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by
J. F. HUTTON

No. 55
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NIGHTMARE

by Edward S. Aarons

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Two Complete DETECTIVE BOOKS

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NIGHTMARE

By EDWARD S. AARONS

At first he thought of himself as an "innocent bystander," the poor guy who catches the slug the law was throwing at crime, or vice versa. Only, Arnold Bayless caught more than a slug and a free ambulance ride. Instead, he got a quick bump on the wig and came to with a murder rap. Then they really began to shove him around; interested parties kidnaped him from the police, making the rap solid. Nolly's friends kept rescuing him, but the pressure kept mounting—until Nolly saw he'd been promoted to the "fall guy" class—and the next label could be "dead man." He'd better do something! And so, with gunflame lighting his trail, Nolly began stalking the city's rat-runs, in a grim quest for the "pal" who was trying to buy him an electric chair. *Copyright, 1948, by Edward S. Aarons. Regular edition \$2.00.*

SELLER OF SOULS

By J. F. HUTTON

Don Paulson decided there was something too sleek about Menke Enterprises. Ray Menke, who had hired the war-hardened Don as his ace trouble-shooter, was getting his fingers into too many other men's pies. The sudden, ghastly murder of the old curio-dealer trained the police spotlight on Don, and Don, noting how nice he fit the frame, went into action. Ducking the clubbed revolver, the glinting knife, the whining bullet, he probed for cause and motive—slowly but surely laying bare a past that not only the distinguished Ray Menke but others wanted buried. But someone else was at work, and not with shovel and pencil, either. Almost too late, Don discovered the plan. For each grisly corpse told a chapter in an unspeakable history—and Don himself was to be the final installment! *In advance of publication in book form.*

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THE NEXT ISSUE OF TWO COMPLETE DETECTIVE BOOKS WILL BE ON
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NIGHTMARE



By

EDWARD S. AARONS



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AFTERWARDS, WHEN IT WAS all over, it came back to Nolly Bayless in one-shots, in kaleidoscopic scenes and tableaux that were like shell holes on the surface of his memory. Some of that Friday he wanted to forget, and some of it he struggled to recall for many anxious hours.

The morning was all right. He remembered the sunlight that poured through the bedroom window when the alarm went off, and the bright pattern on the counterpanes of the twin beds. It was autumn, and the big floral design on the window curtains looked cheerful in the bright crispness. Susan turned over, her hair a gleaming fan on the crumpled pillow slip.

"Nolly?" she said childishly.

"I'm up," he told her.

"I'm so hungry!"

"I know."

He went about his morning chores as usual, preparing breakfast in the shining kitchen and bringing a tray in to Susan, who looked lovely even when half asleep, like a spoiled child who can charm you into overlooking her petulance. Her blue eyes were enormous in her Dresden doll face, and her tiny bare shoulders were smoothly perfect. Everything in the apartment, from the delicate Queen Anne chairs to the Renaissance fireplace, was chosen to accent her miniature loveliness, except perhaps for Nolly's own gangling clumsy presence. He always felt clumsy with Susan, and he always told himself he was lucky to have her.

He took in the milk and walked Loopy Lu, the liver and white cocker spaniel, then kissed Susan on her flushed, drowsy cheek and caught the usual subway downtown to the Globe Finance office on Du-

gan Street, and the morning settled down to its usual routine.

He could remember all that very well, because it was like every other Friday morning for the past five years.

At noon Nolly made out the payroll and tallied the cash in the vault. Globe Finance engaged in more than household loans, being licensed to issue bonds, lend on mortgages, and act as a savings society. The office was in effect a small banking establishment, with teller's cages and a vault in the rear, behind Nolly's office. The cash tallied twenty thousand, three hundred dollars and sixty-six cents, except for what was immediately necessary in the interviewer's tills.

Mr. Wright, the president of Globe, interrupted Nolly's preparation for lunch. Ken Wimbaugh, trouble-shooter and investigator for the firm, was with the president's elegant figure.

"You come with me, Bayless," said Wright to Nolly. "Get your lock-bag."

Nolly said, "Yes, sir," and wondered why Ken Wimbaugh winked behind Wright's impeccable back. They went to the National Harvester Bank, down Dugan Street, where Wright drew twenty thousand more in cash, which went into Nolly's leather case. Ken guarded their return to the office, and the money was stowed in the vault.

"Be on hand tomorrow morning, Bayless. Ted Lomax is coming in from Detroit for these funds. He called for cash. Why, why anybody should want cash on Saturday, Heaven only knows!"

The other officemen—Emmett Pillman, Ken Wimbaugh, and Valentine Douglas—were already eating when Nolly reached Jacqueline's, across the street and joined them. Nolly had his usual noonday meal,

a peanut-butter sandwich and a milkshake. The other fellows had beer. They talked about the World Series, and how the weather was unusually snappy for so early in the fall, and about the lousy situation in Europe, a little over a year after most of them had returned from overseas service. It was decided that nobody wanted another war for anything. Then they went back to the Globe Finance office for the rest of the afternoon.

WELL and good. He remembered all that. It wasn't too unusual for Mr. Wright to leave early, either, his face smooth and inscrutable behind his military moustache and massaged jowls. Gladys, his secretary, trailed out after him, looking important and secretive. There wasn't anything unusual, either, in handing out the pay envelopes, and then withstanding the invitation to join the other fellows in a cocktail over at Jacqueline's.

Nolly rarely joined them in their after-hours drink. He weighed his pay envelope in his hand, torn by the cajoling of Ken, Val and Emmett Pillman. On the other hand, there was the necessity of getting straight home to Susan and Loopy Lu. Every night he walked Loopy Lu to the bakeshop, the delicatessen, and the local florist's for the table centerpiece. On payday nights, Susan insisted on more promptness than usual.

"I'd better not," Nolly said with finality.

Valentine Douglas winked at the others. Even Emmett Pillman, bald and ruddy, joined in their grin. They were all good guys. They meant well. They had no real desire to cause Nolly any domestic difficulties. But they were all single, and they just didn't understand. Once married, you learned to roll with the punches. If you tried to stand up to every little issue, the accumulated weight of them would soon batter you down. Susan, for all her delicate size, had an iron will. Not that Nolly no longer loved her. But there were some things that could have been improved upon.

As if he'd been reading Nolly's mind, Val Douglas said: "I'll bet you don't even open your pay envelope yourself, Nolly."

Nolly grinned defensively. "Why should I? I know what's in it. I really can't go with you fellows."

They had paused in the outer office, where the teller's cages glistened brassily and the marble floor made their voices echo in the gathering gloom. Timken, the night watchman, came down the main hall and checked the doors on the Hommeyer Merchandising Company, a mail-order house that shared the rest of the floor with Globe Finance. Val Douglas shrugged into his topcoat and said:

"You ought to assert yourself, Nolly. That little Susan has you wrapped around her pinkies, but good."

"Maybe he likes it," Ken said. "Susan is O. K."

Val Douglas grunted. He was a bear of a man, who had once played professional football and bore the scars of the gridiron on his broad, homely face. A doting mother had christened him on St. Valentine's day, but you couldn't object to his name, especially when standing next to his massive six-feet three frame. He was no fashion plate, like Ken Wimbaugh. Wimbaugh held a private operative's license, in addition to being investigator for Globe, and there was a hard competence about the man. Ken was saying:

"Look, you guys, we don't have Nolly's responsibilities. Let him go home, if he must—that is if he wants to."

Emmett Pillman said: "But just a short one, Nolly. A man's entitled to at least five minutes of his own, even if he is married."

Emmett, chief interviewer for the loan applicants, was well past forty, older than the other three by at least ten years. He was bald and fat and his blue serge suit needed perpetual pressing. He had worn the same necktie ever since Nolly could remember.

"I'll see to it that you're not late, Nolly," Val added.

Nolly didn't deny the tug of temptation. He was only an occasional drinker, but it was the sudden upsurge of his constant need for companionship that decided him.

Susan and Loopy Lu wouldn't mind. Anyway, they'd never know.

HE WAS, after all, just an ordinary guy with an ordinary job. You wouldn't have noticed him in a crowd. Val Douglas was taller and twice as broad; Ken Wimbaugh looked far more sophisticated and even Emmett Pillman's bald head and fat countenance was more outstanding. In his early thirties, Nolly was still addressed as "young man" and didn't think much about it. He had sandy hair and freckles and a little moustache cultivated with much effort, because Susan thought it made him look distinguished. As if anything could make him look distinguished.

Nothing really started until the business of opening his pay envelope came up. He remembered that, all right, because then he wouldn't have found out about the twenty dollar raise that Susan had neglected to mention. If he hadn't found out, he would have gone on drinking with the boys. In that case, the night wouldn't have ended in murder.

He could remember everything in Jacqueline's.

He stared so long at the extra twenty in his pay envelope that Ken Wimbaugh leaned across the dark wooden table and said anxiously: "What's the matter, Nolly? Were you cut?"

"No," Nolly said. His own pay envelope came directly from Mr. Wright, a whim of the president's, and he'd never investigated it before. "No, I wasn't cut," he said.

"You look sick," Val said.

"There was a mistake. There's too much money here."

They laughed uproariously. Pillman said: "That's nothing to be so solemn about. Maybe it's a raise."

"But there'd be a slip in it, then," Nolly objected.

Ken Wimbaugh spoke over his glass of beer. "When was your last raise, Nolly? When the rest of us got ours?"

"I don't remember," Nolly said.

"Mine was about two years ago," Pillman added wryly.

"That's right," Val Douglas said. "Mine, too."

Nolly didn't say anything. If all the others had been raised then, he would

have been raised, too. But he hadn't known about it, because he always turned over his pay envelope to Susan, intact. She never had said anything about a raise. But that's what it must have been. They never made mistakes in overpayment. The tellers who gave Mr. Wright the payroll never made mistakes.

Anger was slow to rise inside him. He remembered the queer, sick feeling he had, and the sudden decision he made when Emmett Pillman suggested dinner somewhere. Nolly wasn't sure who asked him to go along. Maybe he suggested it himself. But the detail escaped him, and it was an important detail; but it slipped elusively through the fingers of his memory.

They took a taxi to the El Dorado dining room, and had cocktails before dinner. Pillman and Val chose Martinis, and Nolly followed Ken Wimbaugh in ordering a daiquiri. The rum made a warm glowing spot in his stomach, and after that things became definitely hazy.

He remembered a bottle of Scotch in a taxi going up the West Side Highway, and a night club in Westchester. He remembered the blare of polished trombones and the soft pliancy of a hostess' waist as he swung her unfamiliarly over the dance floor. Sweaty faces, strained with laughter. Smoke and noise and the hysterical stutter of swing bands . . .

Nolly wasn't sure just when the two girls had joined them. At first he thought they were Ken Wimbaugh's girls—he had a date book full of them, and they were all smartly attractive, the kind of girls you see shopping on Fifth Avenue near Radio City. He first remembered them in a cellar dive in Greenwich Village, called Sadie's Sin. He didn't recall how they got down there from Westchester. There were a lot of gaps like that. But he remembered Arlene. Nobody could forget Arlene.

SHE was tall and slender, yet not too slender, and she wore an emerald dress chosen obviously for her striking red hair. Nolly's vision was a little blurred by then. The girl's hair seemed to shimmer and undulate with deep, brush-

fire tones when she turned her head, and her voice was lovely, a deep throaty voice that got deeper when she laughed. But she didn't laugh too frequently. Not at first, anyway, when Val turned angry at her appearance.

She was seated with a group of men who looked like advertising executives, crowded in a corner booth of Sadie's Sin with their cocktails. Ken saw her and said happily, "There's Arlene. There's my baby."

"Shut up," Val said. "She's nobody's baby."

"Don't be so touchy, son. I'll do right by her."

"Leave her alone," Val said.

But the redhead had seen them and waved and gotten up and crossed the crowded, smoky room toward them. Her eyes skipped over Val and Ken and settled on Nolly. He felt a sudden, inexplicable embarrassment. He felt like a school-boy suddenly being addressed by his childhood belle.

"Who is this?" he asked.

"My sister, Arlene Scott," Val said grimly.

"Scott?" Nolly asked.

"Her professional name. She's a model."

Then she was with them, seated between bald Pillman and Ken Wimbaugh, facing Nolly and Val. Her eyes were a dark, smoky gray. She looked at Val and said, "Hello, Tiny."

She turned to Ken Wimbaugh and greeted him happily. Evidently she and Ken were friends of long standing. They discussed their last date together. Nolly felt surprise that Val had a sister like Arlene; the big redheaded man had never mentioned her before. He tried to keep his eyes away from her, but he couldn't.

As if she was aware of his reaction, her glance kept straying to meet his. And then she would stop laughing. Something happened in her eyes, something trembled at the corners of her mouth, and she would be silent, just looking at him.

Nolly was silent, too. After the first few moments, he watched her frankly. It was as if they had discovered something between them that permitted unspoken

words to be transmitted by their frequent glances. After a while, in that smoky cellar dive in the Village, she turned from Ken and asked Nolly to dance with her.

"I don't know if I can," he said.

"Yes, you can."

"I've been drinking too much. I don't usually, but——"

"You're all right. You can dance with me."

She was like thistledown in his arms. Her head came only a few inches below his, and her waist was soft and yet firm when he held her. They didn't say anything. The music was gentle. Her hand was cool and quiet in his. Nolly thought irrelevantly of Susan, and felt a pang of guilt. He couldn't dance with Susan like this.

"Val told me a lot about you," Arlene said. "He says you were quite a soldier."

"So were lots of other fellows."

"He said you were decorated by the President, but you kept all your ribbons in your pocket when you came home."

"Oh, that," Nolly said.

He was silent, holding her and moving to the rhythm of the juke box. Arlene looked up at him.

"Talk to me, Nolly," she said. "Why don't people ever call you Arnold?"

"I don't know," he said. "My wife calls me Arnold once in a while."

She said: "Yes, I know you're married. Val talks about you quite often. I asked him to bring you over, but he likes to shelter me."

Nolly laughed at the thought of anyone being sheltered from him. "I'm not a wolf," he said.

"I know you're not, Nolly."

He said suddenly: "I wish I'd met you before."

"Why?"

"A long time ago," he said.

"I know," she said.

"Maybe I'm drunk," he said.

"No, you're not. Not right now."

"I feel as if I am."

"So do I," she said.

THEY didn't get back to the table for a long time. Ken and Emmett made the gesture of rising to their feet. Val

merely scowled. He didn't say anything. Nolly felt flushed and insanely happy. He joined Ken's laugh for no reason at all.

Ken said: "I've seen everything now. Smitten by a look! And hey," he added indignantly, "she used to be my girl!"

Emmett Pillman grinned. "She's Nolly's girl, now."

Ken shrugged. "I've got plenty more." He looked around through the hazy little cafe and suddenly stood upright and called: "Hey, Delia! Hi, honey!"

Delia's hair was midnight dark, her eyes the blue of an inland lake, her figure was something that most men only dreamed about. She wore clothes that needlessly emphasized her charms. As she sat down beside Ken Wimbaugh she looked them all over very carefully, aware of Arlene beside Nolly.

Ken leaned over drunkenly to whisper in Delia's ear. She laughed and slapped at him playfully and then looked her curiosity at Nolly.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Loopy Lu," said Nolly. "It's my night to howl."

Ken introduced them. "Nolly's playing hooky tonight."

Delia eyed Arlene. "He's got quite a playmate."

Arlene drawled: "Mind your manners, Miss Midnight."

Delia pouted. "Well, I like Nolly, too." She came around the table and ran her fingers through Nolly's straw-colored hair. Her perfume was heavy and sultry. She said: "Dance with me, Nolly."

"I can't dance," Nolly said. He didn't want to leave Arlene. "I think I'm drunk."

She pouted again. "Don't you like me, Nolly?"

"Sure I like you a lot."

"Then let's make with the twinkletoes, sugar boy."

Arlene said: "Go ahead, give the girl a break."

He got up and danced with her.

AFTER — he wasn't sure just what time it was—someone suggested a night club on Fifty-second Street. He wasn't able to talk to Arlene alone again. Val was quarreling with her, arguing in a

subdued voice, and after a while Val announced that he was taking her home.

"I'll see you again, Nolly," Arlene said.

"Yes," he said. "Soon."

There didn't seem to be much left of the evening after they were gone. He wasn't sure what time it was when he and Emmett and Ken said their good-nights on the sidewalk at Emmett's place, far uptown. He was pretty drunk by then, but he remembered Ken hailing a lone cab on the dark and empty street, and bundling him inside.

"If Susan asks you where you were, say you were with me. Don't give her any details. Let her ask all the questions she wants to ask, but don't tell her anything."

"Sure," Nolly said.

"And wipe that lipstick off your face before you go in."

It was somewhere between two and three o'clock in the morning when he quietly turned the key in his apartment door and walked in. He heard a scrambling of paws and Loopy Lu greeted him with her usual hysteria. He reached down carefully and patted her, missing her head because of the way the floor seemed to lurch around under him.

"Quiet," he whispered. "You'll wake up Susan."

The apartment was dark. He didn't put on any lights as he dropped his coat and hat on the delicate antique couch and loosened his tie. He put a light on in the kitchen, however. He had a vague idea about drinking a glass of milk before going to bed. Loopy Lu followed him on eager feet and made little whining sounds in her throat, wagging her docked tail as she went to the icebox. He saw that her food bowl wasn't on the floor where it usually should be. She was unmistakably hungry. He shrugged and hummed a little tune, forgetting to be quiet, and filled the dog bowl with milk and crushed wheat biscuits and put it down on the floor. Loopy Lu went to work on it promptly.

It wasn't until he had been in the apartment for several minutes that he discovered that Susan wasn't at home.

Usually there was a tiny night light

over her vanity, which she insisted on burning all night—having a childish fear of the dark. The night light was out. When he turned on the bedside lamp, still being extremely careful not to disturb her, he saw she wasn't home to be disturbed. The twin beds were still freshly made, the counterpanes smooth and untouched. Both his and hers.

He felt incredulous. He called her name, but there was no answer. He didn't understand it. She was always at home. Once in a while she went out with girl friends, but she never stayed out this late. But he had never been away like this before, either.

Quite suddenly, he wasn't drunk at all.

He felt completely sober and a little scared. He told himself there was nothing to worry about, but there was the dark, silent emptiness of the apartment all around him, and quick worry squeezed the liquor out of his nerves.

He saw that the cocker had finished her food, but he left the bowl where it was when the telephone rang. The bell was shrill and urgent, sounding from the darkness of the living room. He moved toward it with a strange fear mounting inside him.

The voice in the receiver was hoarse and blurred.

"Bayless?"

"Yes. Who——?"

"You're wanted down at the Globe Office," the man said.

"Is this Mr. Wright?"

"Come down immediately."

"But I——"

The receiver clicked sharply. Nolly stood there, looking into the empty gloom of the apartment. Loopy Lu padded from the kitchen and sat down at his heel. He shook his head a little and wondered if he had imagined the whole thing. But it had sounded a little like the boss, Mr. Wright. But it hadn't been Susan. He picked up his hat and topcoat and put them on. He was downstairs before he thought he should have left a note for Susan.

He took a taxi instead of the owl trains on the subway. He felt he needed the fresh air that blew across the Hudson on the West Side Highway. He still felt a

little drunk and confused and worried about Susan's absence.

Dugan Street was cloaked in early morning calm. The street was dark and deserted; the business buildings towered emptily up to the night sky. Jacqueline's was long closed. The taxi stopped in the shadow of the curb across from it, and the cabby said:

"Wait for you, boss?"

There was a dim light visible in the big Globe windows. Somebody was there.

"No, thanks," Nolly said.

He went inside, and the building swallowed him like some silently waiting monster. The big front doors were locked, but he used his personal key on a glass side door and went up the broad flight of stairs from the building lobby. A night light on the stairway, left for the guidance of the watchman, helped him find his way up past the Hommeyer Merchandising Company. Their carts cluttered the broad passage, loaded with parcels for the mail. His footsteps echoed through the marble corridor. He pushed at the grilled doors to the Globe Finance office, and the doors weren't locked. He went inside—and the rest was darkness.

Darkness shot through with insinuating perfume, a crazy cacophony of sound, winking lights, pinwheels, freezing cold, illness, sudden pain, giddy laughter. There was a clock in it somewhere, with hands that spun crazily back and forth. In place of numerals, the hours were indicated by faces of people he knew, office workers and neighbors, yammering at him with silent mouths. Nolly sat on the minute hand of the clock and Susan sat on the hour hand, and every time he passed her, she tried to grab at him as if he were a ring on a merry-go-round. She kept screaming something in his ear, something that was whipped away by a hurricane of white wind before he could understand her.

That was where the nightmare began.

II

HE OPENED HIS EYES AND watched the stairs angling up and away from him in a worm's-eye view,

each step marching with geometric precision up into a dark infinity. There was dust on the rubber treads, and he lay still for a while studying the edge of the step on which his head rested. An indistinct humming sound was in his ears. He didn't seem to have a body at all, just his head, twisted rather uncomfortably on the lowest tread of a tall, narrow flight of dark stairs.

Then he moved, and pain shot through his scalp and down one shoulder. He was sprawled on a stair landing, as if he had fallen down head first. A dim yellow light shone down steadily from a vast distance above. He untangled his legs and hauled himself up to a sitting position and his stomach promptly went back on the merry-go-round again.

Someone shook his shoulder. He opened his eyes again, with a great effort, and peered up at the high ceiling light. It was very quiet. His eyes didn't focus properly, and the girl was only a blurred outline bending over him.

"Who are you?" he muttered.

"I'm Arlene," she said.

"You're kidding."

"Why should I be kidding?"

"Because she was too good to be true."

The girl said: "Nolly, you remember me. Arlene Douglas. I was with you at Sadie's Sin."

HE saw her distinctly now. She was leaning anxiously over him, her red hair full of dark, shimmering undertones reflecting the dull light. Her face was pale. Her cloth coat was open, revealing the same emerald dress she'd worn at the night club. She was clinging to the stair bannister as he sat bowed on the steps; her enormous green eyes were anxious.

"Where is Val, Nolly?" she asked.

"I don't know," Nolly said. "How should I know?"

"I was hoping you met him here."

"Here?"

"The Globe Finance Building." Arlene's voice was tight with impatience. "I think you fell down the stairs, Nolly. I just found you this minute, as you started to wake up. You have a nasty bump on your head."

"Somebody hit me as I came in," he said.

"Hit you? Who?"

"I don't know," he said. "I feel awful."

"Nolly," she said, "what are you doing here, anyway?"

"Somebody called me—after I got home. It wasn't Val, was it?"

She looked worried again. "I don't know. He was worried about something; I don't know what it was. He said you were all being followed—you and Ken and Emmett Pillman."

"Where are they?" Nolly asked.

"I don't know. Val insisted on taking me home. He said he was coming back here. I waited an hour, and when he didn't come back or call me, I drove over. The street door was open and you were here on the steps. I thought I heard somebody else, too, but I guess I was mistaken."

"Somebody else?"

"Well, a funny kind of noise, from up there." She pointed up the stairs to the marble corridor leading to the Globe offices. "It must have been my imagination. Are you sure you didn't see Val anywhere around?"

"I don't remember anything," Nolly muttered.

He stood up. His legs trembled under him, and he walked with a decided limp. His right shoe was missing.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"After three."

Nolly shivered. "Susan will never forgive me."

"I wish we could find my brother," the girl said. "I've got the oddest feeling that something is wrong."

"I feel it, too," Nolly said.

He was quite sober as he climbed the stairs. The ankle of his unshod foot throbbed with every step he took. He found his shoe half way up to the top of the stairs and picked it up, but he didn't pause to put it on.

Another light burned behind the barred, pebbled glass doors to the Globe Finance offices. It was brighter than the usual night light, and there was no reason for it to be there at three o'clock in the morning. Uneasiness crept along his nerves as

he palmed the heavy bronze door handle. It yielded silently with no wild, brassy alarm from the burglary system. He went inside, the girl close at his heels.

HIS topcoat was neatly folded on the worn, walnut bench just inside the door. The wide room was empty, the tellers' cages shut tight and the interviewer's desk, behind a walnut railing, looked shiny and barren. His eyes leaped to his hat, lying on its brim in a far corner near the filing cabinets. At three in the morning, the place had an unhealthy air of desertion. Sounds came muted through the big plate-glass windows—a taxi horn, the distant rumble of the elevated train, the clank of a mailbox as someone posted a letter.

Nolly went through the gate in the railing and picked up his hat from the corner, put it on, dropped his shoe on the receptionist's desk, then went back and picked up his topcoat. He didn't know what to do. His hands were sweating, and his mind felt numb. He couldn't think straight.

"You said you heard a noise up here," he told the girl.

"I don't know what it was," Arlene answered. Her eyes were fixed on the glass partition at the back of the room. "I told you how it was. I was worried about Val, and I came here to find him because he thought something was wrong."

He didn't want to go through the glass door into the inner office, but he knew he had to. He pushed behind the teller's wickets, limping clumsily on his stockinged foot.

"Val?" he called. Then: "Ken? Emmett?"

A gooseneck lamp shone dimly on Ken Wimbaugh's desk, shrouding the rest of the paneled office in deep shadow. Another doorway in the back wall led to Nolly's office and the vault. A second door, richly paneled in bleached oak and decorated with Henry Wright's name on it in modern silver letters stood slightly ajar, opening from the outer room. Nolly halted in the doorway so suddenly that the girl bumped into him. Her breath made a whispering sound in the stillness. Her

arm came up, pointing with a gloved hand toward Wright's open door.

"Look," she whispered.

There was a rapid trembling of tiny muscles at the corners of her mouth. Nolly's glance slid off her gloved fingers to the floor of Mr. Wright's doorway. A man's leg was visible in the shadows beyond the entrance. The shoe looked new, a sturdy London cordovan, and the socks above were a conservative blue silk. Fine gray pinstripe trousers were crumpled above the ankle.

Nolly said in a queer, harsh voice: "Stay here, Arlene."

He didn't want to go forward, but he had to, limping along with the topcoat slung over one arm, his straw hair looping out from under the hat he had slapped on the back of his head. Light crept in ahead of him, timidly, fleetingly. Everything wavered as he paused in the doorway.

His eyes moved with numb despair, touching the rumpled gray trousers, the silk cravat, the gray immaculate face and blue eyes, faded in death. It was Henry Wright, president of Globe Finance. He was staring blindly at the coffered ceiling of his private office, his head near the heavy executive desk that was lighted by a tiny lamp standing on its shining surface. The back of his head was battered in, and dark snakes of congealing blood wriggled out from under his skull. A neat homburg hat lay on the floor near the silvered hair, just beyond reach of the twisted, manicured fingers of the dead man.

The heavy office safe gaped wide open and empty behind him. The girl's whisper was choked and frightened.

"Who is it, Nolly? Please—who is it?"

"Mr. Wright," he said. "The boss." He felt her body pressing behind him. "Don't come in here."

"Is he dead?"

"I guess so," Nolly said. He was shivering. "Yeah, he's dead. Somebody beat his head in."

"But——"

"The safe has been opened, too." He used the arm that held his topcoat to wipