fuzzed by sleep. "Writing me a goddam silly letter like that. Don't you know that was a stupid thing to do, Marty?"

"Maybe," I said, "but I meant every word that I wrote."

"You can mean it all you want," he said, "but I'm not paying you a dime. Not a crying dime. I don't hafta stay put for a shake-down in this town. My connections are too good."

I fought to keep my voice free of the elation I felt. "Read the morning papers," I said. "There was another guy with connections even better than yours. Read about what happened to him, and I think you'll change your mind."

"I don't give a damn what's in the papers," the man growled, and he was plenty angry now. "Nobody is gonna shake Big Joe Carson down. You get that?"

"I get it, Joe," I said, "but I don't want it. I don't want any of it. You're going to pay me what you owe me, Joe, you're going to pay me or else."

"If you aren't stir-crazy entirely," the heavy voice said, "you'll take my advice and get outta town. I'll stake you to a c-note for getaway money, or maybe even two hundred, but that's the limit, positively the limit. Where you staying? You still with that friend on Staten Island?"

"I'm calling from the Waldorf," I said, "from the Towers. I came up here to look at a suite that I expect to move into, real soon. You'll hear from me tomorrow, toots."

I hung up quickly. As I turned to leave the booth, I heard a tinkling sound behind me. I turned back and saw that something had gone wrong, mechanically, with the telephone; the coin return box was filling with nickels, dimes and quarters, cascading down in a silver stream.

Jack-pot, I shouted to myself, *jack-pot all around!*

→ 4 ←

CARLA WAS STILL awake when I got home. She was in bed, reading a detective story called *The Case of the Crystallized Colonel,* and she looked beautiful, even with her black hair yanked back from her forehead, and with a slick smear of cold-cream on her lovely face. I kissed her, and decided that she wasn't really mad at me for being so late, just peeved enough to have washed her hair and daubed her face with cream, in a what-the-heck-if-he-doesn't-want-to-come-home-what-do-I-care sort of vexation. I went into the dressing room and got into my pajamas, and I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth before she really spoke to me.

"Is it an interesting case, darling?" she asked sweetly. "The one you were working on tonight?"

I switched off the bathroom light and came back into the bedroom. "Probably not," I said. "At least not by your literary standards."

"Oh, this," she said, looking at the dust jacket of the book, a green and black jacket embellished with drawings of a naked woman, a grinning skull and two smoking pistols. "I'm only reading this because I was sleepy," she said, "and I thought it would help me to keep awake until you came home."

I got into the big double bed beside her. I lay on my side, with my knees drawn up and one arm flung across my eyes, shielding them from the glare of the lamp above Carla's head. "I've only got one more page to read before I find out who the murderer is," my wife said, "but if the light bothers you, I'll turn it out."

I said that the light didn't bother me. "Well I've read enough anyway," Carla said, "and I don't really care who killed the colonel, who was a silly old ass, and you're more fascinating than any stupid book anyway. . . . Do you know something, Steve?"

"Very little," I said, "and I suspect even what I think I do know, at times."

"I think I'm hungry," Carla said, "and I think I'd like a glass of milk. Wouldn't you like a glass of milk, Steve?"

"I would at that," I said. I didn't really want any milk, but if I said that I didn't want any, she wouldn't let me get up and get hers, and I wanted to get Carla her milk. . . . I put my feet into the slippers that were near the bed and dragged on the red dressing gown that Carla had made me for Christmas. I went into the kitchen and filled two glasses with milk, and I was on my way back through the dark living room when the telephone rang. It rang loud and shrill, the way a telephone always seems to sound in the early hours of the morning. It startled me, and I felt cold milk dribbling down the legs of my pajamas as the glasses slopped over, but I finally got both glasses to rest, upright, on the floor, and picked up the telephone.

Inspector Christie was at the other end of the line, and the old boy's voice crackled like a mule-skinner's whip. "You're quite a guy, Considine," he snarled, "a real detective."

"Such praise from you," I simpered, "and all at once too. Please, Inspector, don't encourage my vanity."

"That gun Bender had," Christie rasped, "the one Mike Zacharias thought he was packing in the crown of his hat. You told me it was a .32 calibre automatic. Well, for your information, moron, Wyatt was killed with a .38—a .38 revolver—see? The Doc dug three .38 slugs outta Wyatt, and another one—

probably the one smashed his cheek—was buried in the wall of the hall. This Bender musta been covered with lumps from the weapons he was carrying—and *you* searched him, you butter-fingered slob."

"I find your manner somewhat offensive, Inspector," I kidded him, "and just for that I won't invite you to the little party I plan to have, after I've collected the reward money."

"By the time *you* collect that money," Christie roared, "I'll be pounding a beat in Staten Island."

"You may be there sooner than you think," I said, and hung up before he had a chance to hang up on me.

I carried the milk into the bedroom and gave Carla her glass, and got into bed with mine. "What a dreadful time to telephone someone," Carla said. "Was it Mike?"

I told her that it had been Christie who called. Carla wanted to know what the current case was about, and I said that it was just a routine extortion caper, not particularly interesting by anybody's standards. I didn't want to tell her about the case that night; I wanted to tell her when I showed her the check for Thorne's reward money—and if I didn't get the reward I wanted to tell her the details later—much later, when my disappointment had lost its edge.

"Was he married?" Carla asked suddenly, when I had finished a very limited explanation of the case. "The man who is being extorted from, I mean."

"To be equally grammatical, the man were," I said. I wondered why she had asked this scarcely relevant question, but I found out a moment later.

"Was she pretty, Mike? And don't ask me was who pretty. I mean the man's wife."

"Not particularly," I said. "If she was, I was too busy to notice." It was the first time that I had ever lied to Carla since we were married, or almost the first time anyway. I was still feeling sorry about it when I fell asleep, half an hour later.

I was in the office before ten o'clock next morning. Mike hadn't come in yet, but he telephoned soon after I arrived. He told me that he'd shot a wire to the Minnewaska authorities,

asking for recent photographs of Martin Bender. He'd also sent Richards and Simek, two of our best boys, over to Staten Island, on the strength of the implication Big Joe Carson had made on the telephone to me, that Bender had been staying with a friend on the island.

Christie had also called Mike. "The old boy was really in a lather," Mike chortled, "but when he cooled off enough, he came up with a solution about the .38. He thinks the maid, Emma Gansil, didn't know that Bender was already heeled, and he thinks she slipped Bender the .38, when he and Wyatt went out into the hall. It sounds pretty far-fetched, to me. You seen the papers?"

I said that I had seen them. "Front-page news on every sheet in town," Mike said, "and they got our names and the name of the agency in, too, although maybe it's not such a helluva good ad for us, considering that we apparently just sat on our hands while Wyatt got killed. For a shot taken in the morgue, that isn't a bad picture of Wyatt, is it? Pretty nifty the way the morgue boys plugged that hole in his kisser, huh? . . . Well, I hope all of it adds up to impress your friend Big Joe Carson. You going to see him?"

"Right now," I said, and hung up. I put on my hat and overcoat and stuck a copy of the *Times* and a copy of the *Herald Tribune* into my coat pocket, just in case Carson was the sort of guy who didn't read the morning papers. I went out of my office then, and told our lovely, Spilsbury, that I might be out all the rest of the morning, and then I went downstairs and caught a cab and rode over to the Hotel Aylewarde, in the sixties, on Park.

As I walked into the lobby, I told myself that Big Joe Carson had done very well for a reformed rum-runner, very well indeed. The lobby had a quiet elegance that spoke of money more eloquently than if someone had shouted the vulgar word aloud; it would cost a guy a week's pay, I thought, just to sit in one of the deep chairs and stifle a yawn —providing, of course, that anyone would be rude enough to yawn in the Aylewarde lobby.

The clerk behind the desk looked like a potential ambassa-

dor to the Court of St. James's, and the only thing in the world whiter than his hair was the cuffs and collar of his shirt. I grinned in response to his brief and frigid nod, took a card from my wallet, and shoved it across the top of the desk. "I would like," I said politely, "to see Mr. Joseph Carson. At once, please, if you don't mind."

The clerk picked up the card, held it between a pink thumb and forefinger, and then laid it down on the desk-top, faintly shuddering. "I am afraid that Mr. Carson cannot see you. Mr. Carson never sees anyone in the morning."

I picked up a pen from the desk and scrawled, "about Martin Bender" on a corner of the card. "I think Mr. Carson will see me if he sees this," I said. "Be so kind as to send a bellboy up with it, immediately."

He picked the card up again, stared at it for a moment, then turned away from me. "I will telephone Mr. Carson," he said. He went along the back of the desk to a house telephone, murmured words into the instrument that I could not hear. When he hung up and came back, his austere face wore an expression distantly related to a smile. "You may go up now," he said. "Mr. Carson's apartment is number 821. You may take the elevator."

From him, it was one of the most munificent offers I had ever had in my life. It would have been positively impolite for me to have insisted on walking up eight floors, after he had so graciously said I might ride, so I found the elevator, which was off in a corner behind some potted palms, and rode to the eighth floor.

I got out of the elevator and walked twenty feet down a silent, thickly carpeted corridor, and came to the door of 821 —a noncommittal gray door in a gray wall. I thumbed a mother-of-pearl push-button that was set in the wall beside the door, and after a moment I was received by a maid, a middle-aged woman who was more glamorous than Emma Gansil, but not much. She led me into an entry hall when I'd told her who I was, and took my hat and coat and laid them on a chair, and pointed to a curtained door at the end of the hall.

"You may go right in," she said in a pleasant voice, "Mr. Carson's expecting you."

I went down the hall and pushed my way through the heavy drape curtains and walked into a large room that looked out on Park Avenue through tall, narrow windows. The walls of the room were pale gray and the carpets were the color of faded rose petals, and the furniture was straight out of a stage setting by Cecil Beaton. It was a room so exquisite that I hesitated before profaning it with a footfall, but as I looked around me, my hesitation gave way to amazement. In a corner of the room under a large window there was an old-fashioned, plush-upholstered barber's chair, mounted upon a mobile wooden platform. Sprawled in the barber's chair, with a white-coated razor-jockey working on him, was one of the fattest men I had ever seen.

I stared at the mountain of flesh, unheard and unseen by either him or the barber. Big Joe—and it *had* it be him—must have weighed three hundred and fifty pounds. His jowls hung in quivering folds beneath cheeks that were swollen cushions of inflated skin; his nose, small and flat, was an ugly lump of flaccid tissue, like something glued to the fat face above a mouth that was more like a wrinkle than a mouth, crimped deeply into the bloated flesh. His chest was massive, but it seemed to be shrunken, seen above a belly that was a great quaking mass of fat, a blown-up balloon of a belly that might have carried him away, if he hadn't been held down by legs that were as big around as my chest, and by the biggest pair of buttocks ever worn by man.

He was naked except for a pair of black and white Bronzini shorts, and his whale bulk was deeply tanned. Sun-lamps—or perhaps southern beaches—had flayed his face and body to the color of bacon rind; only the soles of his feet and the palms of his hands were white, silver-white, and the swollen lids of his small eyes gleamed pale under black brows, like clumps of that yellow-white stuff you see growing on stumps in the woods.

I coughed discreetly, and the cough was echoed by someone sitting in a far corner of the big room. I turned and saw a

blond girl in blue lounging pajamas, sitting in an armchair against the wall. She had shoulder-length, straw-colored hair and a pretty, vacuous face and the kind of figure that would have looked undressed in a welder's suit. She smiled mechanically at me as I looked at her, and spoke in a throaty voice: "Joe, sweetie! Joe, there's someone here to see you, I think."

Big Joe pushed the barber away from him and widened his slitted lids, showing eyes like dull jet beads. He made a noise that began as a grunt and ended in an asthmatic wheeze. "You this Considine?" he asked.

I pleaded guilty. Big Joe raised his head and fixed me with a hard, appraising stare, and then he lay back in the chair again. "Have a seat," he said, "I'll be through here in a minute, and then we can talk."

I sat down in a chair against a wall, under a framed reproduction of a Chagall painting, and lit a cigarette. The barber finished shaving the moon-face, rubbed it with unguents and doused it with some scented lotion and powdered the flabby jowls with loving care. There was a metal cart near the barber chair, and the guy in the white jacket put his stuff into it when he had finished shaving Big Joe. There were a pair of slippers on the floor near the chair, and the barber knelt and put them on the fat man's feet. Big Joe, puffing and wheezing, climbed down out of the chair, and stood erect, and I saw that he was not a tall man, probably not more than five feet seven. There was a dressing gown of heavy green silk on a nearby chair, and the barber picked it up and held it while Big Joe thrust his arms into the sleeves. I had seen a dressing gown just like it in a shop window on Fifth Avenue, for a mere five hundred dollars.

"That'll be all for today, Henry," Big Joe said to the barber. "Same time tomorrow, if you please."

The barber skipped across the room, opened the door of a large closet, skipped back and trundled the mobile barber chair into the closet. He shut the door and came back quickly, bid Big Joe a cheerful and respectful good morning, and trundled the metal cart out of the room. Big Joe gave me a

tough look and waddled across a rose-colored carpet and lowered himself into what was evidently a specially constructed chair.

I puffed my cigarette, giving the fat man's hard stare back to him with interest, and after a moment he wheezed: "Did Marty send you?"

"Not exactly," I said.

"My clerk said you was from a detective agency," Big Joe said, frowning. "You're taking quite a risk, aren't you, old boy?"

"A risk of what?"

Carson shrugged. "All right, play dumb. See what it gets you. See what anything gets you." He leaned back, staring pensively at me, and I could hear his breathing, sputtering like the sound of a kettle at full boil. "Marty was a good man, once," he said finally, "a good man, but rough. He didn't have any finesse. He's strictly out of the ice-box—I mean the ice-age, like one of them dinosaurs."

It was my turn to shrug. "I got to admire his nerve a little," Carson said, "trying to put the shake on me. Where are you supposed to fit into the picture? You supposed to be his collector, aren't you?"

"I'm nobody's collector," I said. "Have you read the morning papers, Mr. Carson?"

"Not yet," Carson said. "I usually have my secretary read them to me, while I eat breakfast. What's in them today that I especially ought to know about?"

"Martin Bender killed a man last night," I said. "He killed another guy who wouldn't stand for a shake."

"Oh, that!" Big Joe bubbled carelessly, "I knew about that last night even. But it don't scare me, Considine, I don't scare worth a cent, not from anything. Now I'd like to have you go back to Marty and tell him just what he can do for himself, but I'm afraid it wouldn't be right for me to let you go back to Marty. Because as a public-spirited citizen it's my duty to turn you over to the cops."

"You're evidently laboring under a misapprehension, Mr. Carson," I said, "a considerable misapprehension. I'm not rep-

resenting Martin Bender. I want him captured just as badly as you do."

"Sure," Big Joe sneered, "sure." He turned his head and yelled, "Marlene!" and the girl in the blue pajamas stirred as though she'd been hit with a whip. She rose swiftly from her chair and I saw that she had a ball of yarn and knitting needles in her hands. They went with the rest of her like bare feet go with a full dress suit.

"Please ask Al and the other gentleman to come in out of the library, at once," the fat man said to the girl. "You will give them five minutes in here with me and Mr. Considine, and then you will phone up Lieutenant Morahan, of the Rackets Squad. His number's in the leather book, on my desk. Call him and tell him I got an extortion suspect, right here in my apartment. You got that, Marlene?"

"I got it, sweetie," the girl said, and crossed to a door in the far side of the room. She opened the door and spoke a few quiet words into a room that may have been a library; at least I saw book-laden shelves through the half-opened door.

What came out of the room, a moment later, was a couple of objects that never should have entered a library in the first place: two large guys with hard, stupid faces and muscles that lumped big on their shoulders and arms.

I took a good look at the pair as they marched briskly past the girl. They were so conservatively dressed that they might have been Wall Street brokers, but they definitely were not; they were a couple of blown-in-the-glass, Grade-A goons, and nobody to fool with unless you didn't care about getting hurt. I recognized one of them as Al Gunnison, a Garden main-event fighter of several years before. I didn't know the other guy, and I didn't want to, either.

"Don't touch him, boys," Big Joe Carson said as they made straight for me, "don't touch him yet, please." He spoke to the blond girl without turning his head. "Please leave now, Marlene. And don't forget about that phone call, like I said."

"I won't forget, pet," the girl answered. I didn't see her go; I had my eyes on Al Gunnison's face. The ex-pug stood three feet away from me, balanced on his toes, his arms at his sides.

I sat quietly in my chair, working on another cigarette, and nobody said anything for a long moment. Then Big Joe cleared his throat and spoke.

"What you see here, gentlemen," he said, "what we have here is a boy who is fronting for Marty Bender. A stupid boy, a slob. He doesn't know that rackets like his are dead already many years, as out of date as mah jong or plus-four pants. He doesn't know that nobody shakes Joe Carson down, not with the connections I got in this town."

"You want we should teach him a few things he oughta know?" Al Gunnison asked in a completely matter-of-fact tone.

"In a few minutes maybe," Carson said, "but not yet." I looked at him and his eyes were slitted again, almost lost in the cushions of fat. "Read the newspapers, this guy says to me," he wheezed, "did you read the newspapers he asks me, like maybe he thinks I'm some damn illiterate jerk that can't read. What we've got here, I guess, is an ignorant peeper that don't even know who Joe Carson is.

"I don't like peepers," the man continued. "At the present time I'm a respectable businessman as everybody knows, a civic-minded man, the friend of judges and police commissioners and Congressmen and Senators even. And I am definitely on the side of law and order. But I don't like private cops. They are a cheap and nasty people who go around digging up scandal, and getting divorce case evidence, and things like that. So—" the heavy voice grew louder, bubbling on—"so, stand him up, gentlemen. Stand him on his feet and I will punch the blackmailing bastard in the nose once, just to show him how I feel."

Gunnison glided to the left side of my chair and caught me by an arm. The other goon—a short, squat gorilla with an undershot jaw—moved in and put his hands on my other arm. "Up, bum," Gunnison said in an almost pleasant voice, "you heard what the man said."

I rose to my feet and Carson pushed himself out of his chair and took a step towards me, a grin widening the balloon cheeks. I brought my left foot crashing down on Al Gunni-

son's instep, and when he let go of my arm and staggered back I lashed out sideways with my foot, and I felt it thud solidly into his groin. Mr. Gunnison folded, clutching at his middle like a man trying to hold himself together. He went down, jackknifed on a rose-colored carpet, and the stocky man's fist exploded like an electric light globe against my cheek.

I swung my left fist, blindly, all the way from the floor, and my luck was riding high. The punch caught the squat goon on the point of his blue-black jaw and he reeled back, rubber-legged, and then went down, sprawling on his back. I went to Big Joe, moving fast, and I said, "Okay, Fatso, here it is," and I drove my right fist wrist deep into the quivering jelly of his stomach.

The fat man let out an explosive grunt and rocked on his thick legs, his mouth hanging open. He stood for a moment, just rocking, and then he turned and waddled back to his chair and fell into it, gasping. He sat very still, the pale palms of his hands pressed against his stomach, while sweat sprang out all over his brown face. I picked up a light but serviceable chair and turned to look at the two goons on the floor, and a small and dapper man came into the room and touched me on the arm.

"What goes?" he asked in a light and jocular voice, and I turned to take a good look at him. He had a thin, lined, good-humored face and shrewd gray eyes and iron-gray hair, and he was beautifully dressed in conservative but expensive clothes. "The chair, the chair," he said to me as I looked at him. "Are you going to sit down on it, or belt me with it, or what? If I got a choice, I'll just lie down quietly with those fellows, without being hit."

The squat thug was on his knees, shaking his head to clear it, but Gunnison was still down. Big Joe's white lips worked soundlessly for a moment, framing agonized words, and then he gasped: "He—he hit me in the belly, Max! The son-a-bitch slugged me in the belly."

The man he'd called Max looked at me with interest. "So you put the slug on Joe, huh?" he asked. "And on these other

two guys, too, I presume. I don't know who you are, mister, but you brought your nerve with you when you came."

"My name's Considine," I said. "I'm with the Confidential Agency. I came here to talk to Carson, to do him a favor, in a way, and he sicked these gorillas on me."

"I'm Max Ageld," the dapper man said, "and you don't need to tell me what you came here to see Joe about, or who you are, either, because I read this morning's papers." He turned to Big Joe and spoke contemptuously. "You big, stupid lard-can," he said, "you slobbo. You won't ever learn, will you?"

"I don't get it," Big Joe murmured in a painful whisper, "I don't understand."

"Get your meatballs out of here," Ageld snapped, "and maybe I'll explain."

Big Joe scowled fearsomely at the squat gorilla. "Be kind enough to take Al outta here with you," he said. "A fine pair of bodyguards you turned out to be."

The squat muscle-boy helped Al Gunnison to his feet, half carried him to the door. On the threshold the ex-pug turned back and snarled at me. "You hadda lotta luck with you today, punk," he said, "but you'd better have all the luck there is—next time I see you."

"Beat it!" Big Joe exploded in a wheezing roar. "On your way, bum!"

The squat boy helped Al Gunnison out through the curtained door and Max Ageld turned to Carson. "Who you think Mr. Considine was, Joey? Somebody fronting for Bender?"

Big Joe nodded, his eyes on the floor. "Well, you made another of your dumb mistakes," Ageld said. "Considine is a private eye employed by one of the best agencies in the world. He wants to find Bender just as bad as we do, probably, maybe even more." The shrewd eyes twinkled. "I'll betcha Bayard Thorne will pay plenty to the guy who catches his son-in-law's murderer."

I didn't say anything. Ageld fumbled in the breast pocket of his coat, drew out a folded sheet of paper, and thrust it into

my hands. "Read this," he said tersely. "A little billy-doo I got from Marty, just this morning."

I unfolded the sheet of paper. The message within was formed of single letters cut from newspapers and magazines, and glued together on the paper, forming words that read: "Wyatt wouldn't pay off so look what happened to him. So now you guys owe me seventy-five grand each instead of fifty. Will let you know tomorrow where I will collect. Your old pal Marty."

"I love that 'old pal' line," Ageld said bitterly as I handed the message back to him. "It must have taken him an hour just to paste up that part of it alone."

"What's he mean we owe him seventy-five gees now?" Big Joe panted in a plaintive voice.

"The guy, Wyatt, that I phoned you about this morning," Ageld said, "the one that got chilled last night. Well, he didn't pay, so now Marty's laying that debt on to us. The son-of-a-gun is pro-rating the fifty gees he didn't get—pro-rating it between us two."

"I won't give him a dime," Big Joe snarled, "not a crying dime. I told him so when he called up last night. No stir-crazy old has-been is gonna shake me down, not with the connections I got in—"

"You and your connections!" Max Ageld broke in scornfully. "If you lived in this town a hundred years you wouldn't have the connections Bayard Thorne has got, and last night Marty Bender killed Thorne's own son-in-law." He turned to me. "If I asked you a kind of important question, Mr. Considine, would I get a square answer?"

"Maybe," I said. "Let's hear the question, Ageld."

"What did Marty Bender have on this Murray Wyatt? Don't tell me you don't know."

"I don't know," I lied pleasantly. "Nothing was mentioned about the matter, while I was there. But, now that you've brought that subject up, what does Bender have on you two boys?"

Ageld made a wry face, then shrugged. "It's a question I'll answer," he said. "Joe and I had a few deals with Bender,

back in the old days. We weren't partners with a trigger-happy punk like him, nothing like that, but we did do some business with the guy. And, I guess to tell the honest truth about it, we owed him a little dough when he got rapped for that bank job."

"A little dough?" I asked, "a little dough like seventy-five thousand each is a little dough?"

"Nothing like that amount," Ageld said. "Say he had ten grand coming, at a conservative estimate." He smiled ruefully. "Maybe I'd have been smart to have paid him, when I saw him last week."

"You saw him last week?"

"Well, actually, it was a week ago this past Sunday. Bender said he'd come in on a plane from Minnewaska on Saturday, the day before. Claimed that it took every cent he had to pay his plane fare. I thought that was kind of silly, but Marty always was impulsive. So I slipped him a couple of hundred, and told him I'd get him a job if he wanted one."

"Me too," Big Joe said. "He came to see me and I gave him a hundred bucks and told him I'd put him to work bussing dishes, in the café downstairs. He didn't seem to be sore or anything. And then last Friday I get one of these paste-up notes, demanding fifty thousand bucks. Max gets one, too."

"Was he junked up?" I asked them. "Was he full of H when he talked to either one of you?"

Big Joe shook his head in a positive manner, but Max Ageld's eyes were thoughtful. "Maybe he was too broke to get himself a fix," the dapper man said. "He looked pretty beat when I saw him, old and shabby and awfully frail."

"Well," I said, "both of you seem to know what the score is, and there's no use in my camping here, even though I've found the company most delightful."

Ageld nodded and smiled. "I think maybe I'll drop in on your agency this afternoon," he said. "Drop in and hire a couple of guys to sort of keep the flies off me for a while. Much as I esteem the New York police force, I think I'd like a little extra insurance, until they've put the collar on Marty.

Marty can be very mean when he wants to—at least he could in the old days."

"Marty still can," I said.

"I don't want any bodyguards," Big Joe protested, "not from any lousy detective agency, anyway. I'll call the Commish—"

"You'll call the Commissioner, sure," Max Ageld interrupted sarcastically, "you'll call him and you'll have so many flatfeet hanging around this place they'll scare out every guest you've got. If you got a brain in your head, you'll get a couple of good boys to look after you—and not a couple of muscle-bound jerks like Considine here belted out single-handed."

"Just see Mr. Zacharias, our president," I said. "Our agency is always ready to protect the law-abiding citizen, especially the well-heeled citizen."

I walked through the curtained door and went down the hall and got my hat and coat. As I went I heard Big Joe's voice sputter, rising in a windy, angry shout. "I'm a respectable, civic-minded citizen, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna hire any more bodyguards!"

"I'll be damned if you don't," Max Ageld shouted back at him, "and I'll tell you one good reason why! If we don't pay, and Marty Bender knocks you off because you're too cheap to hire some protection, then *I'll* get stuck to pay off the whole hundred and fifty thousand bucks."

When I got back to the office Mike wasn't there, so I went into my cubby-hole and leaned back in my desk chair, chain-smoking and thinking a lot of thoughts, none of which went very far towards solving the problem of how to put the collar on Martin Bender. It was a quarter after one when Mike came in. His eyebrows went up as he saw the swelling bruise on my cheek.

"Big Joe Carson misunderstood the purpose of my visit," I told him. "But it turned out okay, and I found out definitely what I wanted to find out. Bender's trying to extort money from both Big Joe Carson and Max Ageld."

"Marty Bender evidently isn't the sort of guy who puts all of his yeggs in one basket," Mike said, grinning. I didn't laugh

and the big guy scowled at me, and began to tramp back and forth across the rug, the cigar jutting from a corner of his mouth. I lit another cigarette, and Miss Spilsbury came in briskly, after a perfunctory knock, and laid a white envelope on my desk.

"Some man brought it," the receptionist said. "He didn't say anything, just put this on my desk and walked right out again. I was at the filing cabinet, and I didn't even get a good look at him."

"He couldn't have been much if you didn't get a good look at him," Mike grunted. Miss Spilsbury went out and I picked up the envelope and looked at it. It was plain and white and of cheap material, the kind you can buy in any ten cent store or stationery shop. My name and address and the word "personal" were lettered neatly on the envelope in blue ink, and it bore no postmark. I tore the envelope open and pulled out the single sheet of paper that it contained. The five sentences on the paper seemed to grow larger by the instant as I read:

"Why don't you ask someone who knows, if Martin Bender would do a thing like that? Don't you think that people ever change? And, incidentally, why don't you find out just who this fellow Murray Wyatt really was? A little bird told me that Martin Bender only saw Wyatt twice in his life. So why would he attempt to extort money from a guy he didn't know, or know anything about? Yours respectfully, The Chicago Canary."

→ 5 ←

AT A QUARTER of two, Mike and I went over to the Blue Ribbon for lunch, and we were finishing our dessert when we saw Christie approaching our table. "It's not a coincidence," Mike said in answer to my stare. "I asked the old boy. Only he said for us to go ahead and eat, and not wait for him, in case he couldn't make it."

The Inspector looked haggard and dead-tired and more melancholy than ever. His cow eyes were bleak with hostility, and his greeting consisted of a series of monosyllabic grunts, which convinced me that he would have a great deal more to say later. He ordered pot roast and potato pancakes, and when the waiter had gone he hunched forward and shook a skinny, speckled forefinger under my nose. "You stinker, Considine," he said in a tone more sad than angry, "you a-bominable stinker."

I didn't say anything. "People wonder why regular enforcement officers don't co-operate more with private cops," Christie rasped on. "You read these detective stories, and in nearly every one, the city dicks and the private eyes are like cats and dogs. Well, if the average citizen ever had any truck with people like you, if he really knew the kind of creep you are, he'd be in favor of boiling every private op in oil."

"I am amazed by your loquacity," I said, "but may I point out to you that you can't eat and talk at the same time. At least I hope you can't. Your food will soon be here, so, before it comes why not let us have the specific complaint, Inspector?"

"I'll give you a specific," Christie grated. "A while ago, I get a call from Morahan of the Rackets detail. He'd sent a couple of his boys over to the Aylewarde Hotel, to pick up some joker who's supposed to be trying to shake Big Joe down. When they got there, the guy had powdered out of the place, and Big Joe says it was all a mistake, that he didn't want a pinch made after all."

"A great humanitarian, Big Joe," I said. "The poor fellow probably told Carson a story that touched his heart."

"The guy he didn't want pinched was you, and don't bother to deny it," Christie answered peevishly. "I had Ageld and that big tub of lard, Carson, into my office about an hour ago, and I chewed them out for twenty minutes. So, instead of getting the story from you, where I should of got it from, I get it from punks like them—from a couple of slobs that started out cutting alcohol in a Chicago cellar."

"Just how legitimate are Carson and Ageld now?" Mike

asked. He had lighted one of his cigars and he was leaning back comfortably, evidently enjoying the conversation.

"They're pretty legit," Christie said grudgingly. "Big Joe owns a string of self-service laundries and a lot of vending machines and a summer camp, besides the Aylewarde Hotel. Max Ageld's got a big trucking business and a couple of restaurants, and a flock of apartment houses in Brooklyn. They did dabble in horse-race booking a little, but of course that's out, now." The Inspector smirked at Mike. "Everybody knows there's no gambling in New York at present."

The waiter brought Christie his food and the old man wolfed it silently, saying nothing until the last morsel had disappeared. When he had finished he pushed his plate back, took a vial filled with pills from his vest pocket, and dropped one of the pills into a glass of water. When the pill had dissolved he drank the clouded water, made a wry face, belched explosively, and leaned back in his chair.

Mike offered him a foil-wrapped cigar, but Christie shook his head. "Too rich for my blood," he said. He took one of his terrible stogies from the breast pocket of his coat, lit it and looked at us with narrowed eyes. "I burnt up a lot of the taxpayers' money this morning," he said finally.

"You're not burning up much of it with that cigar," Mike observed.

"I burnt it up with a long distance telephone call," Christie answered, "a call to the warden of the Minnewaska pen. A man name of Sharpe, a nice fella. I found out a lot about Bender."

"Anything you tell us will go no further," Mike said. "Our lips will be forever sealed. And incidentally, Chris, how about letting us have a copy of the recent photograph of Bender that the warden is going to send you? I wired and asked for some, but I don't know if the warden will send them to a private agency."

"I didn't say he was going to send me any," Christie growled, "but if he does, maybe I'll let you have one." Mike smiled at him, and Christie glowered at me, and blew a puff

of rank smoke into my face. "Bender isn't out of Minnewaska on parole," he said, in a very casual manner.

"What do you mean?" Mike asked quickly. "He didn't crush out, did he?"

"He had a pardon," Christie replied, "a full pardon. It seems that during the war Bender volunteered for some very dangerous medical experiments. And then, about a month ago, some stir-crazy con ran amuck in the prison machine shop. He killed a guard with a knife made out of a file, and he got the guard's rifle and ammo, and holed up in the machine shop, ready to shoot it out with everybody. And Bender went in, alone and unarmed, and talked the guy into surrendering. For which the Governor of the state slipped him a permanent pass."

"Very interesting," Mike said.

"You told me," Christie said, "that when Bender was tossing his weight around last night, he said that the worst could happen was he'd have to go back to Minnewaska. Well, he surely knew they couldn't send him back there, not since he had a full pardon."

Mike shrugged. "Bender figured, and rightly, that none of us knew about his pardon. The act was better the way he played it."

I reached into my breast pocket, took out the anonymous note I'd received, and shoved it across the table to Christie. "Here's something you may be interested in," I said, "and, please, no more invidious remarks about us not co-operating with the police."

Christie picked up the note and read it, very slowly. When he had finished he turned the paper over and stared at the back of it, and then he turned it right side up and read the note a second time, his lips moving as he read. "As though things weren't bad enough," he said lugubriously, "now we got anonymous letters." He sighed deeply, staring at the sheet of paper, and cracked the knuckles of one hand. "I wonder who in hell wrote this damned thing?"

"I thought perhaps you'd know," I said, "you always seem to be so sure about most things."

"Quit digging me, son," Christie said. "I got trouble enough, with the Commissioner riding me, and nothing but a lot of stupid flatties to work with. It could have been a crank wrote this note, of course, but there's a good chance Bender wrote it himself."

"I agree with you, if only for once," Mike said, "but why did he write it to Steve? Why to him, especially?"

Christie grinned an evil grin. "Maybe the guy's got a sense of humor. If Bender's the author, it maybe occurred to him last night that Considine's a dick who couldn't find a fresh skunk trace in a telephone booth. So he thought he'd have a little fun. And throw a little dust in Steve's eyes too, in case any dust was necessary."

"Bender must have been a busy little bee last night," I said hotly, "very busy. First he kills a guy, and then he goes home and composes a nice scissors-and-paste note to Max Ageld. After which he writes a note to me. Have you any idea how long it took him to snip those letters out of magazines, and paste them onto Ageld's note? Any idea how much patience it would take to do a thing like that?"

"I figure it took him quite a while," Christie said calmly, "and a tedious job like that isn't the kind of task a junky would enjoy, either, right after a murder. You think I'm pretty stupid, don't you, son?"

"I refuse to answer that letter," I said, "on the grounds that it might tend to degrade someone."

Christie knocked the ashes from his stogie and grunted. "You thought maybe it hadn't occurred to me that Bender maybe run up his message to Ageld *before* he blotted Wyatt? You thought maybe I hadn't considered the possibility that the killing of Wyatt wasn't just the spur-of-a-minute, screwy caper of a junked-up killer? Hell, even Big Joe Carson thought of that."

"It's quite possible that the guy we think is Bender isn't the real Bender at all," Mike Zacharias said quietly.

"You know," Christie said sarcastically, "I thought of that too."

"What about the letter writer's reference to Murray Wyatt?" I asked. "That stops me, and I wish somebody would tell me what that piece of business was all about."

"Wouldn't I like to tell you if I knew," the old cop gritted savagely. "I've run a check on Wyatt, as good a check as we could in the time we've had, and all we've drawn so far is blanks. His business partners don't know any more about his past than Thorne does."

"How did he stack up with his partners?" Mike asked. "Any friction between them?"

"Not to speak of," the Inspector said. "The senior members of the firm were kinda worried because Murray drank and gambled a lot but it didn't worry them too much, Wyatt being Bayard Thorne's in-law. They told me Murray always did his work, even when hungover and as far as they knew he was completely honest."

"You talk to his wife after we left?" Mike asked.

"Yeah. For about half an hour, and she only told us what Bayard J. had already told. He never said anything about his past, except about the orphanage in Chi. And, of course, the stuff he spilled about the hold-up and all, when Bender tried to shake him down. Compared to Wyatt, Frankie Costello was a talkative guy, that time he wouldn't tell the Kefauver Committee anything much except his name."

"I suppose you're checking on the girl, too?" I said.

Christie nodded. "We certainly are," he said. "I got a couple guys on her. She was educated at Vassar, or one of those fancy-pants places. Wanted to be an actress, and it seems she was pretty damned good at it too. No Helen Hayes, maybe, but she got good notices in some Broadway shows, after she'd gone to a dramatic academy and spent a couple seasons in summer stock.

"She seems to have been awful unlucky with her Broadway career," Christie went on. "She opened in a role supporting Horatio Willard, and the critics thought she was wonderful, and then darned if Willard didn't get a heart attack on the third night of the show, and kick off. A year later she was in

another play that clicked, and it looked like she was on her way to stardom. So what happens? She gets some kind of rare throat infection, and loses her voice and has to get out of the show. She had a kind of a nervous breakdown after that. Nothing real serious, but she was in a rest-home for a few weeks, and after that she met Wyatt, and I guess that was the end of her theatrical career."

"Tell me something, Chris," Mike said. "Didn't Thorne say anything more about her marriage to Wyatt? I mean, didn't the old guy seem to think it very strange that his daughter should wind up married to an ex-Chicago hood, under any circumstances?"

"I got the idea that Bayard J. still can't believe it," Christie said, "and I think he's entirely on the level when he says he never suspected Wyatt. He did recall, though, that Murray seemed to have a kind of morbid interest in crime. Murray was always analyzing robberies and murders, and trying to figure out who was guilty, and how the jobs could have been pulled off better."

The old cop blew out a cloud of smoke, squinted at the tablecloth. "I think Bayard J. hated Wyatt's guts," he said. "But he couldn't stop the marriage because it seems he never had much control over the girl, and I'm afraid Thorne didn't give her much in the way of parental guidance. He just gave her everything, too much of everything, except his time.

"There's an older sister, too, a widow named Helen West, who lives in Forest Hills. I'm going to talk to her tonight, just in case she can help. Incidentally, they're burying Murray Wyatt on Thursday."

Christie got wearily to his feet, hesitated a moment, then stooped and picked up the anonymous note. "I better have the boys look this over for prints," he said, "although I doubt if they'll find any, except ours. People are getting pretty smart about things like that. Whoever wrote this probably wore rubber gloves when they did the job."

"I'll keep in touch with you, Chris," Mike said.

"Yeah, do," the old man said. "The Commish is really on

me, like a burr." He folded the note and put it into his pocket and walked out, gaunt and gray and stooped.

Both Mike and I went to Murray Wyatt's funeral on Thursday afternoon. We went because there was a chance—an outside chance—that Wyatt's killer might be the morbid type of homicide artist who feels compelled to witness the final disposal of his victim. But there was no Bender, nor anyone who remotely resembled Bender, among the crowd that thronged the funeral chapel, nor among the scant dozen mourners that rode out to the cemetery. Mike and I remained in our cab while the grave-side rites were held. I had one quick glimpse of Deirdre's white face as she lifted her veil for an instant, a small and pathetic figure, blackly outlined against the yellow clay heaped above the open grave. Another woman, also dressed in mourning, stood close beside her, and I assumed that this was the sister who lived in Forest Hills.

We went back to the office when the forlorn business was over, stopping on the way to buy the evening papers. The Wyatt murder was already off the front page in all of the sheets with the exception of the *Evening Progress*. A left-of-center rag, so far left, in fact, that it couldn't have touched right with a ten-foot pole, the *Evening Progress* was one of the few local newspapers openly opposed to Thorne's senatorial candidacy. Across the top of the smear-sheet's front page, appropriately printed in red ink, a banner headline screamed: WHY DID BENDER KILL BAYARD THORNE'S SON-IN-LAW? There was also a front page editorial, set almost entirely in ten-point boldface type, which demanded that the police "stop stalling, and divulge all of the facts in the case."

Mike and I sat side by side on the couch in his office, reading the editorial blast, and when we had finished, Mike tossed the sheet into the wastebasket and walked to his desk and lowered himself into the chrome-and-leather chair. "Give that editor about two more days," he said, "and the guy will probably conclude that Bender was the victim of an imperialist plot. We tortured him until he went insane—temporarily—and

he borrowed a gun and shot his tormenter, Wyatt, who, of course, was a hireling of Wall Street."

There was a knock at the door and Mike growled an invitation to enter, and Miss Spilsbury came in. She had a large manila envelope in her hand, and she said that it had just come in, airmail special delivery, from Minnewaska. Mike grabbed the envelope, waved Miss Spilsbury out, and tore the envelope open. He shook it excitedly above the desk, and a photograph slid out of the brown paper and thudded onto Mike's blotting pad. A letter fluttered out of the envelope too, but neither of us paid any attention to it, at the moment; both of us were staring at the photograph—a photograph of Martin Bender.

I looked at it, giving it a long, hard, impartial scrutiny, and even as the features of the man in the photograph stamped themselves indelibly upon my memory, I came to the sick realization that I couldn't positively identify the face in front of me, could not be certain that this was the man who had killed Murray Wyatt.

The features were very similar; the Minnewaska convict had the same sort of thin and handsome face, the same lank and almost white hair that we had seen in Deirdre Wyatt's apartment, and the eyes were large and prominent, and set like the eyes of the man who had held us at gun-point on Monday evening. If Marty Bender hadn't killed Wyatt, I told myself, then Marty either had an identical twin, or he came as close to having a real-life "double" as any man could have, outside of fiction or the films. But I couldn't have truthfully sworn that the man in the photograph was the man we sought; he looked too much like too many other guys.

Mike sighed, as though reading my thoughts. "There are a thousand nice-looking characters in Manhattan who look just like this. I don't envy Christie's boys, hunting for him; they'll be spotting Benders in every bar and grill in town."

I picked up the letter that had accompanied the photograph, and handed it to Mike. His eyes flicked it briefly, and then he sighed again and tossed the letter into a basket on his desk. "From the warden of the Minnewaska pen. The picture

of Marty was taken a year ago, under kind of ironic circumstances. A con photographer took it for the prison magazine, the night Bender was elected president of the Convicts' Welfare Society."

The inter-com on Mike's desk squawked as he spoke. Mike leaned forward and flipped a switch and said, "Yeah," into the box, and I heard Miss Spilsbury's voice in a gush of words that were unintelligible to me. "Okay," Mike said, when her voice trailed off, "let him come in." He thumbed the switch again, and leaned back in his chair and grinned at me. "A friend of yours to see us. A Mr. Max Ageld."

The dapper man came in, wearing a double-breasted gray suit and a matching overcoat and a maroon tie with a pearl pin skewered through its rich folds. His homburg sat exactly straight on his head, and when he pulled it off, not an iron-gray hair moved from its place. I said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Ageld. Nice to see you again. This is Mr. Zacharias, our president."

Mike didn't rise or offer to shake hands, and Max Ageld made him a little bow and sat in a chair near the desk. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Zacharias," he said, "only, of course, I feel as though I know you already, with the reputation you've got. You're the William J. Burns and the Pinkerton of this generation."

"You pay me many more compliments like that," Mike said, "and the first thing you know, I'll raise our rates. What's on your mind, or is this just a social call?"

"I discussed a certain matter with Mr. Considine on Tuesday morning," Ageld said. "A little matter of some protection for myself and my friend Mr. Joseph Carson. I would have come in sooner, but Mr. Carson was very obstinate, and also I was very busy."

Mike grunted and tossed the photograph across the desk. "Know this guy?" he asked softly.

Ageld took a very clean linen handkerchief from his breast pocket, and drew a pince-nez—actually a pince-nez—from a pocket in his vest. He wiped the glasses deliberately, hitched them into place on his thin nose, and stared intently at the

photograph. "That's Marty Bender," he said finally. "If it isn't Marty, it's someone enough like him to be his own brother."

"I understand that you saw Bender not long ago," Mike said. "Could you say positively—could you swear—that the guy in this photograph is the same guy you saw?"

"No," Max Ageld said, after a moment of hesitation, "no, I don't think I could do that. The trouble is, he looks like too many other people. He'd even look like me, if he was a few years older, and a little thinner in the face."

The hell of it was, it was true; Max Ageld did bear considerable resemblance to the man in the photograph. I sighed, and Mike heard me and looked at me, and I jerked a thumb at the door. "You and Mr. Ageld want to talk business," I said, "and if you don't mind, I'll skip the sordid details. I've got some work to do."

I nodded to Ageld and walked out. I went through the waiting room and into my own office, shutting the door behind me. I got into my desk chair and tilted it back and put my feet up on the desk top and lit a cigarette. There was a small calendar in a bronze frame on the desk, and I reached out with my left foot and kicked it, toppling it over on the blotter.

I didn't need any calendar to tell me that it was Thursday, and that I had only the rest of Thursday and two other days in which to cut myself a slice of Bayard Thorne's twenty thousand dollar reward. I'd frittered Wednesday away, talking to a lot of furtive characters who I'd optimistically believed might help to find Martin Bender, or the guy who had used his name; none of the furtive characters had helped, and I'd gone home Wednesday night feeling physically dirty and spiritually sick, and low enough to have walked upright under an oyster's bottom shell. I realized now that the Wyatt murder was even farther from solution than it had been when you could still smell the smoke; all I had was a pocketful of cold, damp winter air, some indefinite plans and suspicions, and more loose ends than a broken knitting machine.

Armed with the description that Mike and I had given them, the New York police had tossed out one of their gigantic dragnets on Tuesday morning, but none of the fish pulled in

had been Martin Bender. Christie hadn't said so, but by late Tuesday night or early Wednesday morning he would have received Bender's prints and recent photographs from Minnewaska, and the hunt would have been intensified. I had no doubt that the killer would be caught eventually, but one would get you fifty that he would not be caught by me. All I had, I told myself bitterly, was health and hope and a lot of greed, and unless I hit something flying blind, or pulled a rabbit—a talking rabbit—out of my hat, the Internal Revenue Bureau would never put the bite on me for part of Thorne's reward.

I tossed my used-up cigarette into the ash-tray on the desk, fired another, and leaned back studying the office ceiling. I let my thoughts go, searching for a solid idea, and my thoughts went around and around and got nowhere, like squirrels in the cage of my mind.

There was so little that I really knew, and so little of what I knew that I could understand. But of all the scattered pieces of this monstrous jigsaw, the anonymous letter seemed the most inexplicable. Christie, no matter how facetiously he had spoken in the restaurant, might really believe that the letter had been written to confuse and ridicule me, but I wasn't buying any of that. The hopped-up bucko who'd blasted Murray just wasn't the type to waste his time writing cryptic messages to a private dick. Whoever had sent me the note—and I was positive now that it wasn't the man who'd killed Murray—had been trying to tell me something, or at least to point a finger of suspicion at the late Mr. Wyatt.

Well, what about Murray Wyatt, I asked myself, what about him and his past, now that you've got around to that? Deirdre's husband had admitted that he'd been a get-away chauffeur for a stick-up mob; there was a strong possibility that he'd also done a little trigger-work on his own account. He'd also kept the bank loot and let his pal take the rap for the job, the whole rap, alone, and how much dirtier can you get than that? It didn't seem likely that the letter writer, or anyone else, could connect the late lamented Murray with any

crimes more terrible than those in which he had implicated himself.

The writer of the anonymous letter had implied that the real Martin Bender had seen Murray Wyatt only twice in his life. It was a maddening and an enigmatic statement, because it did nothing but imply that Murray might have been a bigger heel even than he had seemed. If the real Bender had written the letter—and if he hadn't killed Wyatt—why hadn't he said so? If he were hiding out, afraid to come forward because of some reason known only to himself, why hadn't he mentioned the fact? And finally, if there was some secret connected with Murray's past, some evidence connected with his real identity that might prove Bender's innocence, why hadn't he stated what it was?

I lit a third cigarette from the butt of the second, and a vague idea began to take shape in a portion of my mind that wasn't numbed by hours of riding on a merry-go-round of unremitting conjecture. *Because Bender doesn't know who Wyatt really was, either,* the still-lucid part of my mind shouted, *Bender only saw him twice, but he knew that Wyatt was a phony, and knows that if you find out who he really was, and what he was trying to pull, it will lead you straight to the killer.*

It wasn't possible, I told myself, it wasn't plausible, it made no part of common sense. Why had the real Bender written to me of all persons, a shamus he didn't even know? Unless he was in some other sort of jam, unless the killer was more like him than he was like himself, and he had no alibi for Monday night, Bender would have given himself up and proved his innocence long before now. Unless years of prison had completely addled his brain, he would have come forward and talked to the cops, if possible.

If possible! The phrase had no significance as I first said it to myself; it was just so many words framed in my mind, putting a convenient peroration to a sentence. But I said them again and something stirred in my consciousness and I was stung to mental alertness. I repeated the phrase for a third time, and it was sharp with significance as a notice of mort-

gage foreclosure, pregnant with meaning, as the novelists say, and in an advanced stage of pregnancy besides.

Martin Bender was in a place that he couldn't get out of to talk to anyone, let alone the cops. Martin Bender was in a place that he might, conceivably, get a letter out of—just so long as the letter wasn't addressed to the police. He was in a place where nobody wanted any part of the police. And finally (this, of course was only conjecture on my part), Martin Bender was in a place that he wasn't going to get out of alive —unless someone got cracking and saw to it that he did.

I told myself these things, and a hunch built itself up in my mind, a solid hunch that told me I was right. I decided to go and tell Mike—Ageld would have left long ago, I told myself —and I jerked my knees up, meaning to push the swivel chair back by thrusting the soles of my feet against the desk. I pushed too hard; the chair went over with a rending crash and I half turned in the air as it fell and sprawled on a carpet that moved and flung me rudely against a wall.

I rolled over and saw Miss Spilsbury's face in the doorway, her eyebrows arched over eyes that bulged with fright. Mike came in then, and waved her out and shut the door behind her. He stood with his hands on his hips, looking down at me, and laughter wrinkles cut deep into the flesh around his brown eyes. "The Confidential Agency," he said, "we never sleep. Just ask for Mr. Considine, the Sherlock of the swivel chair."

I sat up and pointed at him, and my hand was shaking. "Look, Mike," I shouted, "listen to me! Martin Bender wrote that anonymous note—the real Martin Bender!"

Mike nodded calmly. "Yes, of course," he said, without a trace of excitement in his voice. "I figure it had to be him."

"Then somebody—the gunman, or some of his accomplices —have got Bender penned up somewhere."

"You may be right about that too," Mike said, "but he did get a letter out. And if he could get a letter out, it seems to me he might have told us more than he did."

"He doesn't know anything about Wyatt," I said, getting up from the floor. "But I think he's convinced that if we can

find out about Wyatt's past, we'll know who did the killing."

"Maybe," Mike answered. "It's all a little too pat—nobody knowing anything about Wyatt's past. Murray—the little guy who wasn't there, the man who owned the original invisible cloak."

"But the cloak had a hole in it somewhere," I said. "We can find it, if we work hard enough."

"Possibly so," Mike said, "but we've got the shorts in the time department, so far as that reward is concerned." He raised one hip to the top of my desk and took one of my cigarettes and shoved it into his mouth. It looked the way a straw might have looked in the lips of the Cardiff giant. "And speaking of Bender," he said, "the real Bender. Like to hear something I just found out about our boy?"

I nodded. "Well, after Ageld left," Mike went on, "while you were having your little nap, I put through a call to the warden of the Minnewaska Penitentiary. A real nice guy, like Christie said. And according to him, Marty Bender was real bad coffee the first seven-eight years he was in the clink. A guy doing his time the hard way, with plenty of it spent in the hole, or the disciplinary cells, as the warden put it. And then something changed him."

"Changed him into what?" I asked.

"Into a model prisoner. A gentle guy who apparently wouldn't hurt a fly, the warden says. Bender took a high-school correspondence course and got himself a mail-order diploma. He even took several college courses, the same way. Besides being the prexy of the welfare fund, he was also one of the editors of the prison magazine. He went to church every Sunday, and evidently developed a strong religious philosophy."

"So, you see," I said, "our Bender couldn't be the real Bender. He—"

"Wait a minute," Mike interrupted. "The warden told me not to count too heavily on that assumption. Said you can't tell about cons. He said they had a guy in there once got thirty years for murder, and the fellow got so devout everybody called him Holy Sam. So Sam got sprung out of the iron

bungalow, finally, and what do you suppose he did? Went right back to the same town where he'd murdered his wife, twenty years before—and bumped off his wife's sister."

"I still don't think Martin Bender is the killer," I said. "What else did the warden say about him?"

"Just some more stuff that added up to the impression Bender was a really reformed character. During the last two years he was there, Marty slept in a room over the warden's garage—outside the walls. The warden's a dog fancier, and Bender looked after the pooches. He seems to have had a real affinity for dogs and canaries. He had a lot of canaries in the room over the garage—used to breed 'em for other lifers who were sometimes allowed to have a bird in their cells."

"The Chicago Canary!" I yelled. "Well, that just about settles it, doesn't it?"

"Maybe," Mike said, "but of course the letter could have been written by somebody who knew about his fondness for birds."

"Oh, for God's sake, how much proof do you need?" I asked irritably. I started to say something else, but the phone on my desk rang, and I reached out for the receiver automatically and said, "Considine speaking."

Deirdre Wyatt's voice, low-pitched, tense, came over the wire. "I—I saw you at the cemetery, Mr. Considine. I wanted to talk to you, to ask you if there had been any new developments. But of course I couldn't out there."

"Yes, it would have been difficult," I said sympathetically. "In answer to your question, there have been several developments, but I'm afraid none of them have brought us any closer to a solution of the case."

"I wonder," she said hesitantly, stopped for a moment, and then went on, "I wonder if I could see you, if you could possibly come down here, at least for a few minutes?"

"Now?" I asked stupidly.

"Please," she said, and her voice was so low it was nearly inaudible, "please. I'm terribly afraid. I've never been so frightened in my life."

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OLD RAMROD DIDN'T open the door of Thorne's house when I got out of a taxi twenty minutes later. A young maid, apple-cheeked, blue-eyed, and as plump as Emma Gansil was thin, let me into the long dark hall and took my hat and coat, which was an improvement on gaunt Emma's service too. Vicarious grief sat lightly on the plump girl, and her eyes had a vivacious sparkle, even though she spoke in the hushed voice appropriate for a scene of recent bereavement. "Mrs. Wyatt is in the parlor on the second floor," she said, "the first door at the top of the stairs. You may take the elevator, if you like, sir."

I told her politely that I wouldn't like. I walked down the hall, past the oil portrait of the old guy with the sour face, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the elevator sulking behind its outer door of iron bars, a cubicle of doom and disaster. I went up the steep and narrow staircase; the door to the parlor was open, and I passed into a high-ceilinged, oak-paneled room cluttered with old-fashioned furniture. A log fire burned on a wide hearth beneath a mantel of carved black marble, and Deirdre Wyatt sat on a sofa in front of the fireplace, with lamplight shining on her fair hair.

The girl's back was turned to me, and my feet made no sound on the thick carpet, but she seemed to know by some instinct that I had entered the room. She rose swiftly and turned and came towards me and gave me a firm handclasp. "I'm so sorry to trouble you," she said, "but I am glad you came. If I sounded somewhat hysterical over the telephone, I hope it didn't alarm you."

"It's all right, Mrs. Wyatt," I said, "it's no disgrace to be frightened. You take all the soldiers out of the army who are scared, you wouldn't have any army."

There were heavy dark shadows under her eyes and her heart-shaped face was very pale. She wasn't wearing mourn-

ing; since returning from the funeral she'd changed into a simple gray afternoon dress. I must have stared rather hard at the dress, because she looked down at it herself, and then gave me a wan smile. "I'm not going to wear mourning," she said. "Murray wouldn't have wanted me to wear it. He just wasn't that sort of person. . . . Won't you please sit down, Mr. Considine?"

I sat in a big, stiff-backed chair near the fire and she resumed her seat on the sofa. "Murray was terribly frightened when you saw him," she said, "but he was gay and lighthearted by nature, and he hated sad and unpleasant things." Her voice broke a little when she said that, but it was steady when she spoke again. "He wouldn't have wanted me to wear widow's weeds, but he wouldn't have wanted his murderer to go unpunished either. You can understand that, can't you?"

"I certainly can," I said, "and your husband's murderer will not go unpunished."

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked. "The maid will bring it."

"No thanks," I said, "I'm still trying to make a bum out of Hollywood. But I'll tell you what you can do, Mrs. Wyatt. You can tell me what you're afraid of, or what you were afraid of when you phoned me."

Deirdre's hands fluttered in a gesture of weariness and despair. "I wasn't going to tell you," she said, keeping her voice steady with an obvious effort. "After I telephoned you, I realized that I hadn't learned anything that would really help you to find the man who killed Murray, realized that what I had to say might only distract you. But"—her voice lowered to a whisper, as though she feared that someone besides me might overhear it—"I will tell you, so that you won't think I'm just a hysterical fool. I've talked to Martin Bender."

I was lighting a cigarette. I sat up straight in the big chair, staring at her in amazement, and the flame of the paper match curled around my fingers. I blew a quick breath across the match and my words tumbled out with the exhalation, fast and loud in the quiet room: "You talked to Bender? For God's sake, where, and when?"

"This morning. He telephoned."

"This morning?" I felt a little sick. "This morning, of all mornings he—" I broke off, forcing myself to be calm, but I was beginning to hate the junky gunman even more than I'd hated him at the start.

"I went upstairs to the apartment," Deirdre Wyatt said, "quite early this morning. I hadn't been up there since—since it happened. But I went up this morning, to look at Murray's things, to see if I couldn't find something—anything—that might give us some clue to his past. I went up there, and the phone rang, and it was Bender."

"Tell me everything that he said, please. Everything that you can remember."

"He said that he hadn't meant to kill Murray, but that Murray had attacked him when he turned his back for a moment. He said he didn't feel that Murray had discharged his debt to him, even though he had died. He said he wanted money—a lot of money—and that if I didn't get it for him, he'd make me wish I never had been born. Those are the exact words he used. I tried to argue with him—stall him until I had time to think—but he rang off, after saying that he'd contact me again —soon."

"You've told the police about this?" I asked.

"No," she said, "I haven't told them, at least not yet. Somehow I don't have much faith in the police. They seem so—so big and impersonal, and so lacking in intelligence."

"You must tell them," I said. "When I leave here, I want you to call Inspector Christie, immediately, and tell him everything that you've told me. For one thing, he'll want to tighten up on security measures. He's probably keeping this place under constant surveillance, as a matter of routine, but he'll want more men on the job now."

The girl nodded. "I'll call him if you say so, Mr. Considine."

"You're sure that you've told me everything Bender said? You haven't omitted any details that may have seemed unimportant to you?"

Deirdre looked at the floor and sighed, a deep sigh that was almost a groan. "All right," she said dully, "I did leave some-

thing out. Bender spoke to me about Daddy. He said he knew something terrible about my father's private life—something that would ruin Daddy if it were ever made public."

"Ah," I said gently, "ah! That was quite a detail you left out, Mrs. Wyatt. Do you really believe that this man has something on your father?"

Deirdre shrugged. "I'd say that there's only a slight chance that Daddy had ever done anything to be really ashamed of. Of course, I can't really be sure, can I? I've never really been close to my father, not ever. He was always too busy with his meetings and his committees and his ever-lasting civic duties, as he calls them. And anyway, my older sister, Helen, was always his favorite. He used to do things with her, but he just left me to be brought up by Emma until I went away to school."

"You've spoken to your father about this telephone call from the killer?"

"Not yet," Deirdre said, "but naturally I intended to."

"About your husband," I said, speaking as gently as possible, "are you positive—absolutely positive—that you know nothing about his life before you met him?"

"Nothing!" Deirdre said, her chin trembling. "I told that awful Inspector I didn't—told him again and again. Won't anyone believe me?"

"I believe you," I told her, "but I think we'd better not talk any more now. We'd better wait until you're not so distressed."

"We'll talk now!" she cried vehemently. "We won't wait. If there's anything I can do to help catch that monster, Bender, I insist upon doing it now."

"All right, then," I answered, "we'll talk now. If you or anyone could recall anything about your husband that would help us to find out who he really was—"

"Really was?" she broke in, a little wildly. "For heaven's sake, what do you mean by that?"

"I stated that last remark badly," I said. "I'll try to do it better, even if more bluntly. I have a suspicion—a strong suspicion—that the man who killed your husband was not the ex-convict, Martin Bender."

She stared at me, her eyes widening. "But why would he say so, if he weren't? And why would Murray—" she broke off, looked at me fixedly for a moment, and then went on. "You mean that if the murderer wasn't Bender, then it isn't likely that Murray was implicated in any crime with him?"

It wasn't exactly what I meant, but I let it pass. "Murray must have been mad to say what he said about himself," the girl went on. "He'd have had to be crazy to make such a statement, and yet I know that my husband was sane. There had to be some reason for his telling a story like that."

"Let's just suppose," I answered, "that the man who calls himself Bender was blackmailing—or attempting to blackmail —several persons, including Murray Wyatt. Suppose he had something on your husband, something that enabled him to force Murray Wyatt into doing whatever he told him. The story about the bank robbery was lurid enough to sound credible. And your father *might* have paid the fifty thousand demanded."

"Father would never have paid a blackmailer," she said positively. "Murray must have known that."

"But perhaps Murray couldn't convince the killer that your dad wouldn't pay. And let's consider the others who were being blackmailed. Wouldn't your husband's murder have convinced them that the blackmailer really meant business? I think so. The killer may have shot your husband merely to advance his own plans."

Deirdre reached out and took a cigarette from a silver box on a small table at the end of the sofa, and I saw that her hand was trembling violently. I got up and held a match for her, and she bowed her head over the flame, and kept it bowed after the cigarette was lighted. "I'm sorry," I said, "awfully sorry. I didn't want to talk to you today, not after the ordeal you've been through."

"It's all right," she said after a moment of silence. "I'll do what I have to do." She raised her eyes, and there was a film of tears across them, but her voice was calm. "What about the real Martin Bender?" she asked. "Is there such a man?"

"There is," I said. "We've checked on all that. He was seen here in New York, two weeks ago."

"But he must have heard about this affair—read about it in the press. Wouldn't he have come forward, when he found out that someone was using his name?"

"Not if the cops were looking for him for something else," I said. "He'd probably just lay low, hoping they'd find the real killer, hoping he'd never have to appear at all. Criminals like Bender don't like the cops. He wouldn't help them, if he could avoid doing so."

"It's terribly important that we find out about Murray's past life, isn't it?" she asked.

"Finding out about Murray has a lot of relative importance in capturing Bender," I said. "If we knew what he'd done that might have made him the object of blackmail, if we knew who his former associates were, we might find something that would lead us to the killer."

The girl put the tips of her fingers against her temples, her fine black brows pulled together in a frown. "I'll think of something," she said. "I'll find something. I'll go over every word he ever said to me—when I'm not so tired, when I'm able to concentrate. I'll keep in close touch with you, the moment I think of anything that may help us, I'll let you know."

The apple-cheeked maid came in at that moment. She smiled at me, and spoke to Deirdre in a sepulchral voice. "Mr. Inspector Christie is downstairs, Mrs. Wyatt. In the library, with Mr. Thorne. He would like to see you as soon as possible, if you please."

"The old boy must be getting psychic," I muttered.

"Thank you, Nancy," Deirdre Wyatt said to the girl, and then turned to me. "Do you want to see the Inspector, Mr. Considine?"

I said that I did not want to see the Inspector. "Shall I tell him that I asked you to come here?" she inquired.

"Why not?" I said. "He'll probably find out anyway."

We went downstairs together. At the foot of the stairs we shook hands, formally.

"I want to thank you very much, Mr. Considine," she said

with quiet dignity. "You've been very kind, a real help in this crisis. I think if I'd had to deal entirely with the regular police, with stupid boors such as Christie, I'd have gone mad."

I watched her go through the door into the library—the door that I'd started for Monday night, and had never reached. I was as sorry for Deirdre Wyatt as I'd ever allowed myself to be sorry for anyone, and I think if I had seen the junky at that moment I would have killed him with my bare hands. I got my hat and overcoat from the rack in the hall and went out into the street, feeling mean and savage as hell.

The cold air felt very good. It also snapped me back to a reality that was as chilly as the ozone, and reality cooled my anger and left me wrestling with some doubts—and very reasonable doubts, too—about Deirdre Wyatt. How, a voice of returning logic asked me, could the girl have received a telephone call from Bender without Christie knowing about the call? If ever the cops had a tap on any telephone lines since Mr. Bell perfected his little invention, they certainly had them on the telephones in the Thorne house. If Deirdre had really talked to the guy who called himself Bender, then Inspector Christie had a transcript of every word that was spoken, probably within minutes after the call was made.

If Christie had no such record, then the lovely Deirdre was a liar; there had been no call, and the girl had summoned me for ulterior purposes at which I could only guess. . . . I thought of going back into the house, but I decided to wait and speak to Christie later. It was possible that he had come to the house for the express purpose of discussing the telephone call about which I was in doubt.

I stood before a curtained window of Thorne's old house, looking for a taxi, and something made a sharp, tapping sound on the pane behind me. I turned around: beyond the glass I saw a red-stained nail and a tapering forefinger, a white hand below a black sleeve. I ran my eyes up the sleeve and looked at the face above it, and I jumped, staring at a woman's features, because for a moment I thought the features behind the fluttering curtain belonged to Deirdre Wyatt. But I saw, after a moment, that the face was older and harder, and I

decided that I was looking at the sister from Forest Hills. As I gaped at the apparition, the woman's lips moved, framing the words, "Wait, please!" I nodded, and the curtain swayed back into place. A moment later the woman came out of the house.

She stood in the cold blue winter dusk with the wind whipping the skirt of her black dress—a mourning garment that seemed incongruous when you looked at her long, red-stained nails. She stood very still, looking at me fearfully but appraisingly, as though she wanted to make up her mind about something before she spoke. She had the same amber-gold hair and dark eyes as Deirdre, but she was taller and heavier—a little too heavy—and her painted mouth was thin against the pallor of her face. She had been drinking brandy—quite a lot of it, I thought—and the smell of the stuff rose over the odor of some expensive perfume.

I raised my hat mechanically, looking at her, and after a moment she spoke. "You're Mr. Considine?" she asked. "The man from the detective agency?" Her voice was like Deirdre's too, but strained and hoarse, and filled with an almost hysterical urgency.

I nodded. "I'm Deirdre's sister, Helen," the woman said. "If I tell you something important—important and absolutely confidential, would you give me your word that you wouldn't repeat what I said?"

"That depends on what you tell me," I said.

"You want to catch the man who killed Murray Wyatt," she said impatiently, "and yet you won't even promise me that. Doesn't the reward mean anything to you? Father told me he'd offered a reward."

"Since you brought the matter up," I answered, "the reward does enter into my considerations. Look, lady, you're shivering. Why not tell me what you're going to tell me and get back into the house, before you get pneumonia."

Her voice was a vehement whisper, loosing a torrent of words. "If you want to find out who killed him," she said bitterly, "ask the women he ran around with—ask *all* of the women—because some of them must know something. He

never was true to my sister or—or to anyone else. He wanted every pretty girl he saw, ran after them all."

"How do you know, Helen?" I asked gently, hating myself for the question. "Did Murray Wyatt run after you, too?"

The dark eyes blazed and the thin mouth writhed, spitting words at me through the brandy reek. "I might have known what your attitude would be. A cheap detective, a crook probably, as bad as Murray was himself."

Her voice rose almost to a scream on the last few words. I put out a hand, touched her shoulder, trying to calm her. "Don't make a scene, please," I said. "Go back to the house, and sometime when you're feeling better you can tell me why you hated Murray Wyatt."

She shook my hand from her shoulder, turned and lurched towards the door. She turned and looked back at me with her hand on the knob, her eyes burning with hatred and contempt. "Hated him?" she snarled. "Hated him? Oh, you fool, you damned, utter idiot!" She swung the door open, laughing, her voice like a bugle shrilling in the quiet street. The laugh seemed to echo after her when she had gone in, slamming the door behind her.

I telephoned Christie late that night and asked him about the call Deirdre had allegedly received. The old man was rude and, I thought, somehow evasive, and although he said that the police had monitored a telephone conversation between Deirdre and a man who had said his name was Bender, Christie's manner implied that it was none of my business. I didn't argue, having got the information I wanted from the horse's mouth; when you argued with the old horse, Christie, you usually found that the old horse still had teeth.

Saturday night came very soon that week. From the moment I left Thorne's house until the new week had begun, I was a guy who lived in a waking dream of avarice, eating little, sleeping almost not at all, a man sustained by coffee and whisky and venal hope. And when it was over, when Sunday had come and Thorne's big twenty grand reward had vanished, I was still going—not strong, perhaps, but still going—

like a tired old hunting dog quartering a field from which the most important game had fled.

There had been plenty to keep me occupied. Holed up in their residences with a couple of Confidential operatives each to shield them from harm, Big Joe Carson and little Max Ageld had suddenly discovered a profound interest in their individual and collective pasts. On Thursday evening Carson telephoned Mike and gave him a list of New York residents, all of whom had once been denizens of the Chicago underworld, and most of whom had known Martin Bender. Max Ageld had done even better; in addition to providing us with the names of several persons who had been acquainted with the hoodlum, the dapper man provided us with a list of narcotics peddlers (all known to be dealers in heroin), any one of whom might have had Wyatt's murderer as a customer.

Mike, almost entirely convinced that the killer was not Martin Bender, nevertheless put a half dozen boys to work checking out the Chicago emigrés. The list of narcotics peddlers we kept for ourselves, because whoever Wyatt's murderer might be, he was a lad with a habit; he had to have his happy dust, and as Mike said, the man we sought would be more likely to be found doing business with a peddler than engaged in renewing acquaintances with former Chicago residents.

We talked to a thin, pasty youth named Vincent in a candy-store in Brooklyn, to a swarthy Levantine named Leo in a Manhattan poolroom, to a fat and pallid boy named Oscar, who had a newsstand in the Bronx. The eyes of all three told us that they knew something, but none of them would talk; neither threats nor offers of bribes could make them say a word.

There were others, many others, who would not say a word. Then, late Saturday afternoon, we climbed four flights of dark, smelly stairs in a tenement, looking for a character named Enrique González. This was in Spanish Harlem; Enrique was home, he was home and engaged in beating his wife when we arrived. We interrupted this cheerful domestic scene and pushed Enrique around a little, up in the squalid

tenement room, and Señor González talked, finally: a little, but not much. We wrote down the addresses he gave us and rode to another tenement, on another street, and talked to a hunch-backed Cuban named Eugenio Romero, to a Porto Rican named Sixto Gómez, to a gaunt mulatto woman called Billie, who lay racked by coughing under a red and green crazyquilt, in a bed under which five fat mongrel dogs yapped and snarled.

And none of them knew anything much. Nobody knew the man whose photograph we held before their eyes. Nobody had ever sold any heroin, nobody had ever bought any heroin, nobody knew anybody who ever bought or sold heroin. Marijuana, yes, perhaps; even cocaine, maybe, but certainly not heroin—how could you get heroin when, as everyone knew, a man high on H had murdered some millionaire downtown, and now all the New York police were hunting the peddler who had served him, so that they could find the man who had killed?

Mike grinned his tired lop-sided grin, talking softly to them all, as patient as a starving cat at a rathole. Billie could have bought a lot of dog meat with the bill that Mike peeled from his bankroll and slipped into her cadaverous hand. Billie's memory improved, then; she didn't know *for sure*, of course, but she seemed to remember a guy named Chip who might remember something, a man named Chip who hung out in a pool hall on First Avenue.

We went to the pool hall, and Chip wasn't there; nobody, it seemed, had ever heard of anyone named Chip. But a tall youth, chalking a cue under a cone of glaring white light, looked at us across the faded green cloth of a pool table, and made a lightning quick movement towards the street. We went out, into a cold east wind that was freighted with sleet, and the tall youth came out after us and told us where we could find Chip.

Chip hung out in a gin-mill on Second Avenue, way downtown; Chip didn't come this far north any more, now that the heat was on. A bill rustled, going from Mike's hand to his, and the boy's lips moved almost soundlessly, giving us a de-

scription of Chip. A medium-tall guy, he said, a medium-tall guy with one gimpy leg, and one crockery eye. Chip could help us out with a fix, if anyone could; just tell him we were sent by Eddie the Deuce.

We left Eddie and rode down to the gin-mill. The bartender was a fat guy with wary eyes, and he stood for a long time without answering after we'd asked him if he'd seen Chip. "I ain't seen him tonight," he said, finally, "but maybe he'll come in later. Sometimes he does."

"We don't know him, exactly," Mike said. "But a guy up in Harlem set up a meet for us. A guy name of Eddie the Deuce."

The bartender didn't seem to have ever heard of Eddie. "If Chip comes in, I'll tell him you wanna see him," he said, and began to wipe off the bar with a damp and dirty rag.

We sat in a booth in the gin-mill, and waited. It was a quarter of eleven when we went into the place, and we hadn't had any dinner, and after a while we remembered that, and we ordered some cheese sandwiches from a bald waiter who kept bringing us beer that we ordered, but didn't want. The twenty grand reward was gone already—we both knew that—but we didn't mention it until midnight, and then Mike sighed quietly. Somehow, the ten grand we might *still* get didn't seem very large to us, even at that dark moment.

"Okay," Mike said, "that's that, and now we're just doing a regular, ordinary job. Since we're no longer blinded by dreams of avarice, maybe we can think this thing out straight, and maybe we'll get a break."

Mike looked dead-beat. His eyes were hollow and red-lidded, and there were deep lines of weariness furrowed into his cheeks. He was a guy who lived prudently and saved his money—the money that the horse-race bookies didn't get—but he could have used ten thousand dollars. For that matter, who couldn't?

We knocked off at three o'clock when the gin-mill banged shut. I told Mike that I'd call him, early, and I caught a taxi and went home. Carla was asleep, and I didn't wake her. I went into the bedroom on tiptoe and got the alarm clock and

set it for eight o'clock, and then I went back into the living room and lay down on the couch.

As it turned out, I didn't even hear the alarm clock. It woke Carla, and she got up and turned it off, and she told me later that I didn't move, even with the alarm bell jangling in my ear. My wife put another blanket over me and dressed and made breakfast for herself, and I was still asleep when she went to church at half past nine.

The telephone woke me. I heard it only vaguely at first, a remote sound, a million miles away across the frontiers of sleep, but its insistent clamoring became a whining saw, hacking against the bars of sleep that shut me in. I opened my eyes and saw snowflakes falling beyond the living-room window, and I let my weighted eyelids fall and took refuge in slumber again. But the telephone rasped on; it became a metallic hook that grappled for me and yanked me back to consciousness, to the warm room and the feather-footed dance of snow outside the windowpane.

I got up groggily and stumbled to the telephone and picked it up and spoke into it. Mike's voice came at me from far off. "I thought you were going to call me at eight o'clock?"

I said, "Yeah," because it was all I could think of to say. I said it through a tremendous yawn, and leaned against the wall and slid down to a sitting position on the floor, holding the telephone on my knees.

"Well, you can go back to bed, son," Mike said. "Go back to bed and sleep until something else turns up. Because they got our friend Bender."

"They what?" I yowled. I came awake, and instantly, at Mike's words.

"In Vermont," the boss said, "this morning. The guy gave himself up, and admitted the murder of Murray Wyatt. Christie just called to tell me."

"They're sure it's really him," I asked, "and not some screwball?"

"They're reasonably sure," Mike answered in a voice that didn't have a trace of emotion in it. "The guy answers Bender's general description, he seems to know all about the

case, and he was packing a .38 when he came in. Christie's waiting to check fingerprints before he talks to the newspaper men, but it looks like the real McCoy."

I laughed a little crazily into the telephone, and after a moment Mike began to laugh too, like a man getting a delayed reaction to a very funny story. For half a minute our voices crackled across the wire in lunatic mirth, until Mike remembered his dignity and got his laughter under control. "I'll call you later," he said. "Otherwise, I'll see you at the office in the morning."

I hung up and staggered back to the couch and sat down on it, still laughing. I saw my face reflected in the mirror on the wall across the room, and the reflection gibbered at me, lined and swollen with weariness, stubbled with wiry reddish beard. I went away from that idiotic image and shambled into the kitchen and poured myself three fingers of bourbon out of the bottle that was still left from Christmas. I made myself a salami sandwich, chiefly because salami was the only thing I could find to make myself a sandwich of, and I went back into the living room and ate it, between spasms of mirth. I was still laughing when Carla came home from church.

She looked beautiful, coming in out of the cold with the color high in her ivory-white cheeks and her eyes clear and bright and glad that I was awake, even if I was giving a credible imitation of an imbecile. I hadn't told her much about the case, and I had not mentioned the reward at all, but after Carla had got herself a cup of coffee and seated herself beside me, I spilled the whole story.

I started at the beginning, and omitted no details. I even told her that Deirdre Wyatt was beautiful—if you cared for that sort of blond beauty. I told her about Big Joe and Max Ageld and Old Ramrod, and about the sister, Helen, who had stood outside of her father's house, screaming hysterical words through the smell of brandy. And, of course, I told her about the reward—the reward we weren't going to get. "Unless we take to breeding mink in the living room," I said finally, "or

get to know some influential people, it looks as though you're going to have to wear your coat another year."

Carla smiled at me. "I like that old coat," she said. "It's got a sort of patina of age that gives it an air of distinction." The smile left her face as she frowned thoughtfully at her empty coffee cup, and then she spoke with the seeming irrelevance that is one of my wife's most charming and maddening and deceptive characteristics. "I wonder about Bender," she said abstractedly. "I wonder if he brought any canaries with him when he came to New York."

"I don't know," I said, "but I know that he won't be able to take any with him where he's going. At least where he's ultimately going."

"You," Carla said, "have an utterly cynical and literal mind."

It was a glorious, lazy Sunday, a day of relaxation and contentment, and I enjoyed every moment of it. I soaked my tired body in a hot tub for an hour, reading the sports pages that Carla had thoughtfully saved for me during the week. I took a long time shaving, afterwards, and then I got into some old clothes and went into the living room and sprawled in the big chair, with more newspapers and another salami sandwich and a bottle of beer.

It snowed hard all day, and late in the afternoon, Carla announced that she was going to prepare our Sunday dinner. "I'm going to have a fabulous dish," she assured me. "I got it out of the *Weekly Courier*, and it's a thing called Chicken Zimbala." She came over to where I lounged, just to kiss me, and I took the *Courier* from her hands and looked cautiously at the recipe. Chicken Zimbala seemed simple enough, in an involved sort of a way. You started with an ordinary fried chicken, and built on that, adding mushrooms and onions and more spices and herbs than Marco Polo brought back from Cathay.

Carla had been brought up by an older sister who had done most of the cooking for the orphaned pair, which was probably one of the reasons why my wife had remained healthy and beautiful. Since our marriage, she'd been dab-

bling in the culinary arts, studiously avoiding simple dishes in favor of such gastronomical atrocities as Chicken Zimbala. I was somewhat concerned about the ultimate fate of my digestion, but between outbursts of comestible pyrotechnics, I had consumed large quantities of milk toast, poached eggs and similar blandishments, and had managed to retain my health.

We were sitting down to dinner, at half past seven, when the telephone rang. Mike was on the wire. "I'm sorry, boy," he said in a flat voice, "but the next sound you hear will be my car horn, on your corner. In twenty minutes. So climb into the buffalo coat, partner, and get ready to roll."

"You roll," I told him, "in the nearest drift. With your build, you'll make a wonderful snowman. I'll come around tomorrow and stick pieces of coal in your puss, for eyes."

"Twenty minutes," Mike said firmly. "Maybe it'll occur to you that I'd rather just curl up with a book on a night like this too. But things are cooking, in fact things are blowing the lid off the pot. You were right about that guy, for one thing. The guy who said he was Bender, I mean."

"A nut? The guy in Vermont?"

"A real wheel. It seems he finally told them the reason he killed Wyatt was because he has a radio set built into his head, and he claimed Wyatt was broadcasting threats at him. It turned out that the guy was absent without leave from a looney bin in Massachusetts. I also got some other news that might interest you."

"Such as?" I asked, and I had the feeling that I would not like what I was going to hear.

"Thorne's maid, Emma Gansil," Mike said, "she's been taken very dead. Somebody sneaked into the house this afternoon, right under the noses of Christie's cops, and guzzled the old girl with a piece of rope. See you in a few minutes, pal."

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I HUNG UP and went back into the kitchen, avoiding Carla's eyes. I didn't say anything about what had happened to Old Ramrod. I hadn't been exactly fond of the maid, but I'd never grown so callous that news of a murder didn't shock me—especially just before a meal.

I got into my place in the breakfast-nook as though nothing had happened, and as though I had all the time in the world, and although I seemed to have lost my appetite, I forced myself to take a bite of Chicken Zimbala. "That was Mike on the phone, wasn't it?" Carla asked. "I suppose it means you'll have to go out again tonight?"

I nodded, my eyes on my plate. "The guy in Vermont wasn't Bender," I said, "so now it's on-again, Finnegan."

The chicken wouldn't have been bad, if I had been hungry, and if I had liked sponge rubber dipped in Greek Fire. I took a long drink of wine as the first mouthful seared my gullet. The wine worked on the chicken in a somewhat desultory manner, the way the spray of a single garden hose might have affected Gomorrah, when that city was at full blaze. Carla sighed, a round, heavy sigh. "I guess I'd better poach you some eggs," she said. "This is pretty awful, isn't it?"

I gulped the rest of my wine and shook my head, letting my noggin roll on the same wave length as a shudder. "It's really very good," I said, "but I think maybe it's got a touch of something too much in it. I can't tell exactly what it is, unless we get a laboratory breakdown, but it strikes me that there's just a soupçon too much of something or other."

"You needn't say it's good," Carla said, "because I had a bite while you were on the phone, and nobody could eat it, not even a polar explorer shipwrecked on a cake of ice. Do you suppose we could scrape the other stuff off and eat the chicken?"

"Personally," I answered, "I think the sensible thing to do is

to put the whole mess into a box—a metal-lined box—and ship it to the Home Editor of the *Courier*."

Carla looked very disappointed and I got up and went around the table and squeezed into her side of the breakfast-nook and put my arms around her. I spent two of the twenty minutes Mike had given me right there, and neither of us said any more than was necessary, which means that we didn't say anything at all. I'd have probably remained there for a long time—Mike or no Mike—if Carla hadn't pushed me gently away.

"I'll just *bet* Martin Bender brought some canaries with him," she said, breaking all of her own records for sheer irrelevancy. "I think you ought to check up on that, Steve."

To hell with Bender and his canaries too, I thought.

She'd never looked more beautiful than she looked sitting by that kitchen window. Beyond the pane the snowflakes were falling, big and soft, like curling white feathers. The glass picked up the reflection of the side of Carla's head and the curve of her cheek, and some trick of light made it seem that the snow was falling on her black hair. "I think I'd better cook your eggs," she said, a little breathlessly as I looked at her, and then she put her hands against my chest and shoved me out of the breakfast-nook ahead of her. After that the window was just a window and the snow was only snow, and very wet and miserable stuff besides.

"No time for eggs now, baby," I said. "Mike seems to be in a hurry. You can fix me something as soon as I come home."

"Mike Zacharias will ruin your digestion," Carla called after me as I went through the living room. "He doesn't care if you never eat. I'm going to fix you a sandwich, and you can eat it on the way to wherever you're going. You'd better have peanut butter, because you had salami for lunch. Unless you'd rather have salami."

"I'd rather," I shouted. I didn't want anything, even though lunch did seem to have occurred a long time ago, but I'd always disliked peanut butter, and I didn't even want to carry a peanut butter sandwich out of the place. . . . I peeled off my sports shirt and slacks and kicked my slippers under the bed

and got into a white shirt and a blue tie and my gray flannel suit. I took the homburg I seldom wore out of the box beneath Carla's dressing table, and put it on. I got into my shoes last, and I stepped into the living room just as Carla came out of the kitchen with a salami sandwich in her hand.

"Your rubbers, darling," my wife said.

I dragged my rubbers out from their hiding place beneath the couch, and put them on. I'd never worn a pair of rubbers before I'd married Carla, and I'd never been incapacitated a day in my life, either, except by hangovers and various minor injuries inflicted by anti-social citizens whom I'd clashed with in my profession.

I'd never worn a scarf either, and as I plucked my overcoat out of the closet, I deliberately left the scarf Carla had knitted me, left it hanging on the hook on which I'd draped it when I came in that morning.

"Your scarf," Carla said as I buttoned up my overcoat. I turned back obediently towards the closet; this wasn't the time for a show-down, I told myself, although sooner or later I would have to assert myself, before she made me wear long woolen underwear.

"It doesn't exactly go with the rest of your costume," she said as I wrapped the scarf about my throat, "but it helps a little. In that get-up, you always look a little like a man going out to look for a job as an assistant mortician. Well, with that scarf on, you'll at least look like a guy who isn't too anxious to get the position."

I didn't tell her, thinking of Emma Gansil, that I felt like the head undertaker, not just the assistant. I kissed her, and she clung to me for a moment while I promised her that I'd be back as soon as possible. I took the sandwich and went out quickly, because parting from Carla is such sweet sorrow I usually have an almost irresistible impulse just to forego the sorrow, and not depart. . . . I went down to the street, still thinking about Old Ramrod, and I was as depressed as a caterpillar under an elephant's hoof. I whistled "Button Up Your Overcoat" going down to the street, trying to lighten my spirits, but the gay old tune sounded like a dirge.

The snow was banked up nearly three feet deep along the curb in front of the apartment house; snowplows had evidently pushed it halfway across the sidewalk and Gus Sorenson, our Super, had shoveled it back. I stood for a moment behind the gleaming white breastworks, wondering how I was going to surmount the barrier, and I saw Mike's car coming down the street. He was driving his new Buick, a long, powerful job that shimmered blackly through the white curtain of falling snow.

Mike halted the car and switched on the dome light and opened the front door, and I hurdled the drift. I lit in the street in a staggering run and clawed at the side of the car and half fell into the seat beside Mike. I hadn't disposed of the sandwich, and a large chunk of salami, well-buttered and smeared with salad dressing, plopped out from between the slices of bread and smacked wetly against Mike's right cheek.

He sat with his big hands on the wheel, his face still drawn with weariness, and looked at me pensively. "Thrift is a virtue," he said, "and I approve of it, but now that you own a piece of the business, it's scarcely necessary to carry your own lunch. You maybe got a banana in your pocket too?"

"You tore me away from a wonderful meal," I said. "I was just sitting down to dinner when you called."

"I was lying down when Christie phoned me," Mike said, "in the bathtub." He was grinning, trying to kid the situation, but although Mike can usually find some harsh humor in whatever fate deals out, I knew that he didn't like any part of what we were up against now.

I threw the sandwich out of the window and got out a pack of cigarettes and lit two of them, and gave one to Mike. "Are we going to Thorne's house?" I asked.

"I've been there already," Mike said, "and Christie wasn't very glad to see me. Right now I think he's ready to hate his own mother, just because she happened to give birth to him."

"Any idea who killed Gansil?" I asked. "I mean, any other idea, besides the natural idea that the junky did it?"

Mike shrugged. "About the only sound idea anybody's got is that the Commissioner will fry Christie like a hamburger,

for this piece of business. There were four of his dicks in the house when Emma Gansil got it. Christie had had guys staked out in the street, up till the time Deirdre Wyatt said she got that telephone call from Bender. Then Chris figured it looked pretty obvious, having cops outside watching the house. So he pulled his boys in, on the theory that the killer *might* come in, if he figured the place wasn't watched any more. Well, he came all right, only the cops didn't get him. Emma got the business in a little front room that's just to the right after you come in the door."

"Yeah," I said, remembering Deirdre's sister's face at the window, "I know where that room is, I think."

"Deirdre and the widowed sister, Mrs. Helen West, were out," Mike said, "just in case you were wondering. They went down to Fourteenth Street to a movie, with one of Christie's men chaperoning them. It happened while they were out. They didn't come back till after Christie was on the job. He packed 'em off to the Aylewarde Hotel."

"The Aylewarde!" I asked in surprise. "Why the Aylewarde, for Pete's sake?"

"Because Christie's got an idea he'd better keep all the material witnesses under one roof," Mike said, "keep them together where he can watch them until the junky is caught. Thorne's down in Washington, he's got a case coming up before the Supreme Court tomorrow, but Christie swears as soon as the old man comes back he's going to bottle him up too. The Inspector thinks the killer is maybe figuring on doing a Diamond. You know what I mean by that, kid?"

I shook my head. "Legs Diamond was a prohibition hood," Mike said, "and a very bad pot of coffee too. He is supposed to have knocked a citizen off and six or seven other people saw him do it. But by the time Diamond's trial came off, there weren't any witnesses. Somebody had had 'em all rubbed out—and guess who?"

I remembered Diamond now that Mike reminded me of that gruesome incident, and he didn't need to tell me anything more to make the comparison clear. Mike and I had seen the killer too, but I didn't see any good reason to discuss the im-

plications of that fact; they were something that I would have given a great deal to be able to forget, at the moment. "So Christie's using the Aylewarde," I said. "Big Joe won't be exactly pleased by that."

"Big Joe won't have anything to say about it," Mike answered morosely, "and incidentally, neither will we. Because, as of tonight, Confidential operatives aren't watch-dogging for Carson or Ageld. They're staying put in Big Joe's Hotel, with a police bodyguard. We'll be lucky if Christie doesn't try to put us in protective custody too. Just in case you didn't know, we're on our way to the Aylewarde now, to see if we can't pick up the pieces."

"Well, thank God at least," I said, "that Confidential wasn't supposed to be looking out for Emma Gansil. At least we've kept Big Joe and Max Ageld out of harm."

"That's what you think, pal," Mike said as the big car surged ahead. "Big Joe behaved very naughtily tonight. I didn't tell you over the phone, because I didn't want your mind to have to wrestle with too many details, all at once. Big Joe gave our boys the slip this evening, down in the Village. At least in a way of speaking. He left Eddie Morris and Phil Benfield sitting out in a car on Ninth Street, while he went into an apartment. When he got in, somebody put a slug into his shoulder."

Big Joe Carson sat in the one solid chair in the living room of his apartment, stripped to the waist. A wad of surgical dressing rode on the immense flabby curve of a sweating brown shoulder, moored by criss-crossed strips of adhesive tape, and the sharp smell of disinfectant mingled with the odors of tobacco, perfume and Big Joe's perspiring flesh.

The girl, Marlene, was standing wrathfully in front of Carson as Mike and I came through the curtained door. Sergeant Paul Turner, one of Christie's aces, slouched in the same chair I'd sat in only six days before—although it seemed like a century ago to me. Phil Benfield, the Confidential op, leaned against a wall, puffing a pipe, and Max Ageld was sitting in an armchair near the library door.

The girl didn't even turn her head as Mike and I came into

the room. She was standing with her legs spraddled, arms akimbo, a blond babe turned virago, her pretty, innocuous face a writhing mask of rage. She was wearing a strapless green evening dress that fitted her lower body like a coat of paint. "You bum, you!" she screamed at Carson as we entered. "You fat chippy-chasing louse!"

Big Joe's puckered, sweating face wore the frightened look of a naughty child who has been taken in some vast mischief. "You shut up, Marlene," he wheezed, his tone a rare blend of menace and supplication. "I've *told* you and *told* you it was a pla-tonic visit I made down there."

I looked at Paul Turner, whom I knew slightly, but the sergeant merely shrugged, grinned a faintly malicious grin, and jerked a thumb at Phil Benfield. "Don't ask me, Considine," Turner said, "I only got in after the shooting was over. But maybe your boy, Benfield, can fill you in on the details."

Phil Benfield removed the pipe from his mouth and smiled unhappily at me. He was a pale, stooped young guy who looked stupid and soft; but he was neither of those things, he was as smart as private ops come, and physically as tough as a fifty-cent steak.

"Morris and I were driving Mr. Carson around," he said, eying the girl warily with a sidelong glance. "We were just driving him around to get some fresh air, and we happen to be down in the Village, and Mr. Carson decides he wants to visit a lady lives on Ninth Street. A Miss Priscilla Bonniwell. A friend of a friend, Mr. Carson says."

"A friend of what friend?" Marlene yelled. "A friend of everybody's, that little tramp."

Max Ageld spoke quietly, but there was a metallic ring to his voice. "That'll be all, Marlene. Button it up, see? And please get the hell out of here, before you get on my nerves."

The blond girl gave him a venomous glance and turned back to Carson. "You hear what this old creep says to me?" she shrilled. "I should get out of this room, he says!"

"You not only should," Big Joe said with weary rancor, "but you damn well better."

Tears—real tears—sprang into the girl's eyes, glistening on

her long, spike-like lashes. "I'll get out of here," she said, "I'll get out all right. I won't come back until hell freezes over." She turned, her white shoulders shaking, and ran out of the room. I didn't think she would get very far; there were a half dozen cops in the other rooms of the apartment, and there was a detail of police in the outside hall.

"Okay, Phil," Mike said when the girl had gone, "now that the histrionics are over, let's have the rest of the story."

"I went in and cased the apartment before I let Mr. Carson go in," Benfield said. "The lady let me in, and I told her that we were worried about Mr. Carson, and that we were supposed to look after him. She said I could look around. It's a first floor floor-through apartment, just a bedroom, bath, kitchenette, and a living room opening on to a small garden. The place was clean. There wasn't anybody there but the girl."

"But you didn't case the apartment across the garden, did you?" Mike asked, gently sarcastic. "You couldn't have very well done that, could you, Phil?"

Benfield morosely shook his head. "We figure the guy who did the shooting tailed us down there. When he sees me and Morris parked outside, with Mr. Carson in the apartment, he works fast. There's an apartment hotel on Eighth Street, overlooking the garden and the girl's flat. The guy goes up there, and luck is with him, because one of the back rooms of the hotel is a public John, and he goes in there and waits until he sees Mr. Carson in the window of the lady's apartment, and then he lets him have it."

"How could he have missed a target like that?" Turner asked, and Big Joe glowered as the sergeant guffawed at his own humor.

"If you ask me," Max Ageld said, "the guy who hit our fat friend was quite a marksman. He had to be, not to bury a slug in that yard of blubber. If you ask me, Big Joe got pinked as a reminder—a reminder he'd better pay off or else. Another guy would have dropped ten cents into a telephone and called up, but this lad is an individualist. He invested his small change in cartridges."

"A twenty-two bullet," Phil Benfield said. "It went through the big French window in the lady's living room, and into the subject's shoulder. He ran out and called us, then, and I went straight in and telephoned the police. After that we took Mr. Carson over to St. Vincent's and got him fixed up. It was just a flesh wound, going through the top of his shoulder, and lodging near the skin. I doubt if they'd even give him a Purple Heart in the army, for a crease like that."

"Oh, sure," Big Joe rumbled, his face darker with fury, "it ain't anything but a scratch. It didn't hurt *you* at all."

The curtains across the door of the room were torn apart, and Christie stamped in. His gargoyle face was the color of an aspirin tablet; his usually sad and docile eyes were smoldering with rage and frustration, sunk deep in their bony sockets, and his clothes—which Christie always wore a little too large—hung upon his gaunt body in flabby folds, like the hide of an old rhinoceros. He gave Mike a curt nod, grunted savagely at me and stabbed Big Joe with a terrible look of mingled reproach and loathing.

"So you hadda go out looking for trouble, slob!" the old man snarled. "You hadda go out on a day isn't fit to be out in, the one guy nobody with a gun could miss, a mountain of lard anybody could hit, easy as hitting a hippo in the rear with a banjo."

"I'll tell you something," Big Joe said. "I didn't think Bender would go this far. But he's made a believer out of me. I'm paying off."

"We're both paying off," Max Ageld said.

Christie's voice rose in a quavering shout. "Like hell you're paying off! You give in to an extortionist, you're breaking the law yourself, at least the spirit of the law."

"A man likes to survive," Ageld said calmly. "That's a fundamental law, Inspector, a law of nature, in a way of speaking. If I know Bender, he'll wait. You can't keep us cooped up under guard forever."

"But I'll keep you until we get him," Christie said through his teeth. "Somehow I'll hold you, if it takes until the Fourth of July." He swung his baleful glance away from Ageld and

settled it on me. "Even as stupid as you are, Considine, I guess you know what we're up against. A real psycho, a trigger-happy stir-bug who's out to blot every witness there is. Realize that, don't you?"

"If it makes you feel better, I realize it," I told him, "even if it doesn't make me feel better myself."

"Well, I got news for you!" the old cop snapped. "You and Mike are going into protective custody, too—even if I got to book you on some phony charge and ride you from one precinct house to another, until we've got Bender."

I opened my mouth to reply, but Mike, standing close beside me, dug an elbow into my ribs. "Why, sure, Inspector," the big guy said in a voice that dripped with guile. "I understand exactly how you feel, and I think you're doing a wise thing, too. Steve and I are both pretty tired, and we can stand a little vacation at the taxpayers' expense."

Christie sighed, and his eyes weren't savage any more; they were just tired and old, and a little sick. "I can't understand it," he said. "There were four cops in the house when the killer got the maid. Two in the library, one in the parlor at the top of the stairs, and one in the kitchen. Mort Ames, the guy in the kitchen, was talking to Emma Gansil, just a few minutes before it happened."

"How does he know that?" Mike asked, in the tone of a man who is just making conversation.

"Because of the buzzer," Christie said. "There's an electric board in the kitchen, with numbers on it, and the numbers light up and buzz whenever anybody pushes a button in one of the other rooms of the house. Ames is sitting there, talking to Gansil, when one of the numbers flashes. He asks her if it's the front door, and she says no, they got a bell on the door, and that this is a signal from the parlor. Ames thinks she means the parlor upstairs, where Eddie Griswold, another of my boys, is parked, so he doesn't try to stop her from answering the buzzer. He just sits there, and the old girl goes out—and gets the business."

Mike had moved ahead of me as Christie spoke; he stood now, blocking me from the Inspector's sight, and as I stared

at the boss' broad back he reached a hand quickly out behind him, dangling his car keys before my eyes. I snatched them, moving as swiftly as I'd ever moved in my life, and no one in the room saw me take them. "The front door of Thorne's house," Mike said loudly to Christie. "It was locked, of course?"

"So what does that matter?" the Inspector barked irritably. "There's a thousand teen-age punks in this town could open that door without making a sound." He sighed explosively, and began to pace the room, his voice growling: "Well, at least I know one thing now. That business of Gansil's being so scared of Bender, that was just an act. She was in on the thing with him, just as sure as shooting. You heard her say she useta be a nurse in a hospital for narcos? Well, probably that's where she met Bender, he was probably one of her own patients, years ago. Only he crossed her up and guzzled her, maybe because she tried to shake him down, but more likely because she could put him in the middle of the thing as a witness, if he got caught, and as far as he's concerned, there ain't going to be any witnesses."

Christie's back was towards us now as he prowled across the room, and Mike turned to me, speaking almost soundlessly out of the corner of his mouth. "Check into the Leland in Jersey City. Register under the name of Paul Seeley. I'll contact you tomorrow, just as soon as I get out of here myself."

He turned away from me, took a few steps, then spoke over his shoulder in a completely matter-of-fact voice, "Mind telephoning my missus for me, Steve, and telling her what the score is? I want to talk to the Inspector." I made a move to go to the telephone, ten feet away against a wall, and I was completely mystified by his request; but I understood the meaning of his next words thoroughly.

"On second thought, never mind phoning," Mike said, "I'll do it myself later. But I wish you'd bring me my briefcase, I want to show Christie that letter I got from the Minnewaska warden."

Christie turned, a look of suspicion in his eyes, but Mike advanced on him, beaming and speaking with what sounded

like absolute sincerity. "There's something in the letter I think will interest you, Chris, something that may go a long way towards clearing up this whole mess." Without turning his head, he spoke to me, in the indulgent tone of a man addressing a well-liked but not overly bright retainer. "The briefcase is under my coat, Steve, on a chair by the door."

I went through the curtains without apparent haste, walked down the hall in a leisurely manner, and got my own hat and coat from the chair where I had dropped them when I came in. Mike's hat and coat were on another chair; there wasn't any briefcase. I grinned at the big cop who was standing just inside the door, muttered, "Well, another day, another dollar," and went out into the hall. There were two harness cops in front of the elevator, and I gave them a two-fingered salute and got into the elevator when it finally came, and rode down to the lobby. My arms and legs were tight with nervous tension, and it seemed to take the cage an hour to settle to the ground floor.

Once outside the hotel, I moved fast. I went to the side-street where Mike had parked the car, walking as swiftly as I might without attracting attention, and I took the big Buick downtown in near-record time. It had stopped snowing, a hard wind was driving soot-gray clouds across the sky, and through the ragged patches of cloud a new moon hung like a sliver of ice in the blackness of the night.

I parked the Buick around the corner from my apartment house and I didn't camp on the street, or on the stairs going up to our apartment either. I opened the front door and let myself into the closet-sized entrance hall, and Carla came charging at me, her cheeks pink, her eyes bright with excitement. "Darling!" she said, "you *did* come home early, didn't you? Well, I'm glad, because there's someone here waiting to see you, and besides that I've some wonderful news for you. I had the most utterly fascinating conversation with—"

"Tell me later, baby," I interrupted, "no time now. Christie wants to hold me in protective custody, and I've got to skip for a while. Toss some things into a bag, honey, I've got to move fast."

I spoke almost in a whisper, not knowing who was in the living room. I was gambling on a hunch that a smart cop like Christie wouldn't believe that even I would be stupid enough to go home after lamming out on him. Home was probably the first place a dumb cop would have looked for me, but I'd have bet that such a simple plan of action wouldn't occur to the wily Inspector. I didn't want to crowd my luck, however; I wanted to get out and over to New Jersey as fast as possible. I decided that whoever might be in the living room, it wasn't the police, because even if Christie had reacted like an ordinary policeman, they'd have scarcely had time to head me off.

Carla saw at once that I wasn't kidding. Her gray eyes widened, and her lips parted as though she were going to speak, but she didn't; instead, she turned and raced for the bedroom. I stepped into the living room and saw a bottle of scotch I'd been hoarding, standing on the coffee-table by the big armchair in the corner of the room. In the armchair, his face lined and crumpled and white as chalk, Bayard Thorne sat with the lamplight gleaming on his silver hair.

I came to a halt, staring at him. Thorne lifted a hand, made a vague gesture of salutation, and spoke in an almost inaudible voice. "Good evening, Mr. Considine," he mumbled. "I—I scarcely know what to say. I—I—"

He shrugged, and his voice trailed off. I took a step towards him, and my voice sounded loud in the room. "But you're supposed to be in Washington, Thorne. You're not here. You went down to the capital, to see a man about a mink."

"I didn't go to Washington," Thorne said. "I've been in Manhattan, all day."

"I hope you're prepared to say where you've been all day," I told him. "Your maid, Emma Gansil, was murdered about four o'clock this afternoon."

"I know," Thorne said wearily, "I heard about it on the six o'clock news. I've been driving around ever since, trying to decide what to do. The point is, I can't tell the police where I was this afternoon. I—I simply cannot. That's why I came to see you, Mr. Considine—to ask your advice."

I sat on the sofa, with my hat and overcoat on, and looked at him. "Don't tell me you don't know where you were," I said. "Don't tell me you had a sudden attack of amnesia, or something like that. Because even if I believed you, nobody else would."

"Please," Thorne said, a pained look in his eyes. "I know where I was, of course. But circumstances make it impossible for me to establish an alibi without involving an—without involving innocent persons in the publicity that would result."

"Look, Mr. Thorne," I said, "maybe you don't understand just how serious this situation is. Whoever killed Emma Gansil knew their way around your house, knew enough, anyway, not to go into a room where detectives were planted, and knew how to ring for the maid. Don't you understand that in a deal like this, everybody looks dirty, until they can prove they're clean."

"But—but you can't possibly *really* believe that I killed Emma. My God, Considine, the woman was like one of the family."

"People have been known to kill members of their family," I said. "If you've got an alibi, Mr. Thorne, I'd advise you to reach for it fast. Your two daughters are apparently in the clear."

"But they—they wouldn't harm Emma, any more than I would," Thorne said in an exasperated voice. "That assumption is preposterous, Mr. Considine."

"Maybe," I said, "but you'd be surprised just how much a guy like Christie can worry a preposterous situation, at times. You've absolutely made up your mind that you won't tell where you were this afternoon?"

Thorne's mouth set in an obstinate line. "I won't tell," he said. "I cannot tell."

"Okay," I said. I got up and went over to the coffee-table and took a swig of scotch, out of the bottle. I stood over him, scowling down at him, a feeling of disgust rising in me. The Chevalier without fear and without reproach, I thought, the Shining Knight, the guy Mike so greatly admired—just a frightened old man now, a clay-footed idol like most of the other

big-shots on whom people pinned their faith and their hope of decency in public affairs. Maybe he hadn't killed Emma Gansil —somehow, even as disgusted as I was, I couldn't picture the old boy as a murderer—but for the money I didn't have, he'd done something that afternoon that he wanted to hide. Guys who've got an alibi in a murder case don't shy away from using it—not unless the alibi will make them look almost as dirty as the crime.

"I suppose you want me to tell you how to handle this situation, don't you?" I sneered, giving him the rough edge of my tongue. "You're a great guy for asking Confidential to give you advice—advice that's impossible to give, and still stay within shouting distance of ethics. Would you really like to know what I'd do, Mr. Thorne, if I were in your shoes?"

Thorne stared at me, flushing deeply, but he did not answer. "I'll tell you what I'd do," I said. "I'd grab the next plane for Washington. When I got there, I'd phone Christie and tell him I'd just heard about the Gansil killing, and that I was coming back to New York at once.

"It might work," I continued, "except for one thing—the fact that I'm going to tell Christie that you were here, and that you didn't go to Washington at all. I'm going to tell him for a lot of reasons, including the fact that I've no right to withhold material information from the police—you heard him orate on that subject, that night in your house. I'm also going to tell him because I want to see Confidential stay in business, and I don't want to lose my license. And finally, I'm going to tell the old buzzard because I don't want to get in any worse with him than I already am."

The doorbell rang, just as I finished speaking. Carla came out of the bedroom, holding a suit of my pajamas in her hands and looked at me in inquiry and fright; I nodded ruefully, and motioned to her to answer the bell. Okay, Thorne, I thought, now you'll get an idea just how bad I'm in with Inspector Christie already, and your presence here isn't going to improve things, it isn't going to improve them at all.

But it wasn't the cops. I picked the scotch up and took another belt at it, reaching for a little courage, and I heard the

sound of womens' voices in the outer hall—the voice of my wife and another woman, blended in a polite murmur of conversation. I put the bottle of scotch back on the coffee-table and took off my hat, and Deirdre Wyatt came gracefully out of the dark hall and into the bright living room, smiling the tense and self-conscious smile of a person who does not know how she is going to be received.

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DEIRDRE DIDN'T NOTICE her father, sitting quietly in the corner. She moved straight towards me, her red lips curved in an uncertain smile that failed to mask the fright in her eyes. She was wearing a fur coat and a gray dress, and no hat. I thought that she must have walked a considerable distance in the snow, because her high-heeled shoes oozed water as she walked, and her stockings were black with water, halfway to the knees.

"Please forgive me, Mr. Considine," she said. "I had to go somewhere, and I—" she broke off, looked tensely at Carla and then went on, encouraged by my wife's sympathetic smile. "I just couldn't go home, not after what happened. So, I simply came here."

"Maybe I was wrong," I said, "but I had the impression you were safe in the Aylewarde. You and your sister. Under the personal direction of Inspector Christie, and about half the New York police department."

"I couldn't stay there," Deirdre answered. "I couldn't stand just sitting in that little room. So, I simply left."

"I'd be interested in knowing how you left," I told her, "and so, no doubt, would Christie."

"I went down the fire-escape," she said, as though going

down fire-escapes was something she did every day. "The policeman on guard outside my room was reading a newspaper, and didn't even see me. I went down the fire-escape and dropped into a snowdrift when the ladder left off. I felt like a character in a B movie."

"Coincidence is a wonderful thing," I said. "No matter how far you stretch it, you can always make it give another inch." I jerked a thumb at Bayard Thorne. "Look who's here. If we only had your sister with us, it'd be a sort of family reunion."

Deirdre whirled, looked at her father, and uttered a cry of amazement. Thorne rose swiftly and she ran to him and threw her arms about his neck. Her shoulders shook as she murmured unintelligible words; I heard the name of Emma Gansil, and then a fierce imprecation, muttered against her murderer. Thorne, his face resolute now, patted her shoulder awkwardly and spoke soothing words.

"There, there, darling! It's terrible, I know—a dreadful business. But they'll get him, Deirdre, they're bound to catch him, soon. Believe me, darling."

"You didn't go to Washington?" she asked, her face buried in Thorne's chest. The father shot me a look of appeal, and then spoke quickly to the girl. "No, Deirdre, I didn't go. Something happened that made me change my plans. I—I have explained everything to Mr. Considine."

I considered this monumental falsehood while Carla came out of the bedroom, still carrying a pair of my pajamas slung over one arm. She went into the kitchen and came back with a clean glass and poured three fingers of scotch into it and handed it to Deirdre. "Bottoms up, Mrs. Wyatt," my wife said. "You're shaking like a nudist in a rumble seat. Get that whisky into you, and I'll see if I can find some dry stockings and shoes."

Deirdre, her eyes glistening with tears, managed a smile for my wife. I pointed at my pajamas. "If you don't mind, sweetheart," I said, "how about getting those things into a bag. Something tells me it's time for me to leave."

Deirdre looked at me over the rim of the whisky glass. "*You're* going away? But where? And why?"

"I happen to have given Christie the slip myself," I told her, "and the old boy may be a little miffed about that, too. But, allow me to point out, if he finds both of us here together, his unhappiness will be more than he can bear—and so, probably, will ours."

"But you can't," Deirdre quavered, a note of near-hysteria in her voice. "You can't go away and leave me. I was relying on you—"

"And so you shall," Carla put in, her tone firm. "You're going with us, Mrs. Wyatt."

"Us?" I shouted. "Now, see here, Carla!"

"Now you see here!" Carla said. "This girl's frightened half to death. She's asking for your help, and you're not going to just run off and leave her. Or me, either. I'm your wife, and I've no intention of staying in this apartment while you're lurking in some awful place, not eating properly, and smoking too much, and probably drinking more than is good for you, too. And besides."

"Besides what?" I yelled at her. "If you're going to waste time talking, for Pete's sake, finish your sentences."

"Well," Carla said in a practical tone, "the Inspector is going to be awfully mad at you, and when he finds that Mrs. Wyatt is with us, he's going to be still madder. But, if you'll stop to realize it, you'll be in a wonderful position to bargain with him, too, just as soon as he cools off a little."

"You couldn't bargain with that guy if you had him hanging by his belt from the Empire State Building."

"I think you could," Carla answered. "You tell Mr. Christie that you've got Mrs. Wyatt, and that she's safe, and that you're going to look after her, and that he won't get her back to New York until he stops all this nonsense about keeping you in protective custody, and lets you go ahead and catch Bender. It isn't as though he could solve the case by himself."

Carla turned away from me and smiled at Deirdre. "Now come along, Mrs. Wyatt, and we'll get you some dry things. And then we're off to Jersey City."

"Carla," I said, "under no circumstances will I take you and Mrs. Wyatt with me to Jersey City."

So we went to Jersey City. Thorne left us on the corner near my apartment house. He promised me that he'd see Christie in the morning, and tell him that he hadn't been in Washington, but he also declared, with quiet obstinacy, that he had no intention of informing the Inspector about his whereabouts during the afternoon.

Carla and Deirdre sat in the back seat while I drove, and nobody said much during the short journey. My wife spoke most of the words that were uttered, carrying on a broken monologue about women's clothes and the new books and movies, and the high cost of living. I was nervous and depressed for some obscure reason that I made no attempt to analyze, and I was glad when we were across the river.

The Leland was a comfortable small hotel on a quiet sidestreet on the edge of a residential section. There were two adjoining rooms with bath available, and I engaged them both. I booked Carla and myself as the Paul Seeleys, of Rochester, New York, and Deirdre registered as Mrs. Dorothy Whittier of Hartford, Connecticut. Carla had packed a nightdress and a robe for our guest, and I sent a bellhop out to buy her toothpaste and a brush. When the hop had come back with the stuff, I saw Deirdre safely into her room, and then I went into our room and undressed and got into one of the twin beds that the hotel management had thoughtfully provided.

But I couldn't sleep. I lay and tossed in the narrow bed, chain-smoking, and after a while Carla lit a cigarette of her own and spoke in a cool voice. "I think it was simply awful of you, Steve. Leaving that poor girl alone when she came to you for help. Because there wasn't anybody else she could trust, with that crazy maniac running around trying to kill everybody."

"But I didn't leave her, dammit!"

"Only because I wouldn't let you." I lay watching the glowing tip of her cigarette, and after a considerable silence, Carla spoke in a more amiable tone. "We're going to have quite a

large telephone bill this month, Steve. Larger even than usual."

"Why should it be larger than usual?"

"Because of the calls I made. I started to tell you when you came into the apartment tonight, but you cut me off. I suppose you cut me off because Mr. Thorne was there. I made up my mind I wasn't going to say anything else about the phone calls unless you asked me, but they are rather important, even if you don't seem to care. You see, Martin Bender *did* have some canaries with him when he left the Minnewaska Penitentiary. He had three canaries, and a Boxer puppy."

I sat bolt upright in the bed. "You called the Minnewaska warden?" I gasped.

The spot of crimson that was the cigarette end wagged vigorously up and down. "Twice," she said. "I called him first, and then he called me back, collect. I told him all about you, how clever you were, and that you were the finest husband in the world, and that he simply had to help us catch this murderer." Carla giggled. "I think I sort of seduced the warden with my voice, and he was a perfect darling."

"Jumping Judas!" I howled, "will you tell me what he told you that's relevant, if anything?"

"He told me about the canaries and the dog, and don't shout at me. Bender had the canaries in a box that was made for him in the prison carpenter shop, a box painted blue, and it had 'Good luck, Marty' stenciled on it. And the pup was wearing a brass collar that the convicts made in the machine shop. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Simply wonderful," I said. "All we've got to do is to find where Bender hid some canaries and a dog, and incidentally, where he hid himself too. It would be a lot of fun if we weren't just about one hundred percent sure Bender isn't the guy we're looking for."

"But what about Murray Wyatt?" Carla asked. "This morning, after church, when you told me the whole story, you said you thought that if you knew all about Murray Wyatt—or even knew *anything* tangible about his past—you'd be able to find out who the real killer was."

"That's just my opinion," I answered. "Mike and I are convinced that Bender wrote that anonymous letter, but Mike thinks if Bender knew anything really important he'd have mentioned it in the letter."

"Listen to me, Steve Considine," Carla said vehemently. "I'm not a detective. I'm just a housewife, even if I can't cook or keep house. But I'll tell you something that I figured out this afternoon, while I was incinerating that chicken. Martin Bender never knew Murray Wyatt until he came to New York after getting out of prison, never saw him before, probably never even heard of him."

I said impatiently that the letter had so implied.

"All right!" Carla snapped. "So how did Bender meet Wyatt, where did he first meet him? I'll tell you what my intuition is screaming. He met him at the place—wherever it was—that he stayed when he first came to New York."

"Staten Island," I said. "When Bender went to see Big Joe Carson soon after he arrived, he told him he was staying with a friend on Staten Island. We didn't sleep on that one. Mike's had two guys combing the island. So far, no dice."

"But I—" Carla began, and then broke off.

"But you what?" I demanded.

"Nothing." She was silent for a moment, and when she spoke again, her voice was trembling. "I'm terribly frightened, Steve—I wish that you'd never got mixed up in this case at all." The tip of the cigarette wobbled in the dark, and there was a tearful note in her voice. "Would you—could you—come over here for just a little while, Steve? I know this bed is awfully narrow, but—"

I got up and went over and climbed in with her, and at that moment I wouldn't have cared if the bed had been as narrow as Christopher Christie's mind.

I was awakened by sunlight on my face, by the smell of hot coffee, and by the gentle but firm pressure of a hand on my arm. I sat up and blinked at Carla, who was fully dressed and looking wonderful, and she handed me a cup of coffee and told me that it was nearly nine o'clock. A covered breakfast

tray stood on a portable room-service table at the end of the bed.

"I've had some breakfast sent up for Mrs. Wyatt too," Carla said. "Just as soon as you've eaten, I've got something to tell you."

The telephone rang and I picked it up and yawned into it. A falsetto voice floated over the wire. "Mr. Seeley? This is J. Jerome Biggerstaff, your wife's attorney. My client would like to know what you are doing in Jersey City with a gorgeous blonde."

I said, "Okay, Michael. The stage lost probably the worst actor of all time when you became a dick. Where are you? Still at the Aylewarde?"

Mike chuckled. "No, I'm at the office. I convinced Christie that he'd better let me go, too. I said he'd have a hell of a time explaining to the Commish how you and Deirdre got away; I told him he'd look better if he let on like he hadn't tried to hold anybody. He finally agreed, but he's pretty sore at you for taking off with the girl."

"How does he know she went with us?" I asked.

"We went down and looked your apartment over," Mike said. "We found some wet stockings and shoes in your bedroom, and a couple of her cigarettes in an ash-tray. Christie didn't seem worried about going into your apartment. He said if you sued him, you'd have to sue me too."

"So where do we go from there?" I wanted to know.

"Well, Christie's willing to let us look after Deirdre, providing we give her twenty-four hour coverage, and providing that some of his boys help us do the watching. I think he'll forgive everything, if you'll just lug the babe back here. He's called a conference in his office at eleven o'clock this morning. You can make it by then, can't you?"

I said that I could. "All right, then," Mike said, "lug the body back, and I think there'll be a new deal. Christie's worried as hell, and I guess maybe he's willing to co-operate more fully. See you at eleven, boy."

I hung up and grinned at Carla over my coffee cup. "Mike

talked his way out, and all is forgiven, if not forgotten, and I've got to be in Christie's office at eleven."

"I doubt if you can make it by then," Carla said in a matter-of-fact voice. "Not if we go and see the man Bender stayed with on Staten Island. You see, I know who he is."

I gave a leap of amazement that sent coffee slopping over the rim of the cup. "You know?" I gasped. "For God's sake, how, and why did you wait this long to tell me?"

"Because if I'd told you last night," Carla replied calmly, "you wouldn't have slept. You'd have probably done something foolish, like trying to find him last night, and you'd have been a wreck this morning."

"The warden tell you?" I managed to ask.

"He found out for me. That's why he called me back. You see, I told him they were trying to frame Martin Bender—maybe that wasn't exactly the truth—but, anyway, I made him believe me, and I said that if we could find Bender, everything might come out all right."

Carla stopped for breath, then rushed on. "The warden said he didn't have the slightest idea where Bender had gone. And then, just as I was going to hang up, he said he had an idea. He said he'd talk to Bender's old cellmate, and see if he could find out anything. And he did, and he found out where Bender was going. To visit a man named Lee Adams. On Staten Island. And I've got the address, in my purse."

As soon as I'd dressed—and I pulled on my clothes like a fireman making ready for a four-alarm blaze—I knocked on Deirdre Wyatt's door and gave her a blueprint of the situation. She said quietly that she would like to go along, because whatever concerned the real Bender might concern her, too. We checked out of the hotel and I got Mike's car out of the garage where I'd parked it, and we drove to Staten Island by way of the Bayonne Bridge. It was a wonderful morning, bright and warm, and even Bayonne looked beautiful in the yellow sunlight.

Staten Island has been called the forgotten borough, but the address Carla gave me was in a neighborhood that nobody would have wanted to remember anyway. The Buick plowed

hub-deep in mud and widening pools of melting snow between fields that showed patches of weed-choked, uneven ground where the drifts had thinned, and through the skeletal branches of black, stunted trees you caught occasional glimpses of the bay. The water looked like scraps of wrinkled gray silk under a sky that had begun to darken as a swelling bank of fog rolled in, blanketing the sun. The dwellings we passed were, for the most part, little more than shacks, and the one we were looking for was a tarpaper-covered shanty, set on a drifted hillock—the last house on a dead-end street.

A board sidewalk and steps, shoveled very clean, led up to the shack. I got out of the car, with the cold, damp smell of the sea stinging my nostrils, and spoke to Deirdre. "I'll go in first if you don't mind," I told her, "just in case."

The girl nodded, her eyes bright with excitement, and I went up the steps to the front door of the shack. As I knocked, I saw that there were neat green flower boxes in front of windows, and fresh white curtains hung behind clean windowpanes. My first knock went unanswered, and I waited a moment, and then knocked again. I was standing with my hand raised to knock a third time when I heard shuffling footsteps beyond the door. A moment later it swung wide, and a man stared out at me with eyes that were heavy with sleep.

He was a medium-sized guy with a square, freckled face that was tough but good-humored-looking under carrot-colored hair. He said, "Yeah, mister?" and yawned enormously as he said it, and I saw that he was wearing a faded red dressing gown over flannel pajamas, and shabby old carpet slippers with run-over heels.

"My name is Steve Considine," I said. "I'd like to talk to you for a couple of minutes."

The sleep-ridden gray eyes widened with sudden wakefulness, and he looked at me with a patient grin. "Another cop, huh? I thought I'd told 'em everything I knew already, but if you wanna come in, mister, it's okay. Even if I didn't wanna co-operate, I'm bright enough to know I better."

I stepped into a small, clean little living room that was as neat as Betty Grable's ankles, although poorly furnished. "I'm

a private investigator, not a regular cop," I said, "and I'm not looking for Bender because I think he's a killer. I think he's been done an injustice, and I want to square it if I can. You're Lee Adams?"

"I'm what's left of him," the man said. "I did a bit in Minnewaska a few years back, and that's how I met Marty. He was a right guy, if ever there was one. I wish I could help you. In a case like this, I'd even like to help the regular cops. But like I told them, I don't know very much."

Christie, you co-operative son-of-a-bitch, I thought, *Christie, you double-dealing bastard.* "Marty Bender was here, wasn't he?" I asked Lee Adams.

"For four days, not counting the Saturday night he came flying in from Chi." Adams chuckled, a regretful note in his voice. "Him and the birds and the pooch. He pulled out because this place is so small. He didn't wanna impose on me."

"Didn't he tell you anything about where he was going?"

"Uh-uh. I work nights and sleep days, and I get up on Wednesday afternoon, and there's a note on the table, thanking me for putting him up, saying that he's got a job in the country, and he'll be seeing me first time he's back in town. I give the note to the cops, and they kept it."

I sat down in a wicker chair, and Adams squatted on a wooden bench and looked at me with his freckled forehead wrinkled in thought. "I don't understand it," he said. "Marty didn't know anybody in New York, except me and some old-time big shots he'd knew in Chi. He had a half-sister in Brooklyn, but he wasn't sure of her married name, and he didn't know how to go about finding her."

"So how did Marty get the job?" I asked. "That's what you're wondering about, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Lee Adams said. "If you ask me, I don't think there was any job. He thought he was imposing on me, so he just scrammed. He had a little money, because the Sunday he was here he went to see some of those Chicago guys he knew, and they gave him some dough."

"The cops will have already asked you this," I said, "but a little repetition won't hurt us. Did Marty meet anyone while

he was staying here with you? By anyone, I mean everyone—every soul that he came into contact with, for even a minute. Like the milkman, if you have milk delivered. Or the landlord. Or any of the neighbors."

Adams frowned at a threadbare sleeve of the red dressing gown. "I told the cops," he said. "Like the first night Marty was here, I laid off work and we went to Flanagan's for a little celebration. Flanagan's is the neighborhood gin-mill."

"And he met people there? Some of your friends?"

"He met some of my acquaintances," Adams said, grinning his good-humored grin. "The cops checked on 'em all. None of 'em ever seen Marty since that night. Anyway, that bunch of barflies couldn't promote a job for themselves, let alone anybody else. But I'll tell you something I just thought of last night, if you want to know."

I said that I wanted to know. "Well," Adams said, "Marty used to take the pooch out a lot, daytimes, when I was sleeping. And the pooch would play with a mutt belongs to an old Polack lady, lives just over the hill behind me. And I'll tell you something funny happens the third day Marty was here—Tuesday—something I forgot to tell the cops."

"Do," I said. "Something tells me they won't be happy about you having forgotten to tell them anything, but they won't learn about it from me."

"Well," Adams said, "I was just getting up about four o'clock this day, and Marty came in with the dog, and I could smell booze. Marty didn't have a heat on—he doesn't like the stuff much—but he'd hadda couple snifters, just enough to put a little shine on him, and I ask him if he's been over to Flanagan's. And he said no, he said the old Polack lady had asked him in, and he'd hadda couple snorts with her and her son. The son's name is Stanley."

"And what does Stanley do?" I asked.

Adams shrugged. "Some kind of salesman, working out of New York, or so he says. He wears good clothes, and always seems to have dough, at least enough to buy a jug with. He's a kind of a lush, this Stanley is."

"How well do you know him yourself?"

"Not very good. He comes to see his mother once in a while —say once a month—and sometimes he drops in here with a bottle, and him and me chew the fat while we work on his booze. He knows I'm an ex-con—I don't try to hide it, because I'm really going straight now—and he's a guy seems to have an interest in crime. Maybe he's crooked himself, I dunno, but he never made me no proposition."

"Did you ever mention Martin Bender to him?"

The tough, freckled face looked sheepish. "I guess I did, all right. Marty was a pretty hot guy at one time, and when I get gowed up a little, I kinda like to talk big, like most guys do when they gotta skinful. I told Stanley a lot of things about Marty, I guess. Some of them probably true."

"Like for instance," I said, "like for instance all the money that his old-time playmates owed him. Like Max Ageld and Big Joe Carson owed him?"

Adams' gray eyes gave me a quick and wary stare. "Okay," he said finally, smiling again, "I guess I could have mentioned them, too. Because I knew all about those guys. Marty told me about 'em, while we were in Minnewaska."

"Let me ask you something else, Adams," I said. "Do you think you could have told this Stanley enough so that he could have planned a nifty little extortion plot against Carson and Ageld? Suppose, for instance, Stanley knew somebody, also crooked, who looked almost enough like Bender to be his brother, and suppose the guy who looked like Marty threw in with Stanley, and they tried to pass him off as the real Bender, in an attempted shake-down of Ageld and Carson. Do you think Stanley knew enough to make a deal like that stick?"

"I dunno," Adams said. "Carson and Ageld are pretty smart gees, at least in my book. I don't think they'd shake easy. But of course, I don't know how much more Marty may have told Stanley when they was gabbing over at his mother's place. Also, you just gimme an idea, and it ain't one I like much. There's a chance, isn't there, that Stanley may have talked Marty into going away with him, and that they got Marty cooped up somewheres they can make him co-operate?"

"I think there's a very good chance of that," I said.

I stood up, fumbling for a cigarette, and Adams got to his feet, looking at me in an uncertain manner. "If I was you," he said, "I'd go and talk to the old lady and see if she knows anything. She's strictly barefoot Polack, and she don't speak English so good, but she's friendly enough. Her name is Wiandowski—Sophy Wiandowski."

He led the way to the back of the shack and pointed through a window at three shabby buildings, standing forlornly in a hollow about fifty yards away. "The building by the road is hers," Adams said. "She raises goats and chickens in the other ones. If you turn around and drive back to the corner and then turn left, and then turn left again at the first street, you'll come right out in front of the old lady's place."

I thanked Lee Adams and went out quietly through the neat small house and got into the car and started the motor. Carla and Deirdre both looked inquiringly at me, but I spoke some noncommittal words and turned the car around and drove the way that Adams had told me to drive.

Mrs. Wiandowski's house stood in a grove of gnarled and dead-looking fruit trees, a dilapidated structure weathered to the color of the earth that was banked window-high about its lower story. I had the feeling, getting out of the car, that I myself could have pushed the flimsy building over, that the first hard wind would send it crashing into the sagging sheds and chicken-coops that squatted behind it.

The board sidewalk leading to the house was shoveled clean, as Lee Adams' walk had been. As I moved along the walk, I smelled a warm, ammoniac animal smell, and heard the drowsy clucking of hens, and as I mounted the low stoop of the house, a goat sounded off, like a plaintive, bleating trumpet in one of the ramshackle sheds. A small black and yellow dog came rushing around the house, snarling and yapping, and floundering in the drifted snow.

The little dog couldn't make the stoop; it sank belly-deep in the snow, and when I spoke to it, the pooch stopped barking and began to wag its stump of a tail. I got down from the stoop and waded through the snow and rescued the animal

and brought it back with me. The door swung open just as I put my foot on the bottom step.

The woman who opened the door was small, broad-hipped and big-breasted, with a brown monkey face and quick, pale blue eyes. A red handkerchief was bound, turban-wise, around her head, and strings of lank, grizzled hair spilled out upon her wrinkled forehead. She wore gray woolen socks, no shoes, torn denim pants and a man's sweater. The sweater was faded and out at elbow, but it was made of fine wool, with a heraldic design worked into its front, and I saw at a glance that the sweater had cost someone a lot of money, once.

She gave me an unblinking stare, curious but not suspicious or hostile, and said: "Yes-s?"

I took off my hat and twisted my face into a smile of amiability that was as phony as a counterfeiter's first fifty dollar bill. "You don't know me, Mrs. Wiandowski," I began, "but I feel as though I know you, because I've heard Stanley speak of you so often. I'm a friend of Stanley's, see?"

"You no poliss," she asked, "you no detec-atiff, like fellows come here before?"

"Good Lord, no!" I said, "I'm not a cop. I work for the same company Stanley works for."

"In New York or Tschicago?" the woman asked. "Stanley spend most of his time in Tschicago."

I set the little dog down and eased my way gently through the door. "I'm from the New York office," I said. "We think a lot of Stan in our office, and we're going to have a little party for him, next week."

"Stanley like parties," the woman said, smiling up at me. "But better than parties like Stanley. He drink too much, get bushkay."

"He'll have lots of company at this party," I said. "We plan to give him a real send-off. We want to have a story about it in the newspapers, too—with a picture of Stan. Only we haven't got a picture, and that's why I came to see you. The president of our company thought maybe you'd have a picture that you could lend us."

The blue eyes clouded with suspicion. "Poliss ask for pic-

ture, too," she said. "They come ask me about Mr. Bender, is staying by Mr. Adams' house. They ask me where Bender go, I say I don't know. They ask me where Stanley work, I say I don't know, can't remember company name. They ask me for picture of Stanley, I say I no got."

"I wouldn't worry about that," I told her. "The police wanted to question this fellow Bender about a robbery. They found him yesterday. Turned out he wasn't the man they wanted."

"Poliss act like they think my Stan is crook, too," Sophy Wiandowski said scornfully. "A big businessman like him!"

"Maybe they thought he was planning a robbery or something, the day Bender came here and talked to him." I said it in what I hoped sounded like a facetious tone. "What did the two lads talk about, incidentally?"

Sophy grinned. "They talk about crooked things," she said, "because my Stanley know this Bender is a bad man in Tschicago, one time, and Stanley likes to talk such things. Always, he is reading the crime magazines, the ones got pictures of dead people and guns and all such stuff. I tell Stanley if he keep on reading such stuff, he'll wind up a crook himself, but he don't. He very nice man, my boy. He tell Bender he help him to get nice job, in country."

I kept my face impassive with an effort, and Sophy giggled. "I don't tell nosy cops about this," she said. "All I tell them is I only see Bender two-three times. Iss true. I tell them I don't know—can't remember—where Stanley work. Iss true. They don't believe. I tell them I no got pictures of Stanley. Iss *not* true. They believe."

She lifted a calloused, toil-blackened hand and crooked a finger at me. "You come," she said, "I show you pictures."

I followed her across a dark, disordered living room. Red plush curtains, faded and mildewed and splotched with grime, hung across one corner. The woman clawed the curtains aside and let me go ahead of her into a sort of alcove, windowless, steeped in shadow, an airless cavern that smelled of moldy dampness and stale cooking and of the small dog. "Cops don't

bother for looking here," Sophy Wiandowski said, and giggled again. "They think I'm just hunky slob, no got pictures."

I strained my eyes in the darkness, and the woman said, "Just a minute, mister, I light lamp. Got no electricity here."

I heard the rattle of a match box, the rasp of a match on wood. Quick, flaring light gleamed on discolored walls, on the cardboard bricks of an imitation fireplace, on a large photograph, framed in gilded metal, that hung above a mantel of pale wood. The light dimmed as Sophy Wiandowski turned away, presumably to light a lamp, but before the flare died, I had a good look at the photograph—a colored photograph of the man whom I had briefly known as Murray Wyatt.

I opened my mouth to speak, but said nothing; a long, involuntary sigh rose up from deep within me and whistled in the stuffy little room. The rank smell of kerosene bit at my nostrils, and I turned and saw light climbing in the blackened chimney of the lamp. Mrs. Wiandowski's brown leathery face, softened by the rosy glow, wore a beatific look.

"My Stanley," she said, and pride drummed in her voice. "He buy me this place, so I can live like I'm wanting to live. The poliss, they think I'm just old hunky slob. They don't know my Stan, a big sales-sman, a gentleman."

I turned away from her smiling face and looked back towards the imitation fireplace, and I saw—and felt sick, seeing it—that I was looking at a sort of shrine. There were vases filled with pathetic paper flowers on both sides of the photograph, and all around it, in a rough decorative border, snapshots of Murray Wyatt—or, rather, Stanley Wiandowski—were pinned to the wall.

There was Stanley, as a baby, lying on a rug; Stanley as a boy of nine or ten, wearing a sailor suit and holding a toy boat in his hands; Stanley as a weedy-looking Boy Scout; a teenage Stanley, posed self-consciously in a tuxedo, with a clarinet gripped in a skinny fist. Among the photographs were framed documents: a baptismal scroll, a high school diploma, a birth certificate from a Chicago hospital. I moved closer and peered at the date on the birth certificate, and the date told me that

if Stanley Wiandowski had driven Martin Bender's getaway car, he had done so when he was twelve years old.

Heels clattered on the living-room floor, and Carla walked into the alcove with the small dog frisking along behind her. "Hello," she said, in a high and slightly artificial voice. "I hope this lady doesn't mind us coming in, but it's so darned cold out in that car." She moved closer to me, looking at Mrs. Wiandowski with a bright and specious smile, and when she was by my side, she hissed softly at me through a corner of her mouth: "The sweater, Steve! Deirdre recognized the sweater. She says it's one she gave her husband for a present, the first year they were married."

I looked over Carla's shoulder and saw Deirdre standing between the red curtains. The little dog turned away from my wife as I stared at Stanley Wiandowski's widow; it nipped playfully at Deirdre's ankles, but she neither saw nor felt the dog. She stood like something carved from stone, her eyes fixed on the photograph in the gilt frame, and as I watched, her lips parted and a laugh of sheer hysteria echoed through the room.

→ 9 ←

THE LIVING ROOM of the hotel suite in Brooklyn overlooked a street on which trolley cars jangled through a roaring stream of evening traffic. It seemed a whole world away from Mrs. Wiandowski's alcove, although I'd left the house on Staten Island only a few hours before.

Carla and Deirdre were in one of the bedrooms of the suite, with the door shut, and Christie and I and a detective named Whelan were in the living room, waiting for Mike. I'd telephoned Mike from Staten Island, telling him everything that had happened, and I hadn't forgotten to mention the three canaries in the blue box, and the Boxer pup. Mike had sug-

gested that I check Deirdre and myself into the hotel in Brooklyn, and then call Christie. He'd be over as soon as he could, he said; he had a little business to transact first, and then he'd join us for what promised to be a merry session.

Christie, however, had been too tired to be really disagreeable when he arrived. He slouched in an armchair now, looking old as death and twice as unattractive, and when he spoke his voice was a croak of weary resignation. "Just so the Wyatt woman behaves herself," he said, "just so she stays put. If she steps foot out of this hotel, you go with her, Steve. You and Whelan. She's in your charge entirely. You boys get that?"

Whelan nodded, sitting stiffly on the edge of a chair. He was a tall, stooped guy, with a big jowl and a big paunch, and small eyes that blinked solemnly behind shell-rimmed glasses. "I got it," he said in a deep voice that had a solid Brooklyn accent, "I'm on the broad's tail every minute, like I'm a burr."

Christie scowled at the bedroom door and shook his head, dribbling stogie ashes over his vest. "It don't seem possible she didn't know her husband's real name, or know he had a mother living on the island all the time. You sure she wasn't lying, Steve, when she told you she didn't know?"

"I'd stake my life on it," I told him. "She couldn't have faked the amazement she showed when she saw that photograph."

"And how she take it, afterwards?"

"Pretty badly, for a few minutes," I said. "After that, she just clammed up, and crawled into the ice."

The old man made a hacking sound in his throat and stared sorrowfully at the backs of his speckled hands. "I dunno," he said, "maybe my luck is just naturally bad. My boys found this Lee Adams, less'n ten hours after Big Joe Carson told me Bender had been staying with some guy on Staten Island."

"I was one of the guys worked on that," Whelan said to me, with a self-conscious smile. "We didn't have hardly any trouble finding Adams."

"You was one of the guys talked to Mrs. Wiandowski, too,"

Christie grated, "and don't go reminding me of that. You and Hausmeyer talked to her for an hour—hell, you even sat down and drunk coffee with her. And all the time Wiandowski's pictures are less'n ten feet away. Ke-rist!"

His voice trailed off in a grunt of disgust, and at that moment, Mike Zacharias walked into the room. Mike looked tired, but he was grinning, and there was an unmistakable gleam of excitement in his eyes.

Mike spoke a word of amiable greeting to Christie, but the old cop merely glowered. "Don't look so cocky because this tramp, Considine, had a lucky moment," Christie said to Mike. "What we got now, except one guy dead and buried, and another stiff in the refrigerator? We still ain't caught the murderer."

Mike was lighting a cigar, looking at the Inspector over the flame of the match. When the weed was ignited, he sat down on a sofa and spoke directly to Christie, his voice free of malice—and of guile. "Listen to me, Chris! If I tell you something that may be important, will you give me your word—word of honor—that you won't cross me up? At least until you've heard how I think a certain situation should be handled?"

"I never crossed anybody in my life," Christie said indignantly.

"Save your con for the con men you pinch," Mike told him. "You cheated us on the Lee Adams-Mrs. Wiandowski set-up, and you muffed it besides. Not, of course, that I'm pinning medals on Steve or me, either. We've been cold as a landlord's heart most of the time, and in some respects we've acted like a couple of correspondence school dicks working on their first lesson."

Christie seemed ready to agree with that, and Mike went on. "So when Steve telephoned me from Staten Island and told me what gave, I decided I wasn't going to make like a master mind any more. I decided I'd just go back to using ordinary horse sense, and rely on the experience I've waxed up in thirty years of this business. Well, maybe you'd like to know what I did this afternoon?"

"I'm all ears," Christie said nastily, and it wasn't too much of an exaggeration, either.

And Mike told him, forcibly but mildly, using as few words as possible. After I'd called him, Mike had gone over to Grand Central Terminal and he'd talked to an ex-cop named Carl Roberts, who was one of the top guys in the terminal security set-up. Roberts hadn't been particularly glad to see him, because a flock of New York dicks, armed with photographs of Bender, had already made a check of ticket-window clerks and terminal employees, on the chance that someone might remember having seen Marty.

No one had remembered, and Roberts wasn't hot on the idea of interrogating the terminal personnel again, but Mike had finally convinced him that the deal was different this time, and Carl Roberts had given his consent. He'd called in the ticket salesmen, one after one, and Mike had flashed a photo of Bender, and he'd also asked if any of them had any recent recollections of a guy with a blue box, and a Boxer pup on a leash. He and Roberts had talked to people for nearly three hours, not just to ticket salesmen, but to redcaps, shoe-shine boys, and clerks in the terminal shops. Nobody had remembered anything, and they'd been ready to call it quits, and then one of Roberts' boys had brought in a red-cap named Morgan, and Morgan had remembered putting the old dog-and-canary man on a New York Central local train.

Morgan had been sure there had been canaries in the blue box, because he'd asked the man what was in the strange container, and the man had told him. Morgan had identified a photograph of Bender as a positive likeness of the man he'd helped, but he didn't know exactly where the man was going, because he hadn't seen his ticket.

"So far, so good," Mike said, "but not very good, because that local makes about a hundred stops, running way up the valley, and how could we guess where he got off? I was just about ready to pack up and come over here, and then I had a thought. How about ticket-vendors that might have been off

sick today? With all this flu and everything, I told Roberts, there must be somebody who didn't show up today."

And that had done it. There had been only one ticket salesman ill, and Roberts had telephoned him—a guy named Parrish, who lived in Jackson Heights—and Parrish had remembered the man with the blue box and the Boxer pup. According to the ticket salesman, another man—a younger man—had purchased the tickets, while the man with the box and the dog had stood a little way back from the window, but Parrish remembered the pair fairly well, and he recalled selling the younger man two tickets to Castle Lake.

"Castle Lake's a resort town," Mike said. "About two hours' running time out of New York. I heard that, and I thanked Roberts—I could have kissed him—and then I yarded myself into a taxi and rode up to see this Parrish in Jackson Heights. Parrish had the flu, and he was in bed with a bottle of rye, but he told me the picture of Martin Bender looked a hell of a lot like the guy he'd seen with the box and the dog."

Mike paused for an instant, his mouth widening into a self-satisfied grin, and then went on. "So then I flashed a newspaper photo of Murray Wyatt—Stanley Wiandowski, that is—and Parrish said he was almost positive Wiandowski was the guy who bought the tickets to Castle Lake. He couldn't remember exactly when, but he knew it was fairly recently."

"For crissake!" Christie shrilled, "you wait till you come all the way over here to tell me this! Whyn't you call me immediately, and by this time I'd have the state cops pulling that town to bits!"

"Wait a minute," Mike said, obviously enjoying himself, "keep the shirt on, Chris. It happens that I've got a friend in Castle Lake, a guy named Art Randall, whom I've known for years. After I talked to Parrish, I called Randall and asked him to do a little digging for me. He's city recorder of the burg, and in the real estate business besides, and I figured he could find out a few things, if anybody could."

"And did he?" Christie demanded.

"He did," Mike answered smugly. "First of all, the station master at Castle Lake remembered the guy with the blue box

and the pup. There are only four or five taxi drivers working up there in the winter, and none of them hauled Marty, and that means somebody met him at the train."

"Well, I guess that puts him in the general area all right," Christie said. "But we don't know where he went to, after he got off the train."

"Correction," Mike said. "We *do* know. Randall checked the two grocery stores that are open in the winter months, asking them if anybody, any new customer, had started buying bird seed and dog food recently. And a woman had—a woman who's the wife of a caretaker out at the Woodruff place, on the north side of the lake. It's one of the big places that sometimes keeps help on all the year around. How do you like that, Inspector?"

"It's pretty warm, all right," Christie conceded grudgingly. "Of course, it could be just a coincidence."

"It's no coincidence," Mike said, positively gloating. "You just don't know my friend Randall. As soon as he got the dope from the grocer, Randall called up a widow friend who lives just down the road from the Woodruff place. A real nosy kind of woman I guess, thank God for her. She saw the man with the box and the dog the day they arrived. They're still there —at least the pup is. She sees it every day."

Christie sighed and rose to his feet. His baggy trousers had hiked up above his old-fashioned shoes, and the Inspector stamped his feet, shaking the wrinkled cloth back into place on his gaunt shanks. There was real humility in his eyes when he lifted them to Mike's face.

"I gotta give it to you, Zacharias," he said, "I really do. I guess you know how it is with me. I was a wore-out, old beat-up lieutenant, waiting for retirement, and then there's this shake-up in the department, and they jump me over about fifty men into an inspector's job. At the time I kid myself they do it because of my brains, because they certainly couldn't have done it because of my looks. Well, I no longer got any illusions about my brains. I'm the kind of guy, if they gave me a message to get to Garcia, I'd probably deliver it to

Gilhooley. So, now how you wanna play this thing from here on out?"

"Why," Mike said softly, "I thought we'd all just get in my car and ride up to Castle Lake and have a look. If Bender's there, and he's the guy Steve and I saw at Thorne's, then we've got our murderer. If not, then—well, we'll just sit down and figure it out from there."

"Okay," Christie said, "what are we waiting for? We'll take Mrs. Wyatt—Wiandowski with us, and Whelan here can go along, too."

Mike raised his brows at Whelan, whom he had largely ignored since his arrival. "Bill's been with me quite a while," Christie said. "He's been assigned to guard the lady, the last few days. It was him took her and her sister to the movies yesterday afternoon."

Whelan blinked ingratiatingly at Mike, a smirk on his face. "It's nice work if you can get it," he said, "and I got it."

"Also, in case I ever allow myself to forget it," the Inspector growled, "you was one of the guys went to see Mrs. Wiandowski." The old man grunted scornfully and picked up his hat and coat, and I touched him on an arm. "There's something I forgot to tell you," I said. "Something about Bayard Thorne. He wasn't in Washington yesterday. He was in New York, at least until ten o'clock last night."

Christie shriveled me with a baleful stare. "You think maybe I'm a idiot?" he asked bitterly. "I don't need you to tell me that. And you know so much, maybe you know where Thorne is at this minute? Well, you don't know, so I'll tell you. He's down in the D.A.'s office, doing a little explaining, sweating like an ordinary citizen, and, I'll betcha, sweating some big drops, too."

It may have been colder in Point Barrow, Alaska, than it was on the shores of Castle Lake, but a few extra degrees wouldn't have made much difference. The Buick staggered and rolled on the frozen ruts of the road that wound around the lake, fighting a howling north wind that sounded like a banshees' convention. The gale lifted great ragged plumes of

snow from the lake, and dry, driven flakes pelted the car windows in a whistling roar, like a steady blast from a shotgun filled with rock salt. The dark ice of the lake—bared in jagged patches where the wind had torn up the snow—mirrored stars that looked as hard as the tips of diamond drills.

Deirdre and Christie and Whelan were huddled in the back seat, wrapped in blankets we'd borrowed from the Brooklyn hotel, and Mike and Art Randall and I were squeezed into the front of the car. We'd stopped in Castle Lake for sandwiches and coffee, and Mike had telephoned Randall, and he'd joined us in the diner where we ate. He was a bandy-legged, wiry little character, with a king-size Adam's-apple and a wizened, intelligent face. He was also, as it turned out, a special deputy sheriff, and he was packing a pistol that looked like a sawed-off cannon. I didn't know what we were running into, but I thought that if the party turned out rough, Randall's artillery might be very welcome indeed.

Carla had gone, under protest, to spend the night with her sister in Manhattan; even though the possibility seemed remote that the killer would seek me out in my own apartment, I didn't want her alone in the place. We'd driven north through a cold blue dusk into the cold dark night, going as fast as the law allowed, and a great deal faster whenever Mike was sure that there were no law officers in sight.

Deirdre sat through most of the journey with her hands folded in her lap, staring straight ahead. Christie and Whelan made several awkward attempts to engage her in conversation, but the girl quite obviously didn't want to talk. She was apparently taking the discovery of Murray's mother pretty hard, possibly harder, I thought, than she had taken the actual killing of her husband.

Murray was dead, beyond all scorn—and beyond the law, too—but it was plain, and getting plainer, that he had been no bargain, either as a husband or a son or a citizen of the Republic. Recent bereavement was bad enough, I thought, but life was certainly kicking her in the teeth when it socked her with the knowledge that her husband had been a heel and a liar, and a crook besides. I wanted to say something to the

girl that might comfort her, but I couldn't, so I just sat back, keeping quiet myself, and let the miles unfold.

The house we were looking for was on a hill that sloped down to the shores of the lake. It was one of those long, low-slung modern buildings that look like a barracks, a dun-colored monstrosity that seemed to blend into the surrounding trees and the brown crags of a hill that rose almost sheer behind it. A paved driveway curved up to the house from two tall gate-posts, and the grounds were fenced with a six-foot barrier of native stone.

"I sold Sam Woodruff this property," Art Randall said as Mike brought the car to a stop. "I dunno what his people get out of it that they like, but on a night like this, they certainly got plenty of fresh air." He had a high, nasal voice that twanged like a banjo string.

Christie's voice came from the back of the car in a brisk whisper. "Okay, Michael, take it away! It's all yours."

Mike squinted through the windshield at the driveway, which was heavily strewn with cinders over a sheath of ice. "We'll have to walk in, I guess," he said. "We'd wake the dead, driving over that. And something just occurred to me. We haven't got any warrants, for one thing, and no jurisdiction up here, either. We'd be maybe violating the law a little ourselves, just barging in."

"To hell with protocol," Christie said, "we're going in." He leaned forward and tapped Randall on the shoulder. "How about that bunch of rocks behind the house. Could they be got over?"

"By a goat, maybe," Randall chuckled, "or a man who could climb like a monk. But even then he'd have his work cut out, with all the ice he'll find on those rocks. I'd say anybody comes out of there tonight will hafta come the front way. There's a back door, of course, but I don't think anybody's going over that cliff."

"I'll take the back door," Christie said. "Mike, you and Steve can go up and try the front door. Mr. Randall can cover you boys from the lawn." He turned to Whelan. "You stick here in the car with the lady. You got that?"

"I got it," Whelan answered. "But what do I do if somebody gets by you fellows and comes out this way. Do I start blasting?"

"You do not," Christie said. "You just sit here and watch the lady. And if there's any shooting, shove her down on the floor."

Mike fumbled in a pocket of his overcoat, and the faint light gleamed on a pistol barrel as his paw came into sight again. "I brought you some hardware, Steve," he said.

I told him that I'd slipped a Savage automatic into my pocket before leaving the apartment on the preceding night, and Mike grunted and let the pistol fall back into his pocket. "All right," he said, "let's get it over with." He opened the car door, forcing it open against the wind, and climbed out into the gale. Randall and I followed, and then Christie climbed out with his police special gripped in his hand, and stood braced against the solid blast of the gale.

"Okay," the old man barked. "Give me a minute to get to the back of the house, and then throw your pitch."

"By Godfrey!" Art Randall spoke in a happy whisper, "this is exciting! Like the movies, almost."

The Inspector slid around one of the gate-posts, his head bent, and stepped into a hummock of snow heaped up beside the drive. He sank knee-deep into the drift, churned through it, moving in a sort of staggering run. His gaunt, stooped figure cast a long black shadow on the snow, and then the shadow was lost in the darkness of the trees.

Mike stood for a long moment just inside the gate-posts, looking towards the house with studious and deadly calm, and then he said, "Okay, let's go." Randall and I floundered after him, shielding our faces against the stinging hail of the driven snow, wallowing, half falling, but moving doggedly in the direction of the house. I shut my eyes once, against the whistling horror of the wind, and bumped into a tree trunk that was cold and very hard; I reeled away from it and saw that Mike had come to a halt at the bottom of a short flight of stone steps that rose to the front door of the house.

"All right, Randall," the big guy whispered. "Plant yourself

behind some tree—behind the *warm* side of some tree—until we see what gives."

Randall melted silently into the shadows, and Mike said, "Guns out, I think." He was pulling the driving glove off his right hand as he spoke, and an instant later, the pistol gleamed. My cold fingers fumbled for the butt of the automatic in my hip pocket, and as I felt for it, I saw light—a thin sliver of radiance—shining through the curtains that covered a huge window in the front of the house.

Mike went up the steps, quiet as a cat with sore feet, for all his bulk, and jabbed a push-button set in the wall beside the massive front door. The howl of the wind drowned out the sound of the bell—if the bell made any sound—and after a moment Mike rapped the door with his knuckles and lifted his voice in a plaintive shout: "Hey, in there! Open up, for Pete's sake, I'm freezing!"

A deep voice came back at him from beyond the door—a deep voice, and unfriendly. "We've gone to bed in here. Whatcha want, anyway?"

"My car's broken down," Mike said pleadingly. "For God's sake, old man, let me in to use your phone."

"Can't help you," the deep voice answered. "Phone's out of order. Try the next house up the road."

"Well, for heaven's sake," Mike bellowed in a tone of vast aggrievement, "what kind of guy are you, anyway? I've got my mother out here, and she can't walk another foot."

Mike had called me a lot of things during the years that I'd known him, but it was the first time he had ever referred to me as his maternal parent.

There was a long moment of silence, and then the door was slowly opened, a cautious, inch-wide crack of an opening, through which a man's eye stared. The eye, I noted, was a long way up; the man inside the door was nearly as tall as Mike.

"Coming in, please!" Mike said. He set a hand against the door and shoved, and the guy inside grunted as the wood slammed into him. The crack widened, became a thick shaft of light pouring out into the darkness, then narrowed again as the man flung his weight against the door in a vain effort to

shut it. Mike had a size fourteen shoe jammed down on the threshold, and he yelped with pain as the door closed on it; his shoulder smacked the portal like a battering-ram, and as the door swung wide, a burly tall man staggered back and sat down abruptly on the floor of a big, warm room.

Mike went into the room quickly, holding his gun behind the skirts of his overcoat, and I went in quickly, too, doing likewise. The guy on the floor got up, in a swift and agile manner. He was a hemp-haired, ape-faced thug of thirty-five or forty, with a thick neck and thick arms and shoulders that lumped up, heavy and hard, in the dirty T-shirt that he wore.

He didn't say anything, not a word; he took a long, sliding step towards Mike, with one arm outstretched, the arm of a wrestler feeling for a hold, and he moved very rapidly indeed. But so did Mike. The gun came up in a lightning arc, and the muzzle jabbed into the man's belly and lost itself in folds of muscle and fat. The man stepped back, grunting explosively, and let his arms fall to his sides. They fell an awfully long way, too.

"We came to see a Mr. Bender," Mike said with elaborate calm, "a Mr. Martin Bender."

Apeface looked at him for a moment, his pale eyes black with fury, and then a look of stupid blankness settled over his ugly puss. "Don't know nobody name of Bender," he said. The smell of cheap whisky came from him like a wind blowing off a still.

A door opened at the end of the wide room, and a woman came in. She was a slatternly, fat, hard-faced blond number, shapeless in a flowered pink housecoat, with mules flapping on her bare feet. "What is it, Oscar?" she asked in a harsh and peevish voice. "What these fellas want?"

A dog came into the room close behind her, a half-grown Boxer pup with a wonderful, quizzical wrinkled face, and eyes that were bright with puppy amiability. He came prancing around from behind the woman's skirts, pretending to growl, making deep, snuffling noises that wouldn't have fooled a kitten. I spoke to him, and he came towards me, his stump of

a tail wagging. "The man who owns the dog," Mike said. "We want to see him, if you please."

Apeface stood motionless, locked in sullen silence. "He isn't here, the man who owns the dog," the woman said. "He went away—yesterday." Her dull eyes were wary and mean in her flabby face, and her tongue ran through her lips, licking at the corners of a slack mouth.

"You'll pardon us if we don't believe you," Mike answered. He turned his head slightly, and looked at me with a tight grin. "See if you can find the back door, and call Christie in."

I walked past the woman, moving towards the door through which she had appeared. "You got no right to do this," she shrilled, her eyes following me. "Not unless you're cops, you haven't."

"That's what he's going for," Mike said, "to call a cop. Just in case you think one's necessary."

I went into a large, modern kitchen and found a rear door that was double-locked and bolted. I got the door open and shoved my head out into the tearing wind, and shouted for Christie. I heard his feet crunching snow, and the sound of his hoarse breathing, and then he staggered into the light that flowed past me through the open door. He came panting into the room, and stood glaring at me as snowflakes melted on his bristling eyebrows. "Smart guy, you are," he said, "framing yourself in a lighted door like that. Suppose I'd got bopped on the head, out in the yard. What a target you'd have made!"

"Sorry to disappoint you," I said, "and sorry you didn't get clunked on the noggin, too. But step this way, please."

He stamped after me into the living room, and Mike grinned at him, sitting in a chair with the gun barrel resting on his knees. "This lady and gentleman have raised a nice question of legality," Mike said. "Please be kind enough to flash your potsy and put their doubts at rest."

Christie scowled at the couple, unbuttoned his overcoat and dug out his inspector's shield. Apeface spoke then, in a weary and tipsy voice of complete resignation. "I can't fight three guys with gats," he said to the woman. "So give 'em what they're lookin' for, Gladys."

"We haven't got what they're looking for, slobbo," the woman rasped. "You told me, and Mr. Wilson told me—"

"Shut up!" Apeface interrupted savagely. "I'm not takin' any rap for Wilson and that other guy. Open the door and let Bender out."

The woman shrugged, shot him a look of contempt, and waddled to a door across the room from the door into the kitchen. She took a bunch of keys from a pocket of her housecoat, fitted one into a lock, opened the door and disappeared into a hallway beyond.

A huge fireplace ran one third of the way along one wall of the room, and a log fire blazed cheerful on the hearth. I walked towards the fire, holding out my hands to its warmth, and I saw a decanter of whisky on a small table beside an armchair that was drawn up in front of the hearth.

Footsteps sounded on the bare floor beyond the door and a white-haired man walked into the room. Mike came quickly to his feet, scowling in terrific concentration, and the man looked at him and smiled. "Good evening," he said in a pleasant voice, "I'm Martin Bender." As he came into the room, the fat blonde shuffled in behind him.

→ 10 ←

HE LOOKED A LOT like the guy Mike and I had seen at Thorne's; he looked a lot like him, and yet he really wasn't like the junky at all. His eyes were large and dark and prominent, and he had the same sort of thin, finely chiseled handsome face, and his hair was white, as the killer's had been white. But beyond these physical details—which seemed immaterial, once you saw him closely—all similarity ceased.

Martin Bender's eyes were clear, and wise, and very kind. His face, for all its fragile good looks, had strength and great quiet dignity, and lighted by those remarkable eyes it had an

ascetic beauty, a benignity that I did not understand, yet somehow accepted without question—and I had questioned the benignity of most faces I had encountered in this worldly age. He was frail, and he didn't look particularly well, but his thin body seemed to contain an enormous vitality, as though he were driven by some will stronger than any infirmity that his flesh might own.

Silence hung in the room for a moment, almost as palpable as sound, and then Christie spoke, softly, with a note of what sounded like respect. "Well, Mike? Steve? Don't tell me this is the lad we're looking for?"

Mike's grin spread across the flat planes of his cheeks. "If it is," he said, "I'm the direct descendent of Ivan the Terrible, and the illegitimate son of Abdul the Damned."

Christie sank onto a sofa, his joints creaking as he slumped wearily down. "I guess you got quite a story to tell us, Bender," he said. "I guess you could maybe start by telling us just where you were the night that Wyatt—Wiandowski, that is—got killed."

"I was here," Martin Bender said. His voice was higher than the killer's voice had been, but a good voice, and well-rounded. "I heard about the murder on the radio, at midnight. Oscar Tollefson—" he jerked a thumb at Apeface—"was asleep. After I'd heard the news, and thought about it a while, I wrote the note to Mr. Considine. His name had stuck in my mind; they mentioned him on the radio, you know."

"I'm Steve Considine," I heard myself saying. "You sent the note to me because you heard my name mentioned on the radio?"

"That's the reason." Bender smiled. "And now I suppose you'd like me to tell you how it was delivered?"

"I would," I said. "I would indeed. And I think I'd like to know how come I got it so soon after the murder." I pointed at Apeface. "Don't tell me *he* let you send a messenger, or that he took it himself."

"Hardly," Bender said. "I was locked in my bedroom the morning after the killing. There are bars on the window—there are on all the downstairs windows of this house, you'll

notice, possibly as a precaution against thieves." He smiled, and then went on. "I was locked into my room, desperately trying to think of some way of getting in touch with you, or with someone who could help me, and I had a lot of ideas, and none of them were very good. And then I saw the milk bottles sitting on the back stoop, barely eight feet from my window."

Bender's eyes danced with amusement as he continued. "Mrs. Tollefson"—he pointed at the fat blonde—"isn't an early riser. She's seldom up by the time the milkman comes, so she does what thousands of other women do: she writes the amount of milk and cream she wants on a slip of paper, sticks it into a milk bottle, and sets the bottle out on the stoop the night before."

Christie chuckled. "You must have had a lot of fun, snaffling that bottle."

"It was quite a job," Bender said. "I tore a strip off the edge of the bedroom carpet, made a running noose and fastened it on to the curtain pole from the window. But first, before I did that, I wrote the note to Mr. Considine. I sealed it and put it in a second envelope addressed to the milkman, along with a five dollar bill and another note to the milkman. Oscar and his wife hadn't taken away my money, or the writing materials I had in my bag.

"I asked the milkman to please mail the letter to Considine," Bender continued. "I wrote that it was very important, and would he please get it in the mail as soon as possible. I had quite a time getting the milk bottle back on the porch, but I finally managed. I didn't dare take the chance of speaking to the man when he came, because Oscar Tollefson might hear me, and he'd told me that if he caught me trying to communicate with anyone, he'd kill me."

"Oscar wouldn't really hurt anybody," the woman said. "He just told you that to scare you. You know he wouldn't kill you."

"Maybe he wouldn't," Bender said, "but he'd have given me a beating, and I didn't want that. . . . I took a long chance, the second morning, the day after I sent the note. I stood in

the window when the milkman came, and spoke to him, and he told me that he'd delivered the letter himself. He'd had to go into New York on business the day before, and he'd got off early and gone in, and while he was there he delivered the letter. A very stupid, but honest, man."

"It's a good story," I said, "and I believe it. But it will make a lot more sense when you tell me why you didn't sign your real name, and tell me where you were, along with a lot of other details you omitted."

Bender gave me a patient grin. "I thought the letter would be mailed in Castle Lake. If it had been, you'd have found me, and soon. But if I'd signed my real name to the letter, or given the exact location of where I was, or made a positive statement about anything, there'd have been a lot of cops in here immediately. The thing would have been bound to leak out to the press, and then—well, Wilson wouldn't have come back here again."

"Wilson?" Christie asked quickly. "That the name of the guy who looks like you?"

Bender nodded, "That's what he calls himself, anyway. He's as mean as they come, too, and on the stuff besides, but he's no fool. If the cops had come here and picked me up, Wilson would have found out, and then he wouldn't have come back."

"What makes you think he'd come back?" Mike asked. "If the cops didn't find you, I mean."

"Why," Bender said simply, "he'd have to come back—to kill me. Tollefson here is a thug, but I don't believe he's a killer. Wilson would have to come back to do a job on me, but he wouldn't have come until he'd finished with his shakedown of Carson and Ageld. He might have needed some information, in order to pull the thing off—information that I'd have to supply him."

"How'd you know about him trying to shake them?" Christie asked. "There hasn't been anything about that in the papers or on the radio. This Wilson—or maybe Wiandowski—tell you about what they were trying to pull?"

"They told me," Bender said, "about their plan to shake down Carson and Ageld, at least. I guess I gave the idea to

Wiandowski, the first day we met, without meaning to, of course. I told him about my old pals, Max and Joe, while I was having some drinks with Wiandowski in his mother's house. And I guess my friend, Lee Adams, had bragged me up to Wiandowski before I came, telling him how much money Max and Big Joe owed me, and what a big-shot hood I'd been. Wiandowski told me that he and Lee had talked about my past. And Wiandowski asked me why I didn't go after the money that I had coming, and I said that I was finished with all that sort of stuff."

"Maybe you'd better just tell us all about everything," Christie said mildly, "starting with the time you first met Wiandowski."

Bender sat down in an armchair; the Boxer pup scrabbled his way to the man's knees, and curled up in his lap. I watched his hands—fragile and blue-veined and long-fingered—caress the dog as he talked.

He'd been aware from the very beginning, he said, that he couldn't stay long at Lee Adams' house. Lee was a good lad, but he had to sleep days; the canaries and the dog made a lot of racket, and Bender had started thinking about moving, almost from the moment he arrived. He'd gone in to see Carson and Ageld on the Sunday after his arrival and both of them had given him some money, and both of them had offered him a job. But the more he thought about it, the more certain Bender was that he wouldn't be happy in the city. Or, to be exact, the puppy wouldn't be happy.

So his meeting with Wiandowski on Tuesday had been providential—or at least Bender had thought so, at first—because Wiandowski had told him that he had a lot of connections; he had promised to help him find a job in the country, in some place where he could keep the canaries and the pup, or even more pups if he wanted them. Bender hadn't said anything about a possible job to Lee Adams when he got back to the shack; Lee was a sensitive guy, and Bender hadn't wanted to hurt his feelings.

Wiandowski had come back the next day, while Lee Adams slept. He'd told Bender that a friend of his needed a care-

taker on an estate in the country, and that Bender could have the job, providing he left at once.

Bender had written a note to Lee Adams, and left the note on the kitchen table, together with fifty dollars of the money that Carson and Ageld had given him. Wiandowski had asked him not to tell Adams that he'd gone away with him—he didn't want Lee to get sore at him for taking his friend away, he said—and Bender hadn't mentioned anything about who he went with. He'd packed his stuff and put the canaries in their blue box, and he and Wiandowski had left Lee Adams' place. They'd walked several blocks before they found a taxi, and Wiandowski had told the driver to take them to the ferry. They'd caught another cab on the Manhattan side, and Wiandowski had given the hackie an address that Bender remembered: Irving Place and Gramercy Park.

"He asked me to sit in the cab for a minute when we got there," Bender said. "He said he had to see a man on some business, and that he'd be right out. I wasn't suspicious of him, or worried about anything, but right after he got out, the pup started to whimper, so I got out and walked the dog across the street to the fence of Gramercy Park. I know it was called Gramercy Park, because the cabbie told me so. He said it was a nice part of New York to live in.

"When the pup and I got over by the fence, I looked in the direction that Wiandowski had gone, and I saw him. He was standing outside the front door of a big, old house, and as I watched he took a key out of his pocket and unlocked the door. I thought it was sort of funny, the man having a key to a house like that, considering the way his mother lived, but it wasn't any of my business, and I didn't worry about it."

"And what happened then?" Christie asked.

"I was on my way back to the cab," Bender said, "when I saw Wiandowski come out of the house. An old woman came out behind him—an old woman wearing what looked like a nurse's or a maid's uniform. She grabbed Wiandowski by the arm, but he shoved her away from him and came on. She ran after him a few steps, and I heard her yell, 'Now you listen to me, Mr. Wyatt, you listen to me, Mr. Wyatt!' I thought that

was sort of funny, since I knew the fellow as Wiandowski. The pup and I were back in the cab by the time Wiandowski got there."

"That seems a pretty careless thing for Wiandowski to have done," Christie observed. "Letting you and the hackie see where he lived. And letting you get close enough to hear the maid call him by another name."

"The cab was parked in the sidestreet, Irving Place," Bender answered. "The cabby couldn't have seen the house, and naturally Wiandowski didn't know that I was going to get out with the dog. Anyway, I guess he felt he didn't have to worry much about what I knew, because the way he figured, I wasn't going to live to tell anybody."

"So you heard the radio broadcast on the night of the murder," Mike said softly, "and then a lot of things were clear in your mind, huh? You knew that Wiandowski was mobbed up with somebody who looked like you, didn't you, because obviously, by this time you'd met the guy who tried to pass himself off as Martin Bender. Right?"

Bender nodded gravely, and Mike went on. "You knew also that Wiandowski sometimes called himself Wyatt—at least you'd heard that old woman call him Wyatt. So when the radio told you that a guy who called himself Bender had knocked off somebody named Wyatt, you had a fairly clear picture. Incidentally, when did this bird you call Wilson first come into your life? And where?"

"Here," the white-haired man said, "right in this room. The Wednesday I came up here with Wiandowski. Tollefson met Wiandowski and me at the station the day we came up from New York, and drove us out here, and when I walked in, the fellow called Wilson was sitting where you're sitting now. A cool baby, that one. When I walked in he smiled at me and said, 'Hi, brother, how are you? Sit down and let's have a little talk?'

"When I saw how much Wilson looked like me, I got a shock," Bender continued. "But it was nothing compared to the shock I got when I heard about the murder at Thorne's house. Because anybody who was there would be shown po-

lice photographs of me, wouldn't they? And they'd be almost positive that I was the person they'd seen at Thorne's, at least that was the way I decided that Wilson and Wiandowski had it figured. They thought that Carson and Ageld would naturally hear about it, that they'd believe I was really on the rampage, and would gun them unless they paid off. Wiandowski, naturally, didn't know that Wilson was going to kill him, but the killing made the thing even more convincing, so far as Carson and Ageld were concerned."

Martin Bender smiled. "I'll bet Big Joe and Max were really frightened when they heard the news," he said. "Almost as frightened as I was when I finally realized what he was up to, knowing how much he resembled me."

"Wilson told me this guy *was* his brother!" Apeface yelled suddenly, in a voice of fury—and fright. "What the hell kind of a deal is this, anyway? Wilson says this guy's his brother, and he says he's nuts, and he wants me to keep the guy up here, so he don't have to bug him. What you guys trying to do? You trying to make out like I'm a party to a kidnaping?"

"I think our large friend is telling the truth, at that," Bender said to Christie. "Wiandowski hired him and his wife from an agency, just the day before they brought me up here. I don't think they knew what they were letting themselves in for."

"You damn right we didn't!" Tollefson yowled. "Takin' care of mental patients is my business, ever since I quit wrestling for a living. I been orderly in half a dozen institutions, I can give you references."

"I'll bet you can," Christie said. "And I'll bet the wardens of some of the places you've done time in will give you references, too. Now sit down and shut up, before I get irked at you, meatball!"

Bender scratched the pup's head and looked at me. "Wiandowski and Wilson and I had a little private talk after I got here," he said. "They told me that if I didn't try to communicate with anybody, or try to run away, I'd be taken care of later." There was a trace of bitterness in his eyes as he went on. "I knew how I'd be taken care of, all right. Carson and

Ageld—I didn't have to be a genius to figure out about them, figure what Wiandowski and Wilson had cooked up for that pair."

"A couple of wise guys like Max and Joe wouldn't pay off easy, would they?" Christie asked. "They wouldn't just hand a bundle over to anybody who said he was Bender's representative, or they wouldn't give it, unseen, to somebody who said he was Bender. They'd probably require some proof, Maxey and Joey would."

Bender nodded. "So you had a sort of guarantee of survival," Mike said, "at least for a while. But didn't it shake you when you heard that Wilson had knocked off Wiandowski?"

"It just convinced me that the junky was more dangerous than I thought he was," Bender said. "Wiandowski set it up for him to get me into his hands, and then he didn't need Wiandowski any more, so he killed him. Just as he planned to kill me after he'd used me, and—" he shot a quick look at Tollefson, who was sulking against a wall—"just as he probably planned to kill Tollefson and his wife after he was through with them."

Apeface gave an involuntary gasp of fright, and Christie quieted him with a savage growl. "If you ask me, Marty," the old cop said, "you were a damned fool, and you didn't co-operate much, either, not with us. If you could get a letter out at all, whyn't you load as much information into it as you could?"

"Because I wanted to see Wilson caught," Bender answered simply. "And like I told Mr. Considine, if the cops had come steamboating in here, Wilson would have got wise."

He stared reflectively at the floor for a moment, and then went on. "I put a lot of thought into that letter before I wrote it. I'd read an article about the Confidential Agency in a magazine once, and I figured it was a shrewd outfit. I wanted to convey the impression to Considine that I was in a place I couldn't get out of, or even get word out of, at least easily. I thought that if they checked on Wiandowski thoroughly, they might get a lead that would enable them to run Wilson down. I figured that if Considine got a letter postmarked Castle

Lake he'd start making a discreet investigation, and maybe find me without the whole state knowing about it. And he did."

Bender paused, glanced at Tollefson, and then went on. "Also, I had to consider the effect the note might have on Oscar and his good wife, in case something went wrong and they got hold of it. I wanted to make it sound as screwy, as garbled as possible, because Tollefson had me down in his books as a nut. A sane man would hardly end a letter by signing it 'the Chicago Canary.'

"Tollefson sometimes gets phone calls, obviously from Wilson, or from somebody working with him. I've heard him take the calls, and he never says much of anything, just tells the other party that everything is okay here. When I wrote the note the way I did, I was gambling that Tollefson, if he found it, wouldn't mention a crazy scribble like that to Wilson—especially not when the note would make him look bad, because if he'd been a good keeper, he'd have seen to it that I didn't have a chance to write notes, or material to write them with."

"You still listen to the radio?" Christie asked, with seeming irrelevance.

"No," Bender told him. "Tollefson took it away from me, four or five days ago. A small bedside radio, that was in my room."

Christie grunted. "Well, if you still listened to the radio, you'd have heard something else. Emma Gansil, Bayard Thorne's maid, was murdered yesterday afternoon. It looks to us as if Wilson was trying to eliminate everybody who could possibly identify him. The point I'm trying to make is, if you'd told more in your letter to Considine, it might have saved that poor woman's life."

The ex-convict sighed, and bowed his head for a moment. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, "really sorry about the woman. But if what you say is true—if he's intending to knock off everybody who could identify him—that's all the more reason why he'll eventually come here. He's got to. And he will."

"Yeah," Christie's melancholy voice croaked, "he probably will. Especially if we tell Carson and Ageld what the score

is, and tell 'em to refuse to pay anything until they got proof they're dealing with the real Bender. . . . What you think, Mike? You want to make some suggestions? It's still your play."

"Why," Mike answered in a calm and conversational tone, "as far as I'm concerned, I think I'm staying here. With Steve, and Bender. You take my car and high-tail it back to New York and fix things with Carson and Ageld, and Steve and I will stay here." He turned his head suddenly towards Tollefson and barked: "You!"

Apeface looked back at him, sullen and frightened. "I guess you're bright enough to realize what you blundered into here," Mike said.

Tollefson licked his lips and spread out his hands in a beseeching gesture. "So help me God, mister," he quavered, "I didn't have no idea. It was just a job, see? I been in a couple of jams in my life—that I'll admit—but I never had nothing to do with kidnaping or murder."

"Okay," Mike said. "My partner and I are going to stake ourselves out here and wait for the killer to show. Naturally, you'll have to stay with us. And just to start with, you can hand over the artillery you're probably carrying."

Tollefson sighed in resignation, and dug a big hand into a pocket of his khaki pants. He hauled out a .32 calibre pistol and shuffled over and dropped the weapon into Mike's outstretched hand. "Nice," Mike said, looking at the gun. "A standard part of every male nurse's equipment, huh?"

Tollefson shrugged, and said nothing. "We're going to have to put you and the missus on ice," Mike said. "Lock you up, like you locked up Bender. But before I do, I want to ask you something, and I'd advise you to give me a truthful answer. Do you know where Wilson is—know where we can find him?"

"I got no idea," Apeface said. "He's called up a couple times, long distance, from New York. But I only saw him the one time in my life—the day Wiandowski brought Bender here."

"I'll take your word for it," Mike said. "I don't have any

other choice. Now get this, Tollefson: the next time Wilson calls, I'm going to be standing right behind you when you talk to him, and if you try to pull anything funny I'll put lumps all over you. You're one of the few guys I've met who're as big as I am, and I don't much like your face, and it would be a pleasure to change it. Do I make myself clear?"

Tollefson nodded, and Mike turned to the woman. "All right, girlie, lead the way to the conjugal bedchamber. And I'll take *all* of your keys, if you don't mind."

I watched Mike herd the man and woman into the hall beyond the living room, and as I turned back to look at Christie, there was a loud knock at the front door. Christie rose with amazing speed, gun in hand; I got my automatic out, and as I moved towards the door, another knock sounded, heavy and hard, as though someone were driving a metallic object against the wood.

"Wilson wouldn't hardly announce himself that way," Christie said. "That'll probably be our friend Randall, froze out. By the noise he's making, he's probably using that cannon of his as a door-knocker."

I opened the door an inch, holding my good friend, Mr. Savage, at the ready, and it was Randall who was outside. I swung the door open and he staggered in, shivering like a nudist on an iceberg. His teeth were chattering, his face was blue with cold, and there was a ragged fringe of hoar frost hanging from his moustache. "H-holy smokes," he said, his teeth clicking like dice in a cup, "I'd just as soon get shot as freeze to death!"

I pointed to the whisky decanter, and Randall dove for it and fortified himself with a slug that must have warmed his ancestors. As he drank, Christie made a barely perceptible gesture at me with one hand, walked stiffly across the room, pulled back the window curtain and pretended to stare out into the night.

I followed the old man, and when I had come close to him, he spoke in an almost inaudible whisper. "The girl, Deirdre," he asked, "what you think we'd better do with her?"

"Take her back to New York," I said, "and have her kept

under guard there. It'll be a lot safer for her in New York."

Staring out into the night, Christie hoarsely whispered: "Suppose she's in on this thing? This is a dirty piece of business, Steve, and everybody looks dirty until they're proved clean. Suppose she's an accomplice of Wilson's?"

"I've supposed just that through a lot of sleepless nights," I said, "but it doesn't add up to much sense. It doesn't seem likely she'd be working with a guy who blasted her own husband. Why should she be helping some guy extort money that she doesn't even need, as the daughter of a rich old bastard like Thorne."

"They weren't—aren't—close, the father and the daughter," Christie said, his melancholy eyes more troubled than ever. "How do we know but what Bayard J. has cut her off in his will, told her he wasn't going to leave her a dime? And I'll tell you this, Steve, there's a lot of things worry me about that girl."

"Such as?" I asked rudely.

"Well, take Gansil, for instance," Christie growled. "You hear her say what she was before she came to work for Thorne? A nurse in a goof-farm, a joint handling alkies and narcotics, and very probably assorted psychos, too. Doesn't that strike you as a strange background for a nurse for a rich kid like Thorne's daughter? Couldn't it mean the girl was so erratic, even as a baby, she needed psychiatric care?"

"It could, I suppose," I said. "And on the other hand it could mean that skilled help was hard to get back when Thorne hired Gansil, just as it's hard to get now."

"I'll tell you this," Christie said, "until I got up here tonight, and heard Bender's story, I was just about convinced that Deirdre was up to her pretty ears in this thing. It was the phone call she got on the day of the funeral that really made me suspicious. The one you called me up and asked me about."

"Then she really did get it?" I asked, with some sarcasm. "Not, of course, that I think you would have lied to me. But there are occasions, I recall, upon which you have been known to evade the truth."

"She got the call," Christie said, and grunted savagely, "she got it, and we got a record of the conversation, and it was substantially as she told you it was. But what worried me was, how did the killer get her number? Neither of the two telephones in Thorne's house are listed in the book. Both Thorne and Deirdre and her husband had private, unlisted numbers. I don't know why the Wyatts weren't listed, but Thorne didn't have any listing because, as prominent as he was, he got bothered to death by people calling him up at all hours. He only had a listed phone in his downtown office."

"Now I'll tell you something, Chris," I said, really piling the sarcasm on at this point. "Mike checked on the telephones, among other things. And we were intrigued, to put it mildly, by something Deirdre's husband said on the night he was killed. He said that he'd had no contact with Bender, so-called, except by phone."

"Well, you got the answer to that puzzle," Christie said, "now that we know that Wyatt-Wiandowski was probably the guy who dreamed up the whole bright idea of shaking down himself, so to speak."

"And that takes the heat off Deirdre, as far as the phone call is concerned," I said. "Obviously, the killer got the private number from Wyatt-Wiandowski, the boy he was pals with, until he knocked him off."

"Yeah, I guess so," Christie said, "but just suppose she *is* mixed up in this thing. In New York, we couldn't keep tabs on her unless we put her in protective custody, and with a girl of her position, I didn't have much to go on. If she was loose in New York, she could find some way of tipping off Wilson. On the other hand, if she stayed here with you, she couldn't communicate with anybody."

"You don't spread your bets, do you?" I asked. "If she stays here, Wilson's got all the witnesses under one roof, except Bayard Thorne."

"Okay," Christie answered wearily, "she goes back to New York. It isn't that I think she's such a red-hot suspect, at the moment. It's just that I want to cover every possible angle."

"As far as I'm concerned she can stay," I said. "But after

all, it's more or less up to her, isn't it? We can't just coop her up here unless she's willing. We've stretched legality pretty far, as it is."

"Yeah," Christie said, "I guess we have. So, if she says okay, she stays. I'll leave Whelan here, too—an extra gun in case you get into a shooting war—and I'll sneak a couple of other boys in here tomorrow, and maybe stretch legality a little more. Hell, I'd stretch it till it bust its guts, if it'd catch this Wilson. Now I'll go and bring her up here, and we'll see what she wants to do."

He turned away, yanked open the front door, and stamped out into the howling dark.

Deirdre sat on the sofa before the fire and stared into the highball glass in her hand, a bitter smile playing about her lips. "Even if I didn't want you to know," she said, "you'd probably find out who the owner of this house is. So, I might as well tell you now."

Ice tinkled in Mike's glass where the big fellow sat in an armchair, in the shadows beyond the dancing light of the fire. "Randall told us it belonged to someone named Woodruff," he said gently, "a Mr. Sam Woodruff, I believe he said."

"And Sam Woodruff is the attorney for the firm my husband belonged to," Deirdre answered. "The house actually belongs to his wife, Anita. I always wondered about Murray and that woman, and now—well, now I know."

"When they started throwing things at you, they didn't leave much out," Mike said, and there was real sympathy in his voice. "Well, maybe Mrs. Woodruff can tell us some things we want to know."

"I doubt it," Deirdre said, "she's been in Europe all winter. But Murray must have known her pretty well, to move into her house, staff it with that couple, and bring Bender here."

"If you want to jump at conclusions," Mike said, "I guess that's a nice handy one to jump at."

I sat in the chair by the fire, a glass in my hand, listening and keeping my mouth shut. Christie had pulled out in

Mike's Buick an hour before, after Deirdre had told us that she wanted to stay. He'd left Whelan with us, and Randall—as happy as a kid playing cops-and-robbers—had insisted upon remaining, at least for the night. We had quite a garrison, enough to give Mr. Wilson a rousing reception, even if he showed up with a mob of hoods. We'd agreed that, if the telephone rang, we'd make Tollefson answer it, and if it was Wilson on the wire, Apeface was to tell him that something had gone wrong, and ask him to come to the house as soon as possible.

Deirdre had finished her drink, and I got up and poured her another short one. "I think you'd better sleep in the bedroom closest to the door of this room," Mike told her. "Steve and I will divide the rest of the night into watches, and there'll be one of us awake, just in case our friend Wilson should show."

He looked very tired, the handsome, blue-jawed face lined with weariness under heavy-lidded eyes. "You hit the sack," I told him as I finished pouring Deirdre's drink. "I had a good night's sleep last night, and I'll bet that's more than you can say."

"As a matter of fact," Mike said with a big yawn that turned into a grin, "I didn't leave Christie until after three a.m., and I knew that if I went to bed then, I'd be very hard to get up. So, I just black coffeed my way through, until morning."

Whelan and Randall came in from the kitchen, the latter importantly jangling the keys that Mike had taken from Mrs. Tollefson. "This place is a fortress with an A-chilles heel," the deputy sheriff announced sententiously. "Locks on all of the doors and windows on this floor, and none on some of the basement windows."

"It's a fact," Whelan said. "That basement is as wide-open as Miami Beach in February."

"Well," Mike said, "that's all the more reason then that somebody stays awake around here. Steve's going to stand the first watch, or rather sit the first watch, in case you boys would like to get some sleep."

Whelan and Randall said good night and clumped out, and Mike stood up, smothering another yawn. The Boxer's claws rasped on the floor as Bender gently pushed the pooch off his lap. "If I can get three-four hours of shut-eye, Steve, I'll be okay," Mike said. "I'll bunk in with Marty, I think." He turned to Deirdre, and smiled at the girl. "You'd better get some sleep, too, if you can. You hear any noises, or if anything frightens you, just call out."

Deirdre raised her glass. "I'm going to bed, just as soon as I finish this."

Mike said good night and went out of the room, and Bender and the pup followed him. On the threshold of the door to the hall, the little man turned back. "I guess I didn't have a chance to tell you that I was glad to see you, Mr. Considine," he said, "but believe me, I was. Good night, sir. Good night, Mrs. Wyatt."

He went out quickly, with the pup at his heels, and Deirdre sighed. "Such a nice little chap," she said, "it seems hard to believe that he ever killed anyone."

"It's a theory of penologists that prison sometimes reforms, as well as punishes," I said. "I guess some convicts do change."

Deirdre stared into the fire, as though considering my banal remark carefully, and then she asked quietly: "Where's my father, Mr. Considine? Do you know why he didn't go to Washington yesterday?"

I said that I didn't know where Bayard Thorne was, and that I didn't know why he hadn't gone to the capital. "I don't suppose you could tell me where he was?" I asked.

"I've no idea," Deirdre said, "absolutely no idea. But it's absurd for anyone to think that he might have killed poor Emma."

"I'll agree with you there," I said. She looked very small and forlorn, sitting there on the sofa. I wanted to say something to comfort her, but the things I wanted to say didn't sound right when I framed them in my mind; and the comforting things I could have done might have been misinterpreted, or so I thought.

She got up when she had finished her drink, and I rose to

bid her good night. "I want you to know that I'm grateful to you for everything you've done," she said, standing close to me in front of the fire. "I've felt from the start that you were a friend who wanted to help, something more than just a paid detective doing a job. And if it hadn't been for you, I might have never found out who Murray really was."

"You're not thanking me for that?" I asked.

Her lovely eyes looked full into mine for a moment, and then she turned her gaze away and shrugged. "Murray hadn't been true to me," she said, "not for a long time. Finding out who he really was gave me a shock, of course, and I suppose it shouldn't have been so severe, since I'd already found out that he was a crook. But I think that the things one *doesn't* know are the only really terrible things in this life. Good night, Mr. Considine."

She raised a hand and touched me on the arm, and then turned and walked out of the room. I stood looking after her until I heard a door close softly, just beyond the door of the hall. I knew that the sympathy I felt for her was entirely genuine; I knew it because I was in love with my wife, and what I felt for Deirdre didn't contain the complicating elements that would certainly have been there if I hadn't been married, and in love with my wife.

The fire had burned low, and I replenished it with a log from an ornamental wood-box. I sat down on the sofa and stretched my legs, and then I picked up a magazine, because I knew that I'd become sleepy if I stared into the fire. It was a slick magazine, filled with slick pictures of slick women, and with dull stories about the romances of the women in the illustrations. I read a story in which nothing happened, except an act of adultery which had been implied in the opening paragraph of the story, and then I leafed through the rest of the issue, searching for a yarn in which something of interest happened, but nothing did. And then, suddenly, something happened—to me. I was leaning forward, pouring myself a drink from the nearly empty decanter, when a pair of hands closed in a crushing grip about my neck.

→ 11 ←

THE HANDS WERE incredibly strong, and under their relentless pressure my shout of surprise and fright was throttled into a choked murmur that might have gone unheard a dozen feet away. The whisky glass fell from my hand, and I clawed frantically at the fingers buried in my neck. I threw my weight forward, striving to break the inexorable grip, but even as I struggled I felt myself being dragged towards the end of the sofa. I went over it like a weighted sack, hung in space for a moment, felt a hip jam into my side as the man behind me swung me across his body, half dragging, half carrying me towards the door.

I had to yell for help, I told myself; a voice of sheer panic rose in me, screaming soundlessly that unless I could make an outcry loud enough to wake Mike or some of the others, I would die beneath the pressure of those terrible hands. But the outcry would not come, could not come with the iron fingers biting into my flesh, and waves of nausea rolled over me as my assailant bore me, step by step, towards the door. The flames on the hearth seemed to dance higher, leaping and twisting and blending with the lights of the room, and then darkening, winking out in a roaring blackness in which my breathing rasped and whistled, burning like acid in my lungs and throat.

Somewhere in the darkness, I heard the thud of a heavy body striking some solid object; the grip on my throat was relaxed as my head was jerked back against the man's chest, and he held me with one thick arm crooked about my neck. Air flowed into my lungs, despite the grip of the arm, and I gulped the air, gasping, fighting a faintness that drained the strength from my body. Tollefson's voice came to me, as though from a long way off, in a hoarse and savage whisper: "Stand still! And don't yell! You try to holler, I'll break your gawddam neck!"

Behind me I heard a metallic sound—the sound of the front door being withdrawn. The wind struck me in a cold blast as the giant dragged me through the door he'd opened, out onto the stone steps of the house. I brought my right leg up, a leg that seemed to be composed of water and lead, in equal parts, and let my foot fall in the general direction of Tollefson's feet. He grunted and swore as my foot ground into an instep; I squirmed around in his embrace and wrapped my arms about him and dragged him with me as I fell, off the steps and into the snowy front yard of the house.

Apeface fell on top of me and I jerked a knee up and caught him in the groin, and lay back, shielding my face with a forearm, and gulping air. There was a burning pain in my lungs, and every breath I took seared my throat like salt on an open sore, but at least I breathed, and as Tollefson smashed at me with his big hands, the darkness lifted and I could see his contorted face, outlined against light that seemed to swim in currents, through the door of the house.

"Son-of-a-bitch," the big gorilla slobbered, "son-of-a-bitch! All I want to do is get away—all I want is to get outta here!"

A forearm like a club smashed over the barrier of my uplifted shoulder, and the lights dimmed again as his knuckles hammered into my cheek. I opened my mouth to shout, but no words came; he caught me in his enormous arms and pulled me close to him, butting at me with his head, and then, somehow, we were both on our knees and I clung to him as he tried to move away from me, smashing at my face and body as he scrabbled on his knees.

I neither saw nor heard Deirdre as she came through the door. I'd feebly parried another sledge-hammer blow, and had thrown myself forward, clinging to his shoulder. My eyes were just above the level of a swelling deltoid muscle, and as I stared at nothingness over the thick humped shoulder, Deirdre slid noiselessly into my range of vision and stood above us, a bronze statuette gripped in her hand.

I had only a fleeting glimpse of her as I struggled with Tollefson there in the snow. She was in her stocking feet

and she had her dress off; the gown she wore, made of some flimsy white, almost transparent stuff, seemed to dissolve against the light, and the gentle curves of her thighs and stomach showed as though they were naked below the firm, upstanding breasts—breasts that rose and fell with excitement. Her eyes were widely dilated, either with fear or rage, or both, and as I looked at her the statuette rose high above her head, swinging in a long arc. The faint light turned the dull bronze crimson as the maddened Tollefson rolled me over, clawing at my throat again with his huge hands. The statuette caught him just across the hair-line with a dull, whacking sound, and blood spurted over his forehead as he punched furiously at my face in a reflex of rage and pain.

I rolled away from him, driven by the impact of a staggering, blinding clout on the jaw; my shoulders drove against Deirdre's knees, and then she was down, too, sprawling in the snow with the statuette still in her hand. I lay still for a moment, gasping for breath, and Tollefson climbed to his feet, swaying drunkenly, blood dripping into his eyes. I tried to crawl to him, inching along on my belly, but I was too tired to make much speed; the big man lurched away, into the darkness of the night.

"Stop him," Deirdre shrilled, her lips close to my ear, "stop him for God's sake, Considine. He'll go to Wilson, warn him that we're here."

I got to my knees, fighting a desire to lie flat on the ground forever. My own face was bloody from Tollefson's fists, I was as weak as workhouse soup, and at the moment I wouldn't have been able to handle a kitten in a sack. The girl put her hands on my arms, tugging at me, frantically whispering: "You've got to get him, you've got to!"

I was on my feet, my knees buckling beneath me; I leaned on a wall near the door and told her to awaken Mike and the others. Somehow, I got myself in motion. The Savage automatic was in a rear pants pocket; I dug it out, slipped off the safety catch, said, mentally, "Here goes nothing," and staggered away into the night.

The wind struck with the force of a blow, screaming along

the open space of the drive. The stone steps of the low front porch had been scoured bone-clean by the gale, and the wind had swept the snow entirely away from the cinder-strewn drive where it climbed the hill to curve about the house; but beyond the drive, in the shelter of the black trees, the snow lay deep and crisp and even, like the snow in the old Christmas carol, and on a smooth patch of drift, at the end of the porch, I saw gigantic footprints leading away from the house.

I followed the footprints, stooping low, with the wind at my back. The marks of Tollefson's shoes were plain, running across the front of the house and beyond it, stamping a pattern of flight across an expanse of drifted lawn, and disappearing into a grove of trees. I put my own feet into the big man's footprints and went across the lawn in a spraddle-legged gallop. Inside the grove, the darkness was almost impenetrable, and I could only follow the prints by dropping to my hands and knees.

I lost trace of Apeface less than fifty feet beyond the end of the grove. The footprints faded out on a stretch of frozen, wind-bared turf, the wide expanse of which was broken by flower beds, stone benches, flagged walks and the usual ornaments of a formal garden. I stood still for a moment, cursing in rage and frustration, and then I went on, quartering the garden, looking for footprints in the patches of snow that still clung to the frozen ground. Across the garden, the forest rose like a thick, black wall, and the wind seemed to carry a note of mockery as it shrieked across the open space.

I knew that I had lost Tollefson now; even if I'd picked up his trail again, he'd have had plenty of time to get off the grounds, and once he'd reached the main road, it would have been impossible to follow his tracks.

It was something for Mike to deal with now, I told myself; I'd toss it in his lap and let him call the shots from here on out. Mike wasn't going to think very much of a guy who'd sat reading while Tollefson cat-footed his way into the room and calmly mugged him; my stock was going to be at an all time low, so far as Mike Zacharias was concerned. I told myself

that, since I'd made such a monumental bust of things, Mike could map the strategy from this point onward, and I turned and started back towards the grove through which I had crawled. . . . I was running very well for a guy who'd been half choked to death, and then my right foot came down on a patch of snow that gave way beneath me.

I went through a crust of snow in a hurtling, headlong fall, and sprawled on my face at the bottom of a concrete wading-pool. There were enough dead leaves and snow in the bottom of the pool to break my fall, but I was badly shaken, and half stunned, and pain stabbed at my right ankle, twisted as I fell.

I lay for a moment with my face pressed against the bottom of the pool, with cold dead leaves and dirt in my eyes and mouth. The pistol had fallen from my hand; I got to my knees and crawled about looking for the weapon, and did not find it, and after several moments of futile search, I pulled myself out of the pit and hobbled towards the grove of trees. My ankle hurt like hell, but it held.

The front door of the house was shut when I reached it after a slow and painful journey; I pushed it open and staggered into a silent and apparently empty room. I had expected to find Mike and the others up, and the yell of amazement that rose in my sore throat must have awakened any sleeper within a mile. The echoes of the shout rolled and blended with a second roar of appeal, and I saw Deirdre's amber-gold head, bent low as she slumped before the fire.

I raced to her, forgetting the ankle, and she looked up with a face that was ghastly pale, holding the whisky decanter in one unsteady hand. "I—I'm sorry," she murmured in a voice that was scarcely audible, "I—I must have fainted, after you left. Trying to revive myself—can't seem to manage."

I took the decanter from her hand and held it to her lips; feet pounded in the hall and Mike burst into the room, his hairy chest bulging the front of a white undershirt, his suspenders dangling over the legs of his trousers. An instant later, Randall came in from the kitchen.

I didn't wait for Mike to speak; I let him have the bad

news, in words of one syllable. Mike's mouth, gaping with amazement, replied with a one-syllable word, too, a word that was scarcely polite, and then he looked at Deirdre, and said: "Sorry, honey." His brown eyes swung back to me, and he hunched his shoulders in a philosophical shrug. "Well, that's that," he said. "I kind of figured your batting average had been running a little bit high."

I told him to go to hell, to get the car out of the garage and start looking for Tollefson, pronto, but Mike shook his head. "There's not much use of that. The guy won't be out on the road where we can find him. I guess there's nothing to do but sit here and wait until we hear from Christie. I guess this makes it his show again."

Randall puffed out his chest and waved his out-size pistol with a gesture of importance. "I guess he knew I was settin' in the kitchen," he said. "I got to worryin' about those unlocked windows in the basement, so I sneaked back into the kitchen and stretched out on a couple of chairs. If I'd of heard any noise in here, I'd of come in, shootin'. Too bad, isn't it, that I'm a little mite deaf?"

I may have been confused by the rapidity with which events had been happening, but there was now one thing of which I was sure: Deirdre, in clipping big Tollefson with the statuette, had knocked into a cocked hat all my mounting suspicions of the girl.

Tollefson's wife stood in front of the kitchen stove, with strings of faded, bleached hair hanging down over her haggard and sullen face. Mike and Bender and Whelan sat at the oilcloth-covered table, over the remains of the breakfast the woman had cooked, and across from them, Randall and I sat over our third cup of coffee. Deirdre hadn't risen yet. It was ten o'clock in the morning, and behind the kitchen windows, sunlight was warm and bright on panes wet with melting snow that dripped from the eaves.

Mrs. Tollefson was discussing her husband's departure. "He couldn't have known where Wilson is. If he'd have knew, he'd have told me. You ask me, all he wanted was to get away."

Mike looked at her with a skeptical grin. "He must have wanted to get away awful bad, to pick the bedroom lock, and then guzzle Considine half to death. It could be he's wanted some place, bad?"

The woman scowled and bit her lip. "He wasn't wanted for anything serious. He was just plain scared. Of you folks. But more'n he was scared of you, he was scared of what Wilson might do, if Wilson was to come back."

"Maybe," Mike said with a sidelong glance at me, "maybe Tollefson had some doubts about our ability to protect him."

"I'm sure he wouldn't have hurt Mr. Considine," the woman said in her whining, sulky voice. "It's just that he's so awful strong, he doesn't know his own strength, Oscar doesn't. He bust my arm once when he was drunk, just horsing around. But he never meant to hurt anybody."

"Tollefson," Mike said, "was just a big, mischievous boy."

The phone in the living room rang as he spoke. Mike got up quickly and pointed a finger at Tollefson's wife. "Okay," he said, briskly, "I'll tell you what you're going to do, Mrs. T. You're going in and answer that phone in a normal voice, or I'm going to pull a hunk of that blond hair out by its black roots. And just in case your husband *didn't* contact Wilson, and just in case Wilson asks for him, you're going to tell him your husband is sick. You tell him he's sick, and will Wilson please get over here, because you can't handle Bender alone. You get that?"

Mrs. Tollefson gave him a sullen nod. "All right," Mike said, "let's go. You'd better come along too, Steve."

I took my lumped, plastered face and my taped right ankle out of the chair and followed the woman and Mike. She walked ahead of us into the living room, the skirts of her soiled housecoat flapping about her flabby ankles. The blinds of the big living-room window were up, and in front of the window, in a broad beam of sunlight, Bender's canaries fluttered in a brass cage that had been covered the night before. The telephone had rung for a third time before Mrs. Tollefson reached it. As she spoke into the instrument, my scalp

prickled, and goosebumps rose on my suddenly sweating back.

Mike stood motionless, his face a granite block, but his eyes were burning with excitement. The woman stood for a moment, her face expressionless, then grunted and took her lips away from the transmitter. "New York calling, long distance. For Mr. Zacharias."

Mike snatched the telephone from her hands and said, "Zacharias speaking," and I heard a quick sputter of unintelligible words at the other end of the wire. After a moment, Mike grinned at me and spoke around the crackling instrument. "It's Christie, and he's really hopping. Maybe you'd better take Mrs. Tollefson back into the kitchen and wait until I'm through."

I nodded, and the woman slouched out of the room ahead of me. As we left, the canaries broke into song, a soaring flight of golden notes as bright and warm as the sunlight outside the window.

In the kitchen, Bender was squatting on his heels watching the dog eat from a tin plate; he looked raptly affectionate, completely absorbed in his pet, and indifferent to all the dangers of the world. Whelan leaned back in his chair, picking his teeth, while Randall puffed a briar pipe and pretended to relax. I sat down at the table and poured myself another cup of coffee and pretended to do likewise.

"I'd lay five to one that's the Inspector on the phone," Whelan said.

"You'd win," I told him.

"And I'd lay even money that Tollefson tipped this Wilson off that we was here."

"You'd probably win that one, too," I said.

Whelan sucked the toothpick reflectively for a moment, and then pointed at Bender. "If you ask me," he said, "the old con knows more about this than he's letting on."

Martin Bender looked up at the detective, the smile growing tight on his pale face. For a moment, his eyes held a steely glitter of almost incredible ferocity, but the glare subsided as the pup leapt up and began to lick his face. He turned his

back on Whelan, calmly and deliberately, and fastened his eyes on the dog.

"If you ask me, the stir-bug knows plenty," Whelan said.

"Nobody asked you," I said, as nastily as possible. Whelan's beefy face reddened; he opened his mouth to say something, but he evidently changed his mind. I lit a cigarette and sipped my coffee, waiting for Mike. It seemed like an awfully long time before he came into the room.

Mrs. Tollefson was standing by one of the windows, scowling out into the yard, and Mike walked directly to her and seized her, but gently, by the arm. "So Tollefson didn't know where Wilson was, huh?" He softly mimicked her tone. "If he knew where Wilson was, he'd have told you, huh?"

The woman's mouth hung slack with fright as she stared at him, and Mike dropped her arm and barked at the rest of us: "So, Wilson knows we're here. He delivered an ultimatum to Big Joe Carson, by telephone, just a few minutes ago. Christie wants us all back in New York, as fast as we can get there."

I got up, fast. "There's a car in the garage," Randall said, "if we borrow it, it'll save time."

"Okay," Mike said, "you're a deputy sheriff, so you can commandeer the car. Drive us into Castle Lake, and we'll hire somebody to take us to town."

"Like hell, son," Randall answered. "I'll drive you all in myself. I haven't had so much fun since the battle of Belleau Wood."

Martin Bender was standing up, looking at Mike with an apologetic smile. "I suppose you mean me, too, don't you?" he asked.

"I do mean you," Mike said. "We're not leaving you here for Wilson to play clay pigeon with, just in case he should come back this way."

"Well, then," Martin Bender said, "I guess you understand that I can't leave the dog and the canaries here."

"I understand." Mike grinned at him. "The menagerie goes, too."

Tollefson's wife spoke in a shrill blast from the window.

"You're not leaving me here, either," she shrieked. "I'm not gonna be here, if that murderer comes back."

"Dearie," Mike said, "I would just as soon leave my right hand here as to leave your own sweet self." He turned to me. "Steve-o, how about asking Mrs. Wyatt if she's ready to ride?"

I didn't have to ask her, because when I went into the living room Deirdre, fully clothed, was coming through the door that led into the hall.

Inspector Christopher Christie sat at the big desk in Mike's private office, a Mohammed come to the mountain. Before him on the blotter lay an imposing heap of greenbacks in various denominations, all old, all soiled—and all carefully marked. I watched him as his gnarled old hands riffled through stacks of folding money, and Mike watched him too. So did Bayard Thorne and Deirdre and her sister, Helen, and Bender and Big Joe Carson and Max Ageld were equally attentive, sitting on Mike's couch and office chairs, and on extra seats that'd been lugged in from the reception room. Eight pairs of eyes were focused on the piles of money as the Inspector thumbed them over. When he had finished counting, he let out a long, whistling sigh, and several of the others present—including Mrs. Considine's son, Stephen—sighed too.

"I make it seventy-five thousand dollars," Christie said, looking at the pile of money as though it were a mess of scorpions. "It's all here, and maybe it's the proper bait to catch this Wilson with, but I don't know."

Max Ageld, sartorially impeccable in a gray herringbone suit, a white-on-white shirt and matching necktie and socks, smiled a thin smile. "It was hardly necessary to count our money," he said. "Believe me, Inspector, we know how much is there. And if it isn't the proper bait to catch Wilson with, something tells me it'll pain us a lot more than it will you."

"You don't hafta go through with the deal," Christie said. "Sure, it's a more or less common police practice to trap extortionists with marked bills. But the city usually puts up the money, not the subject of the would-be extortionist. Only, in

this case, where we're looking for a murderer, and probably a madman besides, I doubt if the city—"

"Look," Big Joe Carson broke in, "it's only me and Max's money. We're not squawking. In fact we insist on doing it, don't we, Maxey?"

Ageld nodded. "We do. It's a sort of a public service we're performing, Inspector. We don't even care if we lose the money, just so this screwball gets caught."

"If he gets caught, you most likely get your dough back." Christie leaned back, scratched a kitchen match on the sole of a shoe, and re-lit a ragged stump of cigar. "Maybe you'd better go over it all again, Carson," he said. "The phone call from Wilson, I mean. Maybe you'll remember some detail you forgot to mention this morning."

"The call was monitored by your cops," Ageld remarked. "You've got a transcript of every word that was said."

"But Mike and Steve haven't seen it," Christie said, "so maybe Mr. Carson will be kind enough to give us all the details again."

Carson's dark balloon face was running with sweat; he dragged a silk handkerchief from a coat pocket and scrubbed at his sagging jowls. "I get the call at ten after ten this morning," the fat man wheezed. "The guy tells me he knows we know, by this time, that he ain't the real Martin Bender. But he says the shake is still on. He says he'll take seventy-five grand, but if we don't come through quick, or if we try to cross him, he'll kill me and Maxey, some time, if it's the last thing he does. Not that he scared me, of course."

Ageld stripped his thin lips back in an ironical smile. "Not that he scared Joey at all," he said. "It's just that Carson never could resist a bargain—and look how Wilson came down in his price! For a public service, it's a cut rate."

Big Joe shot his partner a malevolent look, licked his lips, and went on talking. "So, it's seventy-five gees, Wilson says—seventy-five gees in one of them blue canvas overnight bags, like you can buy in any drugstore. And the lady—" he pointed a sausage-like thumb at Deirdre—"is the one who hasta slip him the boodle. It's gotta be her, Wilson says, or nobody."

Bayard Thorne was up, pounding the desk with a clenched fist. "I say that Deirdre shall not do it! If she did, he'd kill her, just as he has already killed two of the six persons who saw him that night at my house."

"I'm not afraid," Deirdre said calmly. "I'll take any necessary risk, if it may lead to that man's capture."

Christie blew out a puff of rank smoke and looked at her with his sorrowful eyes. "I've thought a lot about the risk you'd take," he said. "According to what Wilson said to Carson, you're to be standing beside the information desk in Grand Central, money bag in hand, at exactly four forty-five this afternoon. You'll get instructions from Wilson about what to do after that. I don't know how you'll be contacted, or what you'll be told to do, but one thing seems pretty certain: Wilson isn't going to harm you, not right in the middle of Grand Central Terminal. He may have a screw loose, but he doesn't strike me as the sort of guy would like to commit suicide."

Big Joe Carson's jet eyes glittered with dislike of Christie. "That's what you think," he said, "but I'll tell you what he told me. He says this young lady is a hostage, as well as the pay-off party. He says he's going to the chair, anyway, if he gets caught, so if he hasta chill one more person, what does it matter? He says if anybody tries to collar him before he's in the clear, he'll blast her, and then himself."

Christie grunted and stared at the stacks of money. "Well," he said, "it's a cinch he isn't just going to walk up to her in Grand Central and take the dough, and then walk off and leave her. And he can't walk her out of there at gun-point, either. He'll have to keep his canister out of sight. And if he takes as much as five steps away from that information booth, with this young lady, we grab him."

"The guy may be a maniac," Mike said, "but he's not an imbecile. He won't walk up to her at that booth. He'll contact her through a messenger."

Christie nodded. "He probably will, Mike. But if it's just a messenger that shows up, and Deirdre is told to go some place else, outside the terminal, then all bets are off. That's as far as we're going—we won't risk her getting hurt. If Wilson doesn't

personally contact her, then this thing goes back to ordinary police channels, and Wilson stays loose until we bottle him up."

The old cop looked craftily at Deirdre and her father, spilled stogie ash on the top of Mike's desk, and coughed. "Of course," he said carefully, "if Mrs. Wyatt *wants* to play the string out a little farther, we can't very well prevent her. Suppose she's contacted by somebody with a message from Wilson, telling her to proceed to such and such a place? Well, if she decides to go along with the proposition, I'll guarantee her this: she'll be tailed like nobody was ever tailed before."

"Damn your guarantees," Bayard Thorne said harshly.

"Look," Christie said, "your daughter doesn't hafta do anything she doesn't want to do. Like I said, the deal comes to a stop, right there in Grand Central, if it doesn't look good to her."

"I won't have it!" Thorne shouted. "I won't allow Deirdre to risk her life, even by meeting that madman in the railroad terminal."

The sister, Helen, had been sitting quietly throughout the discussion—quietly but nervously, lighting one cigarette after another, her hard mouth twitching against the pallor of her face. Suddenly, as though driven by some terrific inner force beyond her control, she began to weep hysterically. "No!" she sobbed, "don't let her go! He'll kill her—he'll kill her! Let me go instead. We look enough alike so that he won't know it isn't Deirdre, at least until he's close to me. Let me go to Grand Central with the money."

Thorne put an arm about the girl's shaking shoulders and pulled her head against his chest. "I kinda think," Christie said softly, "it's up to Deirdre to decide for herself."

"I have decided," Deirdre said. "I'll do anything that I can—anything that you want me to do."

"I kinda figured you'd say that," Christie answered. He picked up a cheap canvas overnight bag from the floor, swept the stacks of money into it, and zipped the bag shut. "We got nearly two hours and a half before kick-off time," his melan-

choly voice said. "If anybody wants any refreshments or anything, I guess Mike can send somebody out to get 'em. But nobody leaves here, please—nobody leaves here at all, until it's time to man the battle-stations."

→ 12 ←

CHRISTIE STOOD BEFORE a map of Grand Central Terminal that was tacked to the reception-room wall, a shabby and weary old commander briefing his troops. The reception room was filled almost to overflowing; there were nearly a dozen city detectives, five police-women in street clothes, four men from the terminal security set-up, and a half dozen of our own best operatives, including Big Joe's erstwhile bodyguard, Phil Benfield.

Carson and Ageld and Thorne and his two daughters and Marty Bender were in Mike's private office, sweating it out until zero-hour. Mike and Christie had gone into a huddle in my office, just after Mike had put the canvas overnight bag into the safe, about an hour before; they'd come out of the discussion looking grave and very determined, in time for Christie to give instructions to his men.

The cops had come singly, or in pairs, as inconspicuously as possible, and it had taken more than an hour for all of them to assemble in our outer office. I thought it unlikely that the people in the offices adjacent to ours would have noticed any undue activity. There was always lots of traffic on our floor; there was an insurance office on one side of us, and a loan agency on the other, and a great many people came down the hall every day—especially to the loan office.

I leaned against a wall, thinking about the seventy-five thousand dollars in the office safe, not avariciously, but thinking about it just the same. . . . Christie made another penciled cross on the map of Grand Central, and barked at the throng around him: "Well, I guess that's about it. Eckersall

and his men cover the entrance to the Commodore Hotel; Dubin and his bunch take the entrance to the Lexington Avenue subway. Now, are there any questions, before I bring in the girl?"

There weren't any questions. Christie turned to Whelan, who was chewing a toothpick—another toothpick—just outside the door of Mike's office. "Tell Mrs. Wyatt to come in here, please," the old man said, "and tell her to please wear her coat."

Whelan disappeared into the inner office, and a moment later Deirdre stepped into the room. She was wearing the fur coat in which she'd come to my apartment on Sunday night.

"Will you walk around among these people, please, Mrs. Wyatt?" Christie asked. Deirdre walked, slowly and gracefully, her face composed, while the cops stared at her. "So you'll all know her," Christie said, "look at this lady so you'll remember her to your dying day." The throng parted to let Deirdre through; she walked to the far wall and back, and Christie barked at a handsome, big, red-haired police-woman in a smartly tailored suit: "Mrs. Delaney!"

The red-haired woman smiled at him. "Yes, Inspector?"

"When Mrs. Wyatt takes her place near the information booth, you and Hanson"—he pointed at a tall blond detective who was standing near him—"will stand about eight feet away from her on the south side of the booth. Got it?"

"Got it," Mrs. Delaney said laconically, and Hansen nodded.

"Cosgrove and Mikulak will be about the same distance away on the north side of the booth," Christie said. "Webber and Feinberg on the east, Gottschalk and Riley on the west. If Wilson is crazy enough to brace her near the booth, you all converge on him, but fast. Is that understood?"

Heads nodded vigorously; a big detective, standing near me, growled his assent, his eyes fixed on Deirdre's face. "If anyone comes near her—anyone at all—why, take 'em," Christie said, "but wait long enough to give her a chance to do whatever she's told to do. Give her a chance to get clear of the messenger, see?"

He turned to Deirdre. "Suppose you're told to take a taxi to

some place," he said to the girl. "You walk right straight south from the clock, through the waiting room, and out into Forty-second Street. There'll be a Yellow Cab parked about twenty feet to the left of the door, waiting for you. Greenberg and Smith here will get ahead of you as you move away from the information booth; they'll grab whatever cabs may be coming up to the curb outside, see? So, you do what comes naturally—you go to the cab parked at the curb. Eddie Hammish, here, will be driving it, and there'll be another cop on the floor. Is that clear?"

Deirdre said that it was clear, and Christie turned to Whelan again. "All right," he said, "bring in Martin Bender."

Bender came in, smiling and serene, and faced the battery of eyes. Christie introduced him, and told his boys and girls that the man we wanted looked a lot like the white-haired little man who stood beside him. "Wilson may be a little shorter," Christie said, "and a few years younger, but there's a strong general resemblance. Right, Marty?"

"Right," Bender said cheerfully, "but if you ask me, he'll have disguised himself as much as possible. He'll probably have dyed his hair, for one thing."

The Inspector nodded. "He'll probably have dyed his hair," he agreed, "and he may be wearing elevator shoes to make himself look taller, and he's had time to have raised a moustache. But he looks like you a lot, and that's the best I can tell these people." He turned back to the cops, and spoke like a drill sergeant. "Okay, get going. You got thirty-five minutes to get into position. And for God's sake, everybody keep on the ball."

The crowd dispersed, slowly and quietly. As it trickled out, Christie swung one hip to the top of Miss Spilsbury's desk and grinned at our pretty receptionist. "I feel like Napoleon musta felt a few minutes before things started popping at Austerlitz," he said. "Dammit, if I don't think I'd have made pretty near as good a general as Eisenhower."

Miss Spilsbury was as pale as an aspirin tablet, and she was shaking with excitement. "It was ab-so-lutely mar-velous!" she said in a voice of awe, "mar-velous, and out of this world. I

saw a film exactly like it last week, but, of course, it was kind of different too, because in the picture, the policeman turned out to be the killer, and the hero killed him."

"In this one the detective probably gets killed off also," Christie said, "but not by bullets. What kills him is lack of sleep."

He took a stogie from his breast pocket, fed it into his ugly mouth, and dug a match out of his rumpled clothes. The telephone, ringing in what seemed an unusually loud manner, drowned out the sound the match made, rasping on the polished surface of the receptionist's desk. Miss Spilsbury slued around in her swivel chair, spoke into the telephone in a professional voice that sounded like iced honey, and then smiled and handed the instrument to Mike. "For you, Mr. Zacharias. A Mr. Wilson calling."

Mike's body seemed to freeze, momentarily, and I saw sudden sweat ooze out on his forehead, but his voice was quite calm when he spoke into the telephone. He said, "Zacharias speaking," and stood still then, listening, and I moved close and put my ear almost against the instrument, and heard the rich, deep tones of the man I had met at Bayard Thorne's.

"It's like this," the voice said, completely calm, with a note of contemptuous amusement in its depths. "There's only five people can identify me—five living people, that is: you, that other peeper, Considine, and Bender, and old man Thorne and his daughter."

"Seven people, I think," Mike said quietly, "there are seven people, crum, including that charming couple, Mr. and Mrs. Tollefson."

I thought of Mrs. Tollefson, who at that moment was occupying a room in a downtown hotel with two police-women—or so I hoped. I wondered where Apeface was, and decided that he was probably with Wilson, if Apeface were still alive.

"Don't worry about them," the voice said. "They ain't putting the finger on me. But I can't say as much for the rest of you, so I'll tell you what you're all going to do, chum. All five except, of course, the girl, are gonna be sitting in that office of yours—at four forty-three. You're gonna be sitting there be-

cause I'm gonna give you a ring at four forty-three, and I'm gonna talk, personally, to every one of you. You get that, Zacharias?"

"I get it," Mike said.

"And if you ain't all in that office when I call," the voice went on, "there's no deal. I don't take the dough off the broad unless I know you're all there at four forty-three."

"What makes you so sure the girl's going to be there with the money?" Mike asked.

The voice came back at him, mocking, terrifying in its very lightness. "My girlish intuition tells me she's gonna be there. Like it tells me all five of you are gonna be in your office when I phone. And lemme tell you something else, copper: I got a helluva good memory for voices, so don't ring no switches on me. If all of you ain't there when I phone, I'm calling everything off today, and Carson and Ageld better start looking for someplace to hide. Be talking to you, son, in just a little while."

There was a click at the other end of the wire, and Mike shrugged and put the telephone down on the desk. "Well, I guess that fixes our wagon," he said. "We're pinned down here until two minutes before the pay-off is supposed to take place. Steve and I are clear out of the play now, Chris."

Christie, who had been leaning over my shoulder doing some listening on his account, wrinkled his brow in a ferocious scowl of concentration. "It could mean that Wilson isn't going to be in Grand Central at four forty-five," he said, "and that he's going to let some go-between handle everything in the terminal."

"It could also mean that he's going to be there, plenty," Mike said, "mean, that he's got the deal timed to the split-second, and that he figures on collecting before Steve and Bender and I can cover the four blocks between here and G.C."

The Inspector nodded. "The guy's got a head on his shoulders, even if it's addled," he said with a note of grudging respect in his voice. "You know what the terminal's like at that time of day—an oversize sardine tin, jammed with thousands of commuters. Well, Wilson's eliminated all the people who could

identify him, except the girl, and she's what he'd probably call a calculated risk, if a hood like him used terms like that."

As he finished, Randall came in from the outside hall. I'd sent him out an hour before with Bender's canaries and the pup, with instructions to find a temporary lodging place for the menagerie. Randall reported that, after considerable exploratory effort, he'd found a Sixth Avenue pet shop proprietor who had agreed to lodge the beast and birds. "The pooch didn't act like he wanted to go there," the deputy sheriff said to Bender, "but he seemed to perk up a little, after he saw all the other pups in the place."

"It won't be for long," Bender said. "At least I hope it won't be for long."

Christie looked at his watch, grunted, and swung his hip off Spilsbury's desk. "Twenty-five minutes to go," he said. "I guess we'll get this show on the road, Mike. Shall we percolate into your inner sanctum, and give our friends the final word?"

Mike nodded and opened the door to his office, and we all followed him in, with the exception of Randall and Phil Benfield and Eddie Morris. Helen West was sitting nervously on the edge of the couch, with a handkerchief balled in one hand, and Max Ageld lounged beside her. Big Joe was behind Mike's desk, his wheezing bulk overflowing the chromium-and-leather chair, and Bayard Thorne was pacing the office carpet, his face drawn with worry and fatigue.

Mike crossed to the wall safe and twiddled the dial. "I don't know why I bother to even lock this thing," he said in an elaborately cheerful and careless manner. "An apprentice safecracker could probably open this tin can with a bobby pin."

Christie held up a hand and made an harumphing sound in his throat. "I want everybody here to please listen to me," he said gruffly. "We've made a few changes in our plans. Mike and I talked the thing over a while ago, and we decided it would be awful foolish to go through with this thing the way we originally planned it."

The office was very quiet as Mike swung the safe door open and carried the bulging overnight bag over to the desk.

Christie cleared his throat again, and resumed speaking.

"We figured," he said, "that it would be silly to give a murderer like Wilson even an out-side chance of getting his hands on this much money—much as we appreciate the public-spirited cooperation of Mr. Carson and Mr. Ageld, in getting the money up." The old man sneered slightly, blew smoke through pursed lips, and drawled: "So, we aren't gonna give this hood, Wilson, any chance to get his mitts on the money."

Mike, like an actor responding to a cue, turned the canvas bag upside down; the heaps of bills plopped down upon the desk top in a green cascade, and several of the onlookers gasped, simultaneously. Then Carson's voice cut across the stillness in a great bubbling roar: "For God's sake, Zacharias, you gone crazy or something?"

"I wouldn't wonder," Mike said calmly, and opened the top drawer of his desk. The drawer was filled with memorandum pads, blank sheaves of paper cut in approximately the same size as the green stuff that he'd dumped out of the bag. His face inscrutable, Mike began to stuff memorandum pads into the canvas receptacle.

"Wonderful," Max Ageld said, with a smile that looked a little like a snarl. "We bust a gut, getting the dough up, and now you aren't even going to use it."

The Inspector shrugged, and pointed at Bayard Thorne. "You heard him beefing about the risk his daughter was going to take. Well, I've decided—I've finally decided—that if Wilson don't make his play *in* Grand Central, all bets are off. If all this young lady gets is a message—a message telling her to go somewhere else—then she ain't going. Wilson's too dangerous, and we're not going to let her play games with that crazy killer."

Deirdre, a look of astonishment on her face, opened her mouth to speak; Christie turned his back quickly upon Bayard Thorne, blocking the man's view, and looked sharply at Deirdre. He let his left eyelid fall in a slow, deliberate wink that looked like a grimace of pain, and Deirdre did not speak.

"I'm glad that you've come to such a sensible conclusion," Thorne said in a tone of vast relief.

Max Ageld stood up and stubbed out his cigarette in the

ashtray near the sofa. "And where does this leave Joe and me?" he asked. "We just pick up our dough and go home, I suppose?"

"No," Mike said, as he closed the overnight bag, "not unless you're off the whole deal, and want to pull your chips out. If Wilson doesn't show this afternoon, he'll contact us again, I think—and soon. We may need the money to bait a trap with when he does. I'll put it in the safe, for now."

Ageld's eyebrows lifted. "Beg pardon? That safe? The one you only just now referred to as a tin can?"

Mike grinned cheerfully at the dapper man. "Oh, I won't leave it there overnight," he said. "I'm not quite simple. I'll bring it over to Big Joe's hotel later, when I check out of here, after we see what's going to give."

Carson's voice rose in an indignant wheeze. "Listen, Zacharias! Me and Maxey got that money up to pay this loogan, Wilson, off with, so he won't be taking pot-shots at me no more. I say let's pay him off and get it over with, even if you don't collar him when he gets paid."

Christie picked up the overnight bag and looked at Carson with a glare of contempt. "The terror of the prohibition mobs," he snarled. "Why, you big dog! Haven't you got sense enough to know if Wilson makes you for this score, he'll bleed you to death? A junky won't stop with one shake-down. He'll just think it's the green light, and keep on going."

"That's what you think!" Big Joe yowled. "Lemme tell you something, Christie. I sent out the word. I told a few people a few things. I got some boys blowing into town any minute—some out-of-town boys, see—and they'll find this Wilson, even if you cops can't. They'll find him, and they'll take seventy-five grand outta his stinking hide, and—"

"And you shut up!" Max Ageld snarled, in a voice like a whiplash. He looked at Christie and smiled, and spoke in a soft tone. "Don't mind Joe, Inspector. It's just that sometimes the guy's imagination runs away with him. He wouldn't do anything illegal, Inspector, you know that."

Christie grunted, and turned to Deirdre. "Okay, Mrs. Wyatt, if you're ready."

"I'm ready," Deirdre said.

"I'll carry this till we get to the terminal," Christie said, and tapped the canvas bag. He took a long stride towards the door, then turned back and looked at Mike. "You're staying put, kid? You and Steve and Bender and Mr. Thorne?"

Mike made a gesture of resignation. "We haven't got much choice, have we? You might give me a ring, if you make the pinch, and if you don't you might give me a ring, too. I'll be mildly interested."

"I'll give you a ring," Christie said, "one way or another. I guess this leaves it up to you to look after Bender. In case we fail, Marty's in your charge until we decide what to do next."

"I know," Mike said. "Marty and I will hang around here for an hour or so, and then we'll check into a hotel."

"Make it Big Joe's hotel," Christie told him. "I've had the police guard doubled at Joe's flophouse." He scowled at Carson, and then at Ageld. "You fellas mize well go home," he said. "You come down with us now, and I'll see you into a cab. I guess you can make it as far as the Aylewarde without getting ventilated."

Big Joe heaved himself erect, stood glowering for a moment and then waddled through the door, with Ageld at his heels. Bayard Thorne tossed up his hands in a gesture of sheer wretchedness as Deirdre started to leave, but she smiled at him reassuringly, and walked out quickly. Christie turned back at the threshold of the door, swept the room with his sad eyes, and growled, "Well, everybody keep everything crossed." His long, awkward strides carried him out of sight; I heard the door of the outer office bang shut, and his heavy footfalls died away in the hall.

Helen West rose suddenly, gathered up her purse and her coat, and spoke in a bleak voice. "I'm going home," she announced. "I can't stand this place. I can't stand just—just sitting here." Her voice shrilled and cracked on the last few words, and she plunged towards the door.

Mike walked quickly—very quickly—into the reception room behind her, and spoke to Eddie Morris, who was sitting in a corner of the room. "See that Mrs. West gets a cab, Eddie.

And maybe you'd better ride along with her to Forest Hills."

The older sister turned back, her hand on the knob of the hall door. "I don't want anyone to ride to Forest Hills with me," she said bitterly. "I want to be alone—if you don't mind."

She went out, slamming the door behind her. Mike made a gesture at Eddie Morris, and after a moment Eddie opened the door and eased himself noiselessly into the hall. "I guess you can go home," Mike said to Miss Spilsbury. "The office is closed for today—except maybe for unofficial visitors."

Miss Spilsbury put on her hat and coat, and repaired her make-up briefly, and wafted herself out on a cloud of perfume. Mike turned and looked at Phil Benfield, who was puffing his pipe against a wall. "You can't earn your dough just smoking that hod around here," Mike said in an off-hand manner. "So, suppose you just go down and get in a cab, and sit in it, right in front of this building. And when Steve-o has spoken a fair word of greeting to our friend Wilson, Steve-o will come down and join you."

I grinned at Mike as Phil Benfield went out of the door. "You do occasionally use your head, don't you?" I asked. "I talk to Wilson first, and by the time you and Mr. Thorne and Marty are through with him, I should be in Grand Central—with luck."

"Well," Mike chuckled, "I figure one of us ought to be there."

I went into my office and got a spare .38 and a shoulder holster out of a bottom drawer of the desk, and girded myself for possible battle. It was twenty-two minutes of five when I walked back into the reception room. Thorne and Bender and Mike stood with their eyes fixed upon the telephone, as though the instrument were a living thing. Randall sat on the very edge of a chair, almost overcome with excitement, his Adam's-apple bobbing with every breath he took.

I put on my hat and overcoat and took a long walk on the reception-room rug. I looked at the clock on Miss Spilsbury's desk. It was nineteen minutes of five, and the hands seemed to stand still on the face of the clock. I lit a cigarette, and the

smoke clawed at a throat that was tight as the hoops on a brine barrel, and sweat began to unfurl in cold ribbons on the back of my neck.

A fire engine clanged by on the street outside, and when it had passed, silence hung heavily upon the room, broken only by the sound of our breathing. The telephone sounded like a metallic scream when it rang, laying a cold, rasping tongue on every nerve in my body.

Mike nodded at me, his mouth set in a hard line, and I picked up the telephone and said, "Confidential, Considine speaking." Wilson's voice floated mockingly across the wire, and his voice sounded as though he had all the time in the world. "Well, fiddlefoot," he drawled, "so there you are. You done what I said, huh? Good boy!"

"All right, comedian," I said in a voice that was low and hard, and not with simulated feeling, either. "All right, louse. I did what I was told, and you've got that to laugh at, so now I'll turn you over to Mr. Zacharias. He's got a stomach that's stronger than mine."

I shoved the telephone at Mike like a guy passing the stick in a relay race, and dove at the office door. I hit the hall running, on my toes, making as little noise as possible. Halfway down the hall, Mrs. Wallace, the woman who cleaned our offices, was unlocking the door to the closet in which she kept her mops and pails and brooms. She lifted her grizzled head to stare at me; I smiled at her idiotically and touched my hat, and heard her gasp as I went pounding down the hall.

Our offices were on the sixth floor, but I didn't wait for the elevator. I was on the second floor, and descending fast, when I heard someone clattering along behind me. I looked over my shoulder and saw Randall, the pride of Castle Lake, but I didn't waste any words on him; I merely waved the little man on, and he was trampling on my heels when I ran out into the early winter darkness, to the cab parked at the curb.

Phil Benfield spoke from a corner of the cab as Randall and I piled in. "If that guy called when he said he was going to call," he said, "you got down here in very good time. In

something less than nothing flat. . . . Grand Central, driver, and just so you get us there alive."

Benfield tossed the driver a dollar as we drew up in front of one of the Lexington Avenue entrances to the terminal, and we plunged into the building like three-fourths of a football backfield trying for a touchdown.

The commuters' army was in full march along the corridor, moving towards the train gates at a pace which, though rapid, was slower than the pace at which I wished to go. I tried weaving and dodging through the throng, and promptly got caught in a human traffic jam that snarled itself about a woman with two small children and two large bags. A big man yelped and swore at me as I trod on his foot. I pushed him away from me with a shouted word of apology, and he caromed into Phil Benfield, and cursed again, his hands lifted as though calling upon heaven to witness the rudeness of human behavior.

I dove between two fat women who seemed to be bogged down in the stream, and the living current sucked me in and carried me along, spewing me out, finally into the big wide central portion of the terminal, like a chip tossed out of a torrential stream. Twenty feet away from me, Deirdre stood with the canvas bag clutched in her hand.

The red-haired lady detective, Mrs. Delaney, was standing a short distance away, engaged in what seemed to be a casual conversation with Hanson. Other members of Christie's force were stationed, as directed, around the sides of the information booth. It was a very tight net, I thought, and if junky Wilson blundered into it, he was going to be a gaffed fish before he ever had a chance to draw a gun.

Randall came panting up to my side, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Benfield, a calm citizen apparently absorbed by the headlines of an evening paper. "What do we do now, Steve?" Randall asked in a whisper that must have carried a half block. "What do we do now?"

"We talk—only quietly," I told him. "You talk to me. You tell me about the real estate business in Castle Lake, or about

the high price of turkey eggs in Transylvania. Just make with the conversation, Randall—and calm down."

"Oh, sure," Randall said, "I gotcha, Steve. You think the guy'll show up here? You think he'll dare?"

I opened my mouth to answer, and at that moment a medium-sized man pushed his way through the crowd around Deirdre and came to a halt beside her. I went forward, brushing Randall aside; I broke through a solid phalanx of onrushing commuters, and as I came abreast of Mrs. Delaney and Hanson, I had a good look at the medium-sized man. He definitely wasn't the gunnie that I had seen at Bayard Thorne's.

But he was quite a guy, if looking completely nondescript and absolutely mediocre can make someone quite a guy. He had a face like one postage stamp in a sheet of stamps, and a figure that you wouldn't have looked at twice if you'd seen him at the North Pole in a bathing suit. His clothes, in their well-worn mediocrity, were one of the best protective coloration jobs I'd ever seen on anything alive. Whoever Wilson's messenger might be, I thought, he was certainly the Anonymous Man of the Year.

His lips moved, close to Deirdre's ear, and seemed to get lost, even in motion. I saw the girl's body tense, saw a taut smile appear on her white face. She nodded quickly at Mr. Nobody, turned away from him and began to walk rapidly towards the waiting room and the Forty-second Street exit that lay beyond.

Mrs. Delaney got herself into motion before the girl had taken ten paces; so did Hanson, and so did two of Christie's other boys, who moved quickly, and got ahead of the girl. As I headed for the waiting room myself, I saw four of the Inspector's men converge quietly upon Mr. Nobody, shutting him into a cage of bodies. As a hand touched his arm, the man looked up, and his wooden face came alive with a sudden expression of fear; but even fright seemed stereotyped, stamped on his featureless face.

Benfield and Randall were behind me as I followed Deirdre between the ticket booths and up the wide corridor that led

to the waiting room. Traffic was heavy, and twice I lost sight of her, but I went on, butting my way through the waves of commuters, until I saw her, standing dead still, just inside the doors that led to Forty-second Street.

I veered to the left, and paused before a newsstand, pretending to look at the headlines on a paper, and Deirdre turned back from the door and walked past me, her heels clattering on the floor. I saw her lips moving, speaking some unintelligible words to me as she passed, and I swung in behind her, moving between rows of benches down the center aisle of the waiting room. Phil Benfield, holding his newspaper in his hands, came up behind me, and then moved along side. I heard him gasp, his face blank, and looked where he was looking, and saw that Deirdre had walked calmly to a seat on one of the benches, and had sat down.

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SHE SAT IN the only place vacant on the long wooden bench, between an old man with a child in his arms, and a dumpy, middle-aged woman who leaned back with her feet propped up on a cheap suitcase. The bench opposite Deirdre was entirely filled; there was no place for me to sit anywhere near her, so I walked slowly past her, looking at her out of the corner of my eye. Deirdre stared straight ahead, without a flicker of recognition as I passed. I saw Mrs. Delaney and Hanson strolling imperturbably down the center aisle of the waiting room, and as I lingered, passing Deirdre slowly, Phil Benfield cut by me and took up a position against the waiting-room wall.

I walked to the end of the bench, turned left, and then left again, coming back to the center aisle between the next rows of seats, and as I came between Mrs. Delaney and Hanson, Randall nudged my elbow and hoarsely whispered: "She sat down over there, Steve. Next to the old guy with the kid."

"I know," I said, "I just practically walked on her toes." I looked over Randall's shoulder and saw that Deirdre was talking to the child in the old man's arms, smiling as the child reached out a chubby hand and touched her on a sleeve. A few feet beyond the old man, an over-ripe blonde rose suddenly, teetering on stilted heels, then walked towards the center aisle, her breasts and backside gyrating as she walked. I turned Randall around, gestured as inconspicuously as possible at the blonde, and hissed into his ear: "Okay, boy, here's your chance. Get on that blonde's tail and stay with her, even if she goes to San Francisco."

Randall squinted at the woman's highly mobile *derrière* and spoke in an entirely serious manner. "I sure oughta be able to keep that in sight," he said. He went away, fast, following the blonde, and I saw Phil Benfield flit unobtrusively between the benches and sink into the seat that the woman had vacated.

Mrs. Delaney came close to me and spoke in a toneless voice. "Everything all right, Mr. Considine? If the people next to her get up, do you want us to tail them?"

I could see the canvas bag, resting on Deirdre's lap, and I kept my eyes fixed on it as I answered the police-woman. "If the old gal next to her gets up and goes," I said, "you take her. Hanson can take the old man with the kid. If Deirdre moves, Benfield and I will cover her. Everybody near her's a suspect, until we know where we stand."

Hanson, who appeared to be looking for someone in the crowd, jostled me and spoke softly into my ear. "The woman next to her hasn't moved or even looked at her since she sat down," he said. "But the old guy's making with the mouth. If you ask me, Christie will want to talk to that bird."

I nodded, and at the moment, Deirdre rose and walked to the center aisle. She moved without apparent haste, going back the way she had come, and I followed. She turned right at the end of the aisle, heading towards the center of the terminal. I overtook her as she went down the incline between the ticket offices, and spoke to her, as softly as I could and still be heard. "Don't stop now," I whispered. "Walk a few feet, and then drop the bag. I'll pick it up and hand it to you." I realized that if Wilson saw me, he would either simply take off—or start blasting—but the chance was one I felt I had to take.

She walked half a dozen paces without looking back, and the canvas bag thudded on the floor. I dove for it, heading off a portly gentleman who stooped to retrieve it with a gallant smile, and as I lifted the bag I asked quietly: "Did you get a message there on that bench—make a contact of any kind?"

Deirdre shook her head. "No message," she said. "The man who came up to me by the information booth told me to go into the waiting room. He said if someone didn't contact me

at once, I should just walk around until someone approached me."

"Okay," I said, "walk. I'll be a few feet behind you."

She smiled mechanically as I handed her the bag, turned and went on. I waited for a moment, and then Whelan, toothpick in mouth, moved close to me and pawed at my arm. "The guy that contack her," he said in a side-of-the-mouth mutter, "they're holdin' him over by the booth. Christie's there, and he wants to see you."

I looked around for Phil Benfield; I didn't see him, and I caught Whelan by the arm and pointed at Deirdre's retreating back. "Get on her," I said, "and stay on her. Stall her some way for a moment, and tell her to walk up to the entrance to the Commodore, and then walk back again. Tell her we want her in that area, and tell her to stay in that area until something gives."

Whelan nodded and moved away from me, pushing his way through the crowd. I turned, and collided with a red-cap who was hurrying along, laden with a cheap suitcase, a hat box, and two large shopping bags. Behind him walked a dumpy, middle-aged woman who might—or might not—have been the woman I'd seen sitting next to Deirdre in the waiting room. I cut between her and the red-cap and stared at her, hard. Her face—gopher-cheeked, raddled, caked with rouge and floured with powder as thick as dust under a flophouse bed—didn't tell me a thing. But Mrs. Delaney did, coming up quietly behind the woman a few seconds later.

"It's the woman that was sitting next to Mrs. Wyatt," the female detective said. "She told the red-cap to put her stuff on the five-fifteen for Hartford. I'll just see that she gets on her train."

"Do," I said. I watched Mrs. Delaney go briskly across the terminal, following the dumpy woman, and then I walked as fast as possible towards the information booth. Mr. Anonymous was standing about ten feet from the big kiosk, hemmed in by a circle of large policemen in plain-clothes. It would have taken an unusually observant person to realize that the

medium-sized man was as much in custody as though he were already in a cell; but Wilson's messenger was wearing figurative leg-irons, handcuffs, and an Oregon boot, for all his free-as-air appearance, and as I looked at him, I decided that he was very unhappy about it, too.

Most of the detectives had their backs to him, heightening the illusion that the man was as free as bad advice, but Christie was practically standing on Mr. Anonymous' toes, with one of his terrible cigars smoldering almost against the man's brow. I touched the old cop on the elbow, and he flicked me with a brief glance. "I see you when you come in, Steve," he said. "Did Wilson call?"

I said that Wilson had called. "We figured if we took this guy here off the floor it might scare somebody off," Christie muttered, his eyes fixed on his prisoner's face. "Like, for instance, somebody who might be standing up there on that balcony, watching." He made an almost imperceptible gesture with his left hand, and then pointed at the medium-sized man with his chin. "This is quite a fella we got here, Steve. He's either the stupidest bastard alive, or the best actor in the world."

Mr. Anonymous' breath carried a heavy aroma of bar whisky; his undistinguished face was shining with drops of undistinguished sweat. "I dunno what this is all about," he said in a voice that was like a million other voices in New York, except that it came through chattering teeth. "All I did, officer, was to try to earn a buck. All I did was what the guy tells me to do."

"According to this spook," Christie said in a weary voice, "a guy comes up to him in a bar. A bar on Lexington, at four o'clock. A guy who answers Wilson's description." He balled a fist and punched Mr. Anonymous in the stomach, not hard, but hard enough to convince him of his authority. "Tell my friend, Considine, everything," Christie said. "Come on, character, spill it all."

The man batted pale eyes at me in a glance of terror. "Like I already tell this officer," he said. "I'm sitting in this bar, sipping an ale, and this fella asks me would I like to earn a

quick buck. I say I would, and he says all I gotta do is speak to this lady by the booth, and tell her she should go into the waiting room."

"Which she did," I said. "Go on, fireball."

"He says for me to tell her he's gotta long distance call coming through at a quarter of five, and he can't meet her here, like they planned. He gives me a good idea of what she looks like, and tells me to meet her. He says to tell her if she don't wanna wait in the waiting room she can walk around, that he'll find her soon's he's made his call."

It checked more or less with what Deirdre had told me; I was inclined to believe Mr. Anonymous' story. Obviously, Wilson hadn't taken him into his confidence; what Deirdre had told me on the way out of the waiting room was her own interpretation of the message, as she had understood the man to have meant it. "He gimme a buck in the bar," the frightened voice quavered on. "He told me if I give her the message, and if I hung around here till he'd made his call, he'd stop by here and slip me another smacker."

"You'd hate to be hanging from the ceiling by your ears until you collect that other buck from him," Christie said, and turned to me. "You know if Mrs. Delaney and Hanson are still with Mrs. Wyatt, Steve?"

"They're not," I said. "Mrs. Delaney is shagging a woman who was sitting next to Deirdre in the waiting room, and Hanson's tailing an old man who was ditto. But Whelan's on Deirdre, and probably Benfield is too. And Deirdre's walking a beat between here and the Commodore Hotel."

"Good," Christie said, "but I think maybe you'd better look after her too, son. Whelan somehow ain't my idea of a complete detective, not after that Staten Island deal."

"I'll see you around," I said. I turned on my heel and walked away from Christie, moving fast. I wasn't particularly worried, but I knew that I'd feel better if I had my eye on Deirdre. I realized that, if Wilson saw me, he would probably cancel his plan of action, at least for that day, but it was a risk I believed to be justifiable, because if Wilson were

rash enough to place himself in a position where he might see me, there was a fair chance that I'd see Wilson, too. And I *was* concerned about the girl. I didn't want her to be lured out of the terminal, sucked into some other area where the police had fewer resources, and where she would be in greater jeopardy. I had convinced myself that what I felt for Deirdre was merely friendship and professional interest, but she was too lovely—far too lovely—to die. Plato, I told myself, might have understood just how I felt, even if my wife probably would not.

The corridor was crowded with a surging tide of commuters, driving towards the train gates like the last reserves of an embattled army. I could not see both sides of the corridor, fighting the tide head-on, cleaving a path for myself towards the entrance to the Commodore Hotel. I did not see Deirdre, or Whelan, or Benfield, but a current of humanity swept me almost into the arms of one of Christie's men, standing just outside the hotel entrance. He said that he had seen Deirdre pass twice, Whelan only once.

I swung back out into the stream again, went with it down to the center of the terminal, turned and fought my way back again, pushed my way across to the opposite wall of the corridor and let the crowd carry me, heading for the center of the building once more. I had gone perhaps fifty feet when I saw Whelan, flattened against the wall. The current carried me six feet past him before I could stop and turn back.

I looked at him, and a sudden fear clawed at my stomach, a cold fist of fear that twisted my belly into a quivering knot. Whelan was sick, or Whelan was crazy, and Whelan had lost Deirdre; the latter was as obvious as though he had screamed the fact aloud. The man's mouth twitched and trembled in his pale face, his big hands pawed the air, his bulging eyes rolled almost sightlessly as I shouted his name. "My glasses!" the detective moaned as I caught him by the arm, "for Crissakes, will somebody hand me my glasses?"

He'd lost his shell-rimmed spectacles; they lay on the floor a half dozen feet away, the broken glass ground to a powder that dully shimmered in the weak light. I stood a scant three

feet away from Whelan, my face level with his, and spoke to him again, and his gaze wandered blindly, searching for me; there was not a glimmer of recognition in his eyes. I moved in close to him and caught him by both wrists and he put his face close to mine, and knew me, and spoke with a great gusty sigh of relief: "Jeez, Considine, I'm glad it's you. Somebody knocked the googs off my nose, and I can't see so good. I been sick, see—a kinda inflammation in my eyes."

Sudden rage gripped me, hot and blinding and tangible as physical pain, an acid of fury that ate away my fear. I stared at the hulk in front of me and I wanted to slap him on the mouth, but I knew that if I laid a hand on him I'd attract the attention of the crowd, and I didn't want a scene, not with the desperate need I had to find out as much as I could, as quickly as possible. "Who knocked your glasses off, slob?" I asked, and although I kept my voice low, it roared in my ears, a drum of fury that seemed to reverberate within my skull. "Did she knock them off? Did she? Come on, you son-of-a-bitch, talk!"

"I dunno," Whelan faltered, "I dunno. Somebody just reached out and flipped my cheaters off. It coulda been her, she was near me. Or it coulda been somebody else, too."

I pushed him back against the wall with my belly, not touching him with my hands. "And that Sunday," I said, keeping my voice down with a terrible effort, "the day before yesterday, the day Emma Gansil was murdered? You didn't really go to the movies with Deirdre and her sister, did you?"

Whelan's lips moved; fumbling speech came from him in a series of gasps. "I—I—why, sure I went, sure I took 'em to the movies. I took 'em both."

I pressed my stomach against him, kept my hands down, resisting an impulse to dig my fingers into his flabby throat. "But you didn't sit with them in the movies, did you? Tell the truth, Whelan, or I'll choke the truth out of you!"

Whelan's prominent eyes bulged until it seemed they would burst from their sockets. I nudged him with my belly,

and he cried out in quavering, slobbering words: "All right, then! I didn't set with them. I couldn't see the pictures, 'count of my eyes, so I set in the lobby and smoked. But I seen them when they went down the aisle together, and I seen them when they came back. Hell, Considine, you don't think—"

"That one of the sisters sneaked out and killed Emma Gansil?" I interrupted savagely. "It's exactly what I think, and even as stupid as you are, you must have suspected it. You suspected it, but you kept your dirty mouth shut, because if Christie found out about the way you'd neglected your duty, if he found out the condition your eyes were in, you could kiss your job goodbye."

"I hadda keep on workin'," Whelan croaked. "I hadda hang onta the job. I got five kids—"

"I'll bet they'll be proud of you," I said. I flung away from him and dove back into the crowd, heading for the Lexington Avenue exit, and if you had been looking for a madman at that moment, I would have done nicely until you found a real one. The cold evening air struck my face, and some of my fury abated, or enough of it, at least, to leave me capable of rational thought. I stood still for a moment on Lexington Avenue, feeling the fear rise coldly in me again as my berserk rage died, and then a big hand touched my arm. I turned and saw Vic Grossmeyer, one of Christie's men.

"What's wrong?" Grossmeyer asked in a voice that began as a whisper and rose to a yell of excitement, "what the hell's gone wrong? The babe—this Mrs. Wyatt—comes out a few minutes ago and climbs into a cab. And nobody was tailing her, nobody at all. I couldn't shag her—Christie give me orders to stay put here, until he ordered me off this spot. I got the cab number, but I dunno what good it'll do."

"Find Christie and tell him," I said. "He's down by the information booth. Tell him the girl's out of the terminal, and that I'm going back to my office and wait things out."

I was moving even as I spoke, running for a cab that had drawn up at the curb. As I ran I had a mental picture of Mike

and Bender and Bayard Thorne, sitting in the office with seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of first-class criminal bait, waiting for something to materialize, and not knowing how soon—how terribly soon—a break might come. Mike had deliberately exaggerated the infirmity of the office safe—that was clear—and Mike had expected that someone, lured by the knowledge that the money was there, would return. But I wondered if he would be prepared for a "visitor" who came many minutes before Mike could logically expect the murderer's arrival. And I wondered if he would suspect a woman who might come alone, and apparently unarmed—a woman who might very well have strangled a lonely old servant on a Sunday afternoon.

The elevator operator, a lad named Benny Parks, said that a horse named Palmer House looked like a good thing in the fourth race at Havana tomorrow, but I didn't answer. He stopped the car at the sixth floor, and turned and looked at me, and his eyes bulged as he stared. "Jeez, Mr. Considine," he said, "you look awful. You aren't coming down with the flu, I hope?"

I said I was all right, and when he opened the door I went quickly past him into the hall. I didn't look back, and after a moment I heard the gentle noise the elevator made, sinking into the shaft. I got the .38 out of the shoulder holster and slipped off the safety catch. I tucked the weapon back in its leather sheath, but loosely, walked twenty feet to the end of the corridor on which the elevators faced, and turned into the long hall that led to our offices.

Light came faintly from the single bulb that burned in a row of lamps along the high ceiling. The floor of the hall gleamed like a strip of dull white tape, stretching through shadows that were thick along the end of the corridor, and the door of Mrs. Wallace's broom-closet—tightly shut now—was a solid rectangle of blackness against a gray wall. The opaque glass windows in doors along the hall had a ghostly shimmer in the gloom, but the glass in the front door of our reception room glowed with light that came from within. The

dim radiance shone on a scrub pail and a mop, standing just outside the office door.

The pail and the mop gave me a welcome feeling of security. It was somehow difficult to think of a murderer in conjunction with those prosaic implements, almost impossible to imagine a killer lurking in the Confidential offices while our charwoman, Mrs. Wallace, cleaned the premises. I told myself that no one had arrived at the office ahead of me; I told myself that, and I wanted to believe it; but I still took such precautions as I could. I went down the hall on tiptoe, my right hand inside my coat, on the butt of the gun. At the door, I put my left hand gently on the knob, and stood listening, holding my breath. From inside, I heard a ripple of quiet laughter, the sound of footsteps, a muffled cough. And then a silhouetted figure moved slowly across the frosted glass.

It was a female silhouette, round of shoulder, obese, reassuringly blowsy of hair—the outline of old Mrs. Wallace, just as I'd seen it stamped upon the glass a hundred times before. I let out a gasp of sheer relief, loosened my hold on the pistol, and opened the door. I went into the room briskly, whistling a popular tune. The man called Wilson, standing in the door of Mike's office in woman's clothes, a female wig askew on his head, turned and leveled a silenced .38 at my heart. "All right, Deirdre," he said in a matter-of-fact, almost detached voice, "suppose you look after our friend, Mr. Considine."

I looked over my shoulder and saw Deirdre standing in a corner, an automatic—also silenced—gripped in her hand. Her eyes looked too big for human eyes, and they blazed with a glare of exultant cruelty, of sheer purposeful fury that was more frightening than any look of madness might have been. The curved, lovely lips were stripped back in a mirthless, triumphant grin, and all the things that Deirdre Thorne Wyatt had hidden from the world—the monstrous and depraved and unclean things that lived in her mind—were written obscenely on her contorted face. It was as though some-

one had chipped away the features of Venus de Milo, to reveal a deformed horror cast within; as though you looked at the Mona Lisa, and by some evil trick of the imagination, you saw the face blotched and hideous, the famous smile turned into a wolfish snarl. Looking at Deirdre, I felt as I had felt in airplanes in bad weather, or on ships in very angry seas; and I knew that I had seen a Medusa unmasked.

She was very calm. She came up quickly behind me as Wilson spoke, and jabbed the muzzle of her gun into my back. She put her left hand on my arm, and turned me around a little (I made no resistance with two pistols trained on me), and then her left hand snaked the .38 out of its nest under my left arm. I heard a soft thud as the weapon hit the floor on the other side of Miss Spilsbury's desk. "Into your partner's office," Deirdre said coolly, "I don't have to tell you that I'll kill you if you make a bad move."

The guy called Wilson was standing in the door of Mike's office, swinging his gun in a wide arc that had one end based on me, the other on Mike and Bender and Bayard Thorne. The three stood behind Mike's desk, facing the door, their hands held high. Sweat gleamed all over Mike's dark face, as though he were wet from a shower, and as I looked at him I saw a ribbon of blood running on the back of his right hand. Thorne's fine eyes had a fixed and glassy look in a face that twitched and trembled around a mouth twisted into a bewildered knot. Martin Bender stood quietly, a slight smile on his face, but his eyes were hard and bright.

Wilson moved back into Mike's office as I approached the door, and his rouged mouth grinned contemptuously. He looked at once ridiculous and deadly with his frowsy wig and his painted face and his badly fitting female clothes. I knew now why I hadn't recognized him when he sat next to Deirdre in the waiting room, or later when I collided with the porter who was carrying his luggage to the train that Wilson never took. He'd been wearing false teeth, probably the grotesque "comic" molars that are sold in novelty stores, the kind that kids distort their faces with on Hallowe'en.

But he wasn't wearing them now. The words came out of his mouth, deep and direct, unimpeded by false dentures, and his words were as cold as a ton of refrigerated cod. "You got here sooner than I expected, Considine," he said, and his diction was precise, no longer the speech of a B picture thug. "Well, it saves me the trouble of having to look for you later. Mr. Zacharias refused to open the safe, so I nicked him in the hand. I'll do worse to you unless you open it."

"I haven't got the combination," I told him. "It's tattooed on my grandmother's back, and granny's wintering in Miami." I had never felt less heroic, or less inclined to talk like a wise guy, but I didn't feel like dying, either, and I was stalling for every precious second of time.

The girl came up silently behind me and the barrel of her pistol lashed the back of my head. I half turned, and Wilson came in, like a fast boxer, and his own gun thudded solidly against my face. He skipped nimbly back, so fast that I couldn't have hit him even if I'd been crazy enough to try; blood oozed stickily on my back hair, and my right eye began to swell, a hot balloon rising above a cheekbone that throbbed like the largest toothache in all the world. Wilson smashed at my face again with the gun, and Mike's voice cut across the stillness in a rumbling, sick roar of protest: "Don't Wilson, for crissakes! I'll open the damn safe—I'll open it right away."

"Don't do it," I said, holding my hands up to shield my face, "don't do it, Mike. If you open it, he'll blast us the minute he gets the money."

"He'll blast us if he doesn't," Mike said, and his hand was on the dial.

The girl spoke to me softly, from behind me. "Surprised, Considine?" she asked. "Don't tell me you knew about me all the time."

"I didn't know," I said, and I was unable to repress the long sigh that went with the words. "I suspected, at times. But after last night—after you clouted Tollefson when he was choking me—I didn't suspect you any more." Anger rose in me,

stronger even than my dislike of being pistol-whipped. "I suppose I should have known," I said in a choked, hot voice, "and pardon my stupidity. But you didn't act much like a bitch who would eat her own young."

Her gun smacked the back of my head again, and her laughter mocked me. "I've always known you were a moronic slob," she said, "but I didn't think you were an imbecile. Tollefson! Don't you know that I aimed that statuette at *you*, and not at him? I thought he might get away and carry a message for me, and if he had, then I'd have said I tried to hit *him*. He rolled you over, just as I swung, and spoiled my aim."

Wilson chuckled, his hopped-up eyes gleaming through the mascara caked on his lashes. "Clever girl, isn't she, Considine? She thought Tollefson might contact me, but when he just took off without any chance of her giving him instructions, she had to think of something else. So, when you were out in the snow, chasing this dumb cluck who doesn't even really figure in the deal, she simply telephoned me. And that's how I knew what the score was."

"The stage," I said, "lost a great actress when Deirdre decided to become a ring-tailed horror."

Mike had the safe open; Mike had a big hand inside, and Deirdre stood beside him, emptying the pads of paper out of the blue canvas bag. Wilson moved farther away from me, giving himself room to cover us all, and Bayard Thorne spoke in a weak and frightened voice, like the voice of a shocked child. "Deirdre," he said, "for God's sake, Deirdre, what do you think you're doing?"

"What I have to do," the girl answered without looking at him, and she might have been speaking to a stranger.

The packets of money made soft little plumping sounds, falling into the blue canvas bag. I sought comfort by telling myself that, if I died, I deserved to die on the grounds of stupidity alone; but there wasn't any comfort in the fact. I stood still, with my hands up, and immortal curiosity stirred in the expectant cadaver that I was, surmounting my fear.

"About Wyatt—Wiandowski," I said to Wilson. "It doesn't matter much, now, does it, if you tell me about him?"

"No," Wilson said, and his voice sounded amused, "I guess it doesn't matter now. Murray was a bastard, and he had to go. I'd always hated him, always wanted to kill him, ever since he married Deirdre, but—" he paused, then went on again—"that's not what you want to know, is it? I suppose you want to know, first of all, how I got my hands on a gun, after I was clean when you frisked me downstairs?"

"I am wondering about that," I said, "among other things."

Wilson grinned, a lucid madman's grin. "Deirdre passed me the gun. Right in front of you slobs. She had the gun in her housecoat pocket, and when I slapped her on the rear—remember?—she tossed it into my lap. You guys didn't look at anything—except at what I slapped!"

Deirdre's laughter cackled as she shoved Carson and Ageld's money down into the bag. "I didn't have any way of communicating with him," she said to me, "of stopping him from coming to the house. I naturally didn't want him to come after Father had called you detectives in, but I couldn't head him off in time. And I knew that he wasn't armed, and I was afraid you and Zacharias would turn him over to the police. So, I pretended to be cold, went into my room and put on a housecoat, and shoved the automatic into a pocket. And passed it to him, just as he's told you."

Mike sighed, standing by the open safe with his bloody hand upraised. "That's wonderful," he said, "and it makes us out the biggest dopes ever hatched. But what about the .38 calibre revolver your husband was killed with? You passed Wilson a .32 automatic."

"Why," Wilson answered for her, in a tone of vast amusement, "that was a matter of what you might call poetic justice. I rubbed out Murray with his own gun—a gun he had in *his* pocket—a gun he didn't have the guts to use. He handed it to me when we went out into the hall—handed it to me himself, and begged me to kill Bayard Thorne."

Thorne made a low cry of protest and horror; I didn't look

at his face. "It sounds good," I said to Wilson, "and I'll believe you, even though I don't want to. But why did you complicate matters by using his gun? Why not the automatic that Lady Werewolf passed you?"

Wilson's tone was sardonic. "Because the automatic wasn't loaded. Murray very kindly told me so, when we got out into the hall that night. The gutless wonder was afraid of his own wife, afraid to have a gun around that was loaded—one that Deirdre could get her hands on, that is. He'd unloaded the automatic, a couple of days before."

His eyes glittered, hating Murray Wyatt-Wiandowski even in recollection. "He didn't have nerve enough to kill Thorne himself," he said. "He wanted the old man to die, so that Deirdre would inherit his money, and, obviously, Murray planned to take care of me later. I guess he didn't know how I despised him, because we were all in on this thing together, he, and Deirdre, and myself, and I'd never let on how much I hated his guts." The evil chuckle sounded in his throat again. "He was a dirty, double-crossing louse, and if ever any man deserved to die, Murray did."

"Speaking of double-crossers," Mike said, softly, a look of sick wonder on his big face, "Wiandowski evidently dreamed up the whole original plan to shake down Mr. Thorne, and Carson and Ageld, after he saw how much you resembled Martin Bender. He figured the deal out, and cut you in—and you blasted him, and went on, using his original pitch!"

"I told you he was a louse," Wilson said, "a guy who deserved to die."

"And old Emma Gansil?" I asked harshly. "Did she deserve to die, too?"

Deirdre looked at me, her long fingers closing the zipper fastening of the bag. "It would be like you to feel sorry for an old fool like Emma," she sneered, and I thought that Lucrezia Borgia and Messalina must have sometimes looked as she did when she spoke. "Emma was a nosy old bitch who never did anything but snoop and spy on me, all my life. A sentimental, silly old woman who simply knew too much—

and so she had to die. Just as any stupid person should, when they get in the way of more intelligent people."

"And you killed her?" I heard myself asking.

She nodded, and actually smiled. "Since you're not going to live to tell anyone," she said, "I did. Thanks to that blind idiot, Whelan. And thanks to my dipsomaniac sister, who had to sneak out of the theatre to get herself some drinks. I knew that Whelan couldn't see anything—he dropped his glasses once, in the living room, when he was supposed to be watching me—and he was helpless until I found them for him. So I knew that I could go out and—and take care of Emma, and get back again, without being seen. He couldn't see very far, even with his glasses, not more than a few feet. I passed him, sitting there in the lobby, on my way out, and on my way back."

"And I guess you knew he wouldn't tell anyone he hadn't sat with you," I said. "I guess you're a pretty good judge of bad character."

The zipper rasped shut and the girl took a step towards me, swinging the bag against her hip, her eyes burning with that look of mad but somehow lucid exultation that would have made a body-snatcher's blood run cold.

"I know what you think," she shrilled, "you and your stupid kind! You think we're murderers—murderers and crazy. You think that because your narrow little minds can't grasp the fact that some people have the right—the right, and even the duty—to place themselves above the law, and above the petty code of morals that binds inferior people. Superior intelligence gives some people that right!"

"Well, my soul and body!" Mike Zacharias spoke in a loud and clear voice. "Look what we've got here. An Adolf Hitler yet, in skirts!"

Deirdre had shoved her pistol into her coat pocket as she filled the bag; she reached for it now, her mouth snarling at Mike, and as the light gleamed on the dark barrel of the weapon, Martin Bender went into action. He was standing just behind the center of Mike's big desk, and on the blotter in front of him there was an antique knife that Mike some-

times used as a letter opener, an oriental dagger with an ornamental handle and a straight, razor-sharp blade. Bender caught the knife up with a movement indescribably quick; the blade gleamed for a split-second, rising in his swift and dexterous hand, flashed over the desk and lodged, quivering, in Wilson's right arm. The gunman screamed; the silenced pistol went off, making a popping, sneezing sound as it fell from his hand, and Mike flung himself through space, grabbing at Deirdre's gun arm.

He missed her arm, but his fingers closed on the pistol barrel and tore it from her grasp as the momentum of his headlong charge carried him crashing into the office wall. I smashed both fists into Wilson's face, and saw him fall, and Deirdre was running through the door, heading for the outside hall, the bag still clutched in her hand.

I stooped and snatched up the gun that Wilson had dropped, and Deirdre was through the reception room, tugging at the outside door. I broke fast, going after her, and Martin Bender's voice followed me, rising in a compassionate shout. "Don't shoot her, Mr. Considine," he said, "the girl's sick—terribly sick."

She had the door open; I heard her heels drum wildly on the floor, turning to the right as she went out into the hall, heading for the stairway beside the elevators. I reached the door, and the click of her flying heels sounded louder, and she brushed against me as she came back the way she had gone. I made a startled grab at her and missed; her eyes were wild, and her breath whistled through a mouth that was a twisted, slobbering gash in her white face. I threw a quick look to the right as she went past me, and saw Art Randall plodding down the hall.

Deirdre increased her speed as she passed me, racing for the tall window at the end of the hall. The window, which overlooked a parking lot, framed a street and a jumble of dark buildings like the broken bastions of a canyon wall, and beyond them, the Empire State Building lifted its phallic beauty against the black sky.

I shouted at Deirdre to stop; she didn't stop, and I raised

the gun that Wilson had dropped. I said mentally, *"Okay, Deirdre of the sorrows, that's all for you, and you've probably been asking for this since the moment you were born."*

But somehow I couldn't shoot, and I didn't need to. The girl ran faster as she neared the window; she went up and over the ledge in a headlong bound and crashed through the window like a human projectile, and she carried half of the pane with her as she went, screaming, out into the night. The glass shook around the jagged hole her body made going through; the Empire State Building seemed to sway and topple, reflected in the quivering glass, and I had a terrible illusion that Deirdre rose as she crashed through the window, as though she were trying to impale herself upon the bright spire.

I ran to the window and looked through the hole, and down, and I saw nothing but blackness below in the parking lot, and I heard no sound. I turned away, and Randall came up to me, his face like chalk, and asked me if the girl were dead. I said that she probably was, and walked on, and Randall caught me by a sleeve.

"We ought to go down," he said. "Somebody ought to go down."

"Somebody will," I answered. "I'm going to tell them, in there."

Bender and Bayard Thorne appeared in the reception-room door. Thorne stared at the window with an expression of sheer horror in his eyes, and then looked piteously at me. I nodded, forcing myself to meet his gaze. The handsome man seemed to shrivel, to grow too small for his clothes, and his face looked as though the bones had crumpled away, sagging in flesh that had aged twenty years. He leaned against Bender, holding to the little man with shaking hands, and when he spoke I think he spoke to the world, and not to us.

"You've got to begin at home," he said brokenly, his eyes on the shattered pane. "You've got to do the job at home first, with your own family. You think you're an idealist—you're going to change the world—make it clean and good. And all the time you've neglected your family—the family

that's the biggest guarantee of decency and honesty in all the world."

"I think you'd better sit down, sir," Martin Bender said in an ineffably gentle voice. "I'll look after things below."

I took a weary step into the reception room and looked through Mike's door and saw Mike sitting on Wilson, who was face down on the floor. Randall came up behind me, and cleared his throat and growled: "I'll go down with Bender. But I wanta tell you something, first."

"Tell," I said.

"That babe you told me to tail," Randall answered, "that big blond tomato. Hell, she didn't wanta get away from anybody. She wanted somebody to catch her. I hadn't followed her more'n three-four blocks before she stopped and waited for me to catch up with her, and asked me to buy her a drink. So, I said to hell with that noise, and I came back up here."

It was the neatest bit of anti-climax I'd ever experienced, and I might have made some use of it if I hadn't felt sicker than I'd ever felt in my life.

→ 14 ←

CHRISTIE SIPPED HIS martini, made a wry face, and leaned back in his chair. "The fella's real name is Guido," he said, "Francis Guido. Wilson is just one of a lot of aliases he's used at various times. But he was christened Francis Guido, and it was under that name that Deirdre met him and fell in love with him."

"At some summer theatre, I suppose," Mike Zacharias commented. "Or, at least in connection with some theatrical enterprise."

We were sitting in the living room of my apartment, Carla and Mike and Bender and Christie and myself. It was twenty-four hours after Deirdre had plunged to her death, and although none of us were exactly celebrating, time had dulled the edge of our shock, and three martinis had numbed our pain.

Christie squinted at Mike with a look of mild surprise, and then shrugged. "Well, I suppose you did figure out he was an actor, especially after the way he fooled you with that woman's disguise. Mind telling me how he got into your office and dropped a gun on you, *even* in that female get-up?"

Mike wriggled uncomfortably in his chair and stared at his bandaged hand. "It was the scrub pail that really fooled me," he said, "the scrub pail banging just outside the door. I've heard it a hundred times, nights when I've worked late. Mrs. Wallace is a noisy old gal; she always makes a helluva racket, outside in the hall."

"Pretty smart of Wilson—Guido, I mean—using her props," Christie said. "But he still had to come into the office. When he waltzed in, didn't you notice that it wasn't the regular cleaning woman?"

Mike grinned sheepishly and took a drink from his own

cocktail glass. "Mrs. Wallace doesn't always clean our offices," he told Christie. "Sometimes there's a substitute for her. But to tell the truth, I didn't even take a second look at the figure that came through the door. The mere fact that it was apparently a female, and equipped with cleaning implements—well, that was enough for me. I wasn't expecting a man dressed as a woman. Matter of fact, I wasn't expecting anyone, so soon. And then the next thing I knew, the guy had a gun on us. Five or ten minutes later, Deirdre walked in, and then there were two guns, as soon as the guy obligingly handed her an extra one he had."

Christie grunted, and stretched out his long legs. "I dunno as I blame you," he said magnanimously, "I dunno as I'd have played it any different. You couldn't have known, after all, that the regular cleaning woman was shoved into her own broom closet, with a lump on her head, and a gag in her mouth."

Carla stirred, sitting beside me on the sofa. "How is the woman?" she asked. "The morning papers said that she wasn't seriously injured."

"Mrs. Wallace," Christie answered, "is from Glasgow, and she's a very tough old haggis indeed. She was discharged from the hospital at noon today, and she's probably back banging pails around, at this very minute. Guido isn't as durable. When I talked to him in the prison ward at Bellevue hospital this morning, he wasn't feeling so hot. Our friend Marty shoved that knife halfway through his arm."

Bender stared at the glass in his hand, and there was a look of sadness in his eyes. "I hated to do it," he said, "even to a mad dog like that. Because, you see, I'd promised myself—sworn a solemn oath—that I'd never again raise a hand in violent anger against any man. But I couldn't just stand there and let him shoot down Mr. Zacharias and Mr. Considine, and Mr. Thorne."

Mike's hard eyes were softened by a look of admiration for the old ex-con. "How do you like him?" Mike said to me. "He says he just couldn't stand there and let the hop-head blow the rest of us down. He never even mentioned himself."

He turned back to Bender, and grinned at him. "I guess Guido is lucky you weren't really *mad* at him. You must have spent a lot of time practicing knife-throwing, 'way back when."

Bender nodded. "I did. The first time I got sent up, when I was just a kid of sixteen, they had me peeling potatoes in the reformatory kitchen. Whenever I wasn't hacking away at spuds, I practiced throwing knives of various sizes." He gave an embarrassed little cough. "I wasn't a very nice guy to know, back in those days."

"Well, you're all right to know now," Christie said, and a note of what sounded like actual affection warmed his voice. He drank the rest of his martini, lit a stogie, and scowled at Mike and me. "I've no intention of belittling you boys," he croaked, "but I think I was the only one who really suspected little Deirdre, right from the first."

"So," Mike said, "you really started digging into her past. Not just the routine sort of investigation like you let on to us, but a real dredging job."

"Right," Christie said, "and it was the theatrical angle that finally paid off. You remember, the night her husband was killed, Deirdre's father gave me a sort of a rough outline of her life? Told me about the dramatic schools she attended, the summer stock outfits she worked in? Well, I got to thinking. I figured if Deirdre was in cahoots with the murderer—if she wasn't just the innocent gal she seemed—then she was one of the greatest actresses since Bernhardt, even if she hadn't won any lasting fame."

The Inspector sighed, and stretched his legs out farther. "Maybe, I reasoned, she was a helluva lot more of an actress than her brief career indicated—a frustrated genius who had the stuff it took to hoodwink us. And then I got to thinking about the guy who called himself Bender, and wasn't Bender. He seemed a little too sinister to be real, too plausible to be really plausible, if you understand what I mean. So, I got to wondering if maybe he wasn't just a first-class performer, too."

"You must have had a hell of a time," Mike chuckled, "checking out all the hams Deirdre ever knew."

"Maybe you think we didn't," Christie answered. "It was just a screwy hunch I had, and I think the Commish thought I was nuts, but he let me go ahead, maybe just to humor me. We started 'way back the first year Deirdre got bit by the theatrical bug, ten-eleven years ago, when she was an apprentice actress, with an outfit called the Apple Tree Lane Players, up in Connecticut. We carried right through, up to the time she deserted the stage and married Wiandowski."

The old cop spilled ashes on his vest, twisted one leg about the other, and went on talking. "We checked every son-of-a-gun that girl was ever associated with. We accounted for guys who gave up art for money, frustrated Barrymores who are now operating filling stations in Bayonne or Patchogue, guys who have really made names for themselves in the legitimate theatre, guys who married for money, and guys who got married for love and went to work to earn money. And finally, we eliminated everybody except this Francis Guido."

"But you couldn't find Guido," Mike said, "because by the time you started looking, Guido was making himself hard to find."

"Right. But I'll tell you this, Michael: once we decided Guido was the boy we were looking for, we really dug. Inside of four days, I coulda told you where he was nearly every minute of his life—up to about eight months ago. And then, temporarily, we lost him."

Mike drained his glass, got out one of his perfectos, and began to strip the cellophane from his cigar. "We're all relaxed, Chris," he said, "and we like to hear nice stories. But a complete biography of that junked-up psycho is something I wouldn't like to hear. When did he and Deirdre first meet, and where?"

"About ten years ago," Christie said, "at a summer stock company in Massachusetts. Deirdre was just a kid, and Guido was already thirty-five, but it didn't make any difference; it was a thing with them, right from the start, according to the info I got.

"Guido," the Inspector continued, "seems to have been a darned good actor, but a guy who never got a break. He was

handsome, with this wonderful voice of his, and real talent, but he seems to have always been erratic in a brilliant, crazy kind of way, and he acquired his junk habit early. He was just dubbing along with this summer company when Deirdre met him. He didn't even have a job when the summer season was over.

"But spoiled Deirdre, the rich man's kid, didn't give a hoot. She'd have probably married the guy, if Thorne hadn't dragged her off to South America, for a sort of cooling-off process. Thorne didn't know Guido, but he'd heard about her having an affair with some older guy, so he took her away, and broke it off."

"Temporarily, he broke it off," I said.

Christie nodded. "Temporarily, is right, Steve. . . . So Deirdre went to S.A., and Guido went into the army, Uncle Sam not being too choosy at the moment, and they never met until after the girl had married Wiandowski. That marriage was just sort of a spur-of-the-moment affair as we've been told, but anyway, she'd no sooner met Guido again than the old affair was on again, hot and heavy. She was quite a girl. She even introduced Guido to her husband, and the three of them ran around together—and plotted the extortion deal."

"And Wiandowski probably didn't know about Deirdre's affair with her old friend," Mike observed. "Well, they say a cuckolded husband is always the last to know."

"Wiandowski," Christie said drily, "was probably too busy to know, too busy making cuckolds out of other husbands. He really played the field, that boy, including an affair with Deirdre's widowed sister. He threw her over, which was one reason why, for a while, I suspected the sister of complicity in his murder. But it turned out she was just a more or less harmless dipso."

Carla carried the cocktail shaker over and refilled Christie's glass. He thanked her, took a sip of the drink, and leaned back in his chair again, looking slyly at me. When he spoke again, it was in a deliberately careless voice. "The cockeyed thing about the whole thing," he said, "was that Guido was in jail the night he killed Wiandowski."

Mike jumped half out of his chair. "Guido was what?" he shouted. "You gone crazy, Chris, or are Carla's drinks that powerful?"

Christie smirked at him. "*Officially,* Guido was in jail, Mike. He'd swindled a dame out of some money upstate, and he was doing a year in the county jail, for fraud—in a county jail, incidentally, just about twenty miles from the house we found Marty Bender in."

Carla spoke, in perplexity and mild exasperation. "I know I'm not very bright about these things, Inspector, but tell me how he could be in Bayard Thorne's apartment when he was in jail?"

Christie beamed at her. "Well," he said, "it seems that the sheriff and the head jailer up there were a little lax in their duties. For a price, Guido was allowed considerable liberty. Like he could go into New York whenever he had to, keep himself supplied with heroin, and carry on assorted criminal activities, such as murder. The jailer, naturally, didn't know how bad Guido was, but the guy with the keys was really a broad-minded guy, and just as long as Guido checked in for an occasional roll-call, it was okay."

"It doesn't seem possible!" my wife said.

"Well, things like that do sometimes happen," Christie answered. "Remember, a couple of years ago, a big-shot mobster was doing time over in Jersey, and he went in and out of the clink just about as he pleased? And what about the bookie who did a year on Rikers Island in New York, and he had more special visits in one year than practically all the other prisoners combined? If you ask me, that character probably got out for an occasional airing, too."

"*O tempora!*" exclaimed Mike, the literate slob. "*O mores!*"

Christie heaved out a savage, reflective grunt. "What a spot for Guido to hide out in," the old man said, "a nice, comfortable jail to hole up in, whenever he wasn't engaged in an active life of crime. Even Wiandowski didn't know where he was, didn't know that he was doing time. Only two people in New York knew it—Deirdre and Emma Gansil. The maid had overheard Deirdre and Guido talking about it once, when

Guido came to the house during the absence of both Thorne and Wyatt-Wiandowski."

"And that's why Emma had to die," I said.

"Yeah, that's why Emma had to die. She and Deirdre had a row about Guido, and Emma sealed her own doom, as the old saying is, by threatening to tell Bayard Thorne."

"I don't see how Deirdre could have brought herself to do it," I said, "even as twisted as she was. The old woman was completely devoted to her, and she'd been with her for years. It must have seemed like—well, almost like, killing her own mother."

Christie grinned his ferocious grin. "Don't forget she was willing to stand right there while Guido killed her father," he said. "And besides, she really hated Emma Gansil. Like I suspected, Emma'd been brought in when Deirdre was almost a baby, not just as an ordinary nurse, but because Deirdre was even abnormal as a tot, and had to have special care. Thorne told me, this morning, about the tantrums Deirdre used to throw when she was little more than a baby. He said there didn't seem much point in mentioning them before. Him and his rotten pride!"

The old man sighed, and scratched a leathery cheek. "The old-time animal trainers used to use dogs to help keep their big cats in line. Lions and tigers would fear a dog that pushed them around, long after they were big enough to kill the dog with one swipe. When the lion or the tiger got over being afraid of the dog, he was usually a real mean animal. Well, Deirdre's relationship with Emma was a lot like that."

"But Deirdre needn't have killed Emma herself," Mike commented. "Guido was in town that Sunday—it was Guido who nicked Big Joe, down in the village."

Christie nodded. "But Deirdre took a lot less risk than he would have. *She* knew how to get into the house and summon the maid, with a minimum of risk. And anyway, according to what Guido told us this morning, it was Deirdre who really plotted everything, and she practically insisted on killing Emma, to prove her love by placing herself in as much jeopardy as her lover was in, so says Guido. But if you ask

me, what Deirdre really wanted to prove was that she had as much crazy guts as he did."

His melancholy eyes brooded on the martini glass, and his wrinkled face twisted into a sad frown. "This affair of theirs was the hottest thing since a French couple I read about named Heloise and Abelard," he said, "except that the Frenchies weren't psychopathic personalities. Deirdre and her paramour had all the romanticism of theatrical people, fouled up with a streak of homicidal mania, delusions of grandeur, and two of the worst superiority complexes since Hitler and Mussolini. They were a classical example of water reaching its own level, a frightening example of what can happen when two extra-bright psychos meet.

"And bright they were, too," he continued, "even if both of them were warped as hell. Look at the way they handled almost all the details, the cold-blooded way they doped everything out up until the time they got caught. Wiandowski, of course, dreamed up the original plan, when he saw how much Bender and Guido resembled each other, and it was probably his own delightful idea that he should pretend he'd been part of the old Chicago mob that he never belonged to, and he probably planned the phony shake-down of himself, hoping that Bayard Thorne would pay-off for him, or hoping to soften up Ageld and Carson, by letting them know that an extortion attempt had been made. That much of the pitch was Wiandowski's, but the rest of the brain-child was the work of Guido and Deirdre."

"And Wiandowski was marked for death," Mike said softly, "and he helped matters along by obligingly handing Guido a loaded gun. Considering the fact that Deirdre and Guido must have already planned to murder the husband, sooner or later, her demonstrations after the death were something of a dramatic triumph, huh?"

"They were full of what the critics call ver-sim-il-itude," Christie said. "The girl really was a good actress. She maybe slipped up a little, showing the kind of reaction she did when she found out what kind of a mama Stanley Wiandowski had, but her superiority psychosis, or whatever you call it, was

stronger than her desire to act, at that point. Funny, isn't it, how somebody who'd just as soon kill a whole mob of people, could be such a snob?"

"But weren't she and Guido virtually flying blind after he murdered Wiandowski?" Carla asked. "They couldn't communicate with the girl under constant surveillance, and it's pretty evident that poor Emma Gansil wouldn't help them, either. Of course, there was that one phone call Deirdre got in the upstairs apartment, but unless they used code words, they couldn't have told each other much in that."

"Guido says that call wasn't of much significance," Christie answered. "Except to reassure him that Deirdre hadn't been placed in protective custody, and, of course, to keep the idea going that the killer was still at large, and still very dangerous. He was wise enough to know that the phone was tapped, and little Deirdre knew it, too." He shot me a narrow-eyed look, grinned an evil grin. "Of course, there's probably a reason why she called Steve after she got that call."

The martinis had wrapped me in a nice, warm, custom-made pink cloud, and the cloud must have had an armor-plate lining, too, because I didn't feel Christie's implied gibe. "She thought I was just a gullible slob," I said, "and why don't you be man enough to say so, instead of beating around the conversational bush? She thought I was just dumb enough to fill her in about everything that was going on. Well, I wasn't that dumb—not quite."

"I daresay you had your suspicions," Christie said magnanimously, "at least till she clipped Tollefson, and you thought she meant to clip him, instead of you. Anyway, a case like this one was clear out of you boys' line, and I'm surprised you did as well as you did."

The old cop hiccoughed, stared reflectively at the floor. "That Guido!" he said, "that junky! The kind of nerve a load of that happy dust can give a man! Take the way he handled the pay-off that never came off. Deirdre called him, at the jail, mind you, while you, Steve, were playing tag with Tollefson, out in the night. That lug, Tollefson, incidentally, didn't know any more than he claimed to know, and the

cops picked him up last night, hiding in an old shack near the lake."

Christie halted his speech, stared at the liquid remaining in his glass, and then spoke in a voice that was a trifle thick. "Where the devil was I? I'm not used to guzzling this kind of stuff, and it's sort of sneaked up on me."

"You," Mike said, "were about to give a dissertation on the manner in which Guido handled the abortive pay-off, or so I think."

"Yeah," Christie said, "well! The guy slept in the county jail office, which was convenient in case he came in late, and all this privileged character had to do was to reach out his hand to answer her call. He knew the fat was in the fire, soon's she told him what had happened, and he only had a couple of minutes to make plans in, because common sense told him he wasn't going to be able to contact Deirdre again.

"So," Christie said, emphasizing his words, "the son-of-a-gun just told her to hang tough, to stick along with you and Steve and me, and do what *we* told her to do. How do you like that?"

"I don't," Mike said, "but the guy did have nerve, even if it was backed up by dope."

"He sat in a bar across the street from the terminal most of the next afternoon," Christie said. "The bar where he lined up his messenger. When he was ready to go he took a suitcase he was carrying, sneaked into the ladies' room in the bar, got his female disguise out of the suitcase, put it on, and walked out. He had a couple of big shopping bags checked over in Grand Central. In one of them was a blue canvas overnight bag—the very kind he'd told us to get. It was stuffed with paper, all set for the switcheroo.

"Deirdre recognized the man she'd slept with so often, of course, even with his disguise. She sat down beside him, and Guido was all set to switch the bags, but she told him—even while she was pretending to coo at the kid who was with the old man on the other side of her—that the money was up in Mike's office, and that he'd have to go there after it."

"How did he shake Mrs. Delaney, incidentally?" I asked.

"I saw her glued on to his tail, following him and his luggage onto a Connecticut train."

Christie chuckled. "Mrs. Delaney," he said, "has been on the force for twenty years, but he made a monkey out of her. He simply got onto the train ahead of the red-cap, then jumped back into the vestibule and let the red-cap go ahead. The guy carrying the bags was a tall, big fella, and when Mrs. D. got into the crowded car, he blocked her supposed view of the person she was tailing. She assumed Guido was still ahead of the porter, and she followed through three cars before she knew she'd been fooled. So, then Guido jumped off the rattler and got out and grabbed a cab and rode to Mike's office, like we figured he would, if he didn't get scragged in the depot."

"Now wait a minute," Mike said, "wait a minute. We figured some larcenous character would show up after the money, but we weren't sure who. You were even up in the air, after I told you about Deirdre conking Tollefson up at the lake. You weren't even sure she was guilty yourself, after that."

"I was pretty darned sure," Christie growled, "and don't mess up my story with irrelevant remarks. The point is, Guido did get there, and you came within an inch of getting murdered, too, since you insisted on not having any cops around."

The Inspector looked at Carla and smiled. "Mike figured the money in the safe was a good bait, but not enough to lure the killer in if the scene was all messed up with cops. He figured if the murderer was cagy enough not to get nabbed in Grand Central, he wasn't going to flatfoot his way into a nest of cops in the office building, either. Which is why we decided to let Mike play practically a lone hand, even if it was risky as hell."

"I didn't know much of anything, really," Mike said, "because, like Christie says, this kind of a caper is out of our line. But I knew that *someone* who saw me stick the money in the office safe was an accomplice of the killer's. And I knew the killer would come after the dough."

Carla, seated beside me, had her forehead wrinkled in frowning thought. "There's one thing I don't understand," she said. "What about Deirdre? What did Guido think was going to happen to her after he switched the bags—just supposing she had gone to Grand Central with the money? How was she going to explain it, the switch I mean? Did he think the police would believe her if she wound up with a bag filled with paper, and told them she hadn't been aware that the switch took place?"

Christie contorted his face into a fond, hideous smile. "Smart girl you've got for a wife, Steve," he said to me. "The truth is, Guido didn't plan any escape route for Deirdre, and if you ask me, he didn't want her to get away. He may have talked big about his love for the girl, but a megalomaniac psychopath like him can't think of anything but himself, really. When the chips were down, the rat came out in Francis Guido. I think he intended to take off for Mexico, or somewhere, and leave the girl to fry.

"Of course, that ain't the way Guido talked this morning," Christie went on. "According to him, they were going to convert the dough they got into a mess of raw heroin that would sell for a half million bucks, more or less, retail, and then get out of everything crooked, and go to some place—Jamaica, I think he said—and build a theatre of their own. After he, Guido, took himself a cure first, to kick his habit, for good and all.

"If you ask me, Guido was snowing me with that story. He changed all of his plans, immediately, when Deirdre showed up at the Confidential office, after she looked like a cinch never to get there. I think he figured on rubbing out you guys, and Bender and Thorne, then taking care of the girl later. But I'm sure he knew she'd never have got out of Grand Central, barring an accident."

"Accident!" I exclaimed. "Why, you old reprobate, she had an assist—an assist from the New York police department, in the person of Whelan."

Christie had the grace to appear somewhat embarrassed. "I'm not trying to apologize for Whelan," he said, after a

moment of rueful silence, "and we're really going to throw the book at that character. New York's got the finest police department in the world, but it'd be finer if cops were really compelled to take periodical physical examinations. They're supposed to, but there are ways of getting out of the exams."

"Could you pass one if you had to take one?" I asked.

"I doubt if I could," Christie answered calmly. "But it's a cinch that Whelan wouldn't have been on active duty if a doc had looked him over during the past few months."

"There's something I'd like to ask," I said, "if you won't be breaching any ethics—any more ethics—by answering. Where was Bayard J. Thorne on the afternoon Gansil was murdered?"

Christie shuffled his feet on the carpet, blew rank smoke through his pear-shaped nose. "I'll tell you how it was with Thorne," he said. "Thorne had a girl friend—a lady friend, I should say—a middle-aged highly respectable dame whose husband's been in a sanitarium for years. The lady wouldn't divorce the guy while he's sick and helpless, and her affair with Bayard was a terrifically hush-hush thing. Thorne didn't know that we knew all about the affair—hell, I've had somebody tailing him every minute since Wiandowski was murdered—and we knew where he was all day the day Emma Gansil got hers. But Thorne was afraid his friend's name might get kicked around in the papers, so he wouldn't tell that he was with her. Always the gent, Bayard Thorne.

"They didn't leave poor Thorne much, did they?" the Inspector asked, and there was a note of genuine sadness in his tone. "He and Deirdre never did hit it off, but I think he loved her a lot, in his way, and look how she finished up? He's old, and his career is shot to pieces, and his whole life—or what's left of it—is ruined. He's like that fella in the Shakespeare play, King Lear. Only, he's got nothing left but the lady lush, Helen, to comfort him, and if you ask me, she's one helluva Cordelia."

He set his empty glass down carefully on the carpet and uncoiled his ungainly length from the chair. "They were quite a pair, this Deirdre and Guido," Christie said, "quite a pair.

But like all megalomaniacs, they were too smart for their own good. I think I suspected the girl as soon as I saw all those peach-colored mirrors, and read the titles of those books by her bed. That sort of ego isn't healthy. And then, after I went to the trouble of *reading* some of the books she had, I was darned sure she was queer, especially after I found out Wyatt-Wiandowski never read anything except the papers and detective magazines. Well, I got to be getting along."

"Don't hurry away, Chrissie," I said, "Carla will make another shaker of martinis and—"

"And I'd be skunk-drunk by the time I got to the Commissioner's house," Christie interrupted, "and wouldn't that be just swell? Me and Martin got to at least show up there sober."

"Me?" Martin Bender asked, his eyebrows raised in surprise. "Did you say me, Inspector?"

"You," Christie said. "You're going to the Commish's house for dinner with me. I waited to tell you, because I wanted to surprise you, but I got another surprise I might as well spring now, too—a real pièce de résistance of a surprise. The Commissioner's wife's brother is a big contractor who's got a big estate in Pennsylvania, with kennels and riding stables and what not. He wants a guy who likes animals, and there's a job there that's yours for the taking."

Martin Bender seemed to be walking on air when he and Christie left a few moments later.

Mike Zacharias sat quietly after they had gone, staring at the floor with a somber look in his eyes.

"Well, it was a helluva slice of life, anyway," he said finally, "a revolting hunk of humanity with the hair on it. A wonderful set of characters: a heel like Wiandowski, a babe who's beautiful and rotten and crazy as a peach orchard pig, and a bright boy who'd turn a torch on his own mother for a dollar, net." Mike sighed and waved a big hand in the direction that Bender had gone. "Well, thank God for Marty Bender, anyway. He, at least, gives me a feeling that I'm not living in a world that's entirely dirty and mad."

"Guido's certain to go to the chair, isn't he?" Carla asked.

Mike shrugged. "That depends. When Christie and the D.A.

talked to him last night and this morning, Guido was pretty well loaded with heroin, and in love with the sound of his own voice. The D.A.'s got Guido as good as fried already, but Guido will get himself an attorney, and they'll have other plans. I'd lay fifty to one he shows up in court gibbering like an idiot, trying to get himself into the criminal insane asylum, in order to beat the chair. Well, he may be able to fake his way into Mattawan, but he'll have a helluva time faking his way out. You ask me, one way or the other, Bright Boy Guido is going out of circulation—permanently."

Mike stood up, then, saying he had to go. Carla asked him if he wouldn't stay for dinner, but the big guy grinned and shook his head. "Gotta go home and get acquainted with my own wife," he said, "before she starts shopping for another husband." He turned to me, half floored me with a playful belt on the shoulder, and growled, "Get a lot of rest, kid—just relax and take it easy. And you aren't expected to show up at the office tomorrow morning until nine-thirty."

Mike went down the hall and out the front door, and my amazing wife looked at me with a strange expression and suddenly threw herself into my arms. She kissed me on the lips, hard, and then clung to me and panted in a fierce voice: "I want you to promise me something, Steve! I want you to promise that you'll never let our son drift away from us, the way Guido must have drifted away from his parents!"

"Why, sure, honey," I said, stroking her hair, "I promise. You just wait until we have one, and I'll do a real job of raising him."

"We're going to have one," Carla said, "soon." I looked at her with my mouth open, gaping in amazement, and she spoke with a note of asperity in her voice. "I didn't have a chance to tell you—I mean, that is, I haven't had a chance to really tell you anything, the way you've been running around like crazy, and never staying home long enough to listen to anything. But the doctor says we're going to have a child—practically any minute."

"Any minute!" I screamed.

Carla looked at me and smiled. "I said practically any

minute," she said, "but it'll be seven and a half months, really, to be more or less exact. But the way time flies with you and me, what's seven and a half months but a minute, darling?"

"What indeed," I said.

I was kissing her when I smelled the evening roast burning. I didn't tell her that I smelled the roast burning; I just held her closer and let the meat go up in smoke. After all, what was ten dollars' worth of prime beef, at a time like that? And also, considering the way Carla cooked most of our meat, there was a chance that the roast might taste a little better if it were well done—at least on the outside.

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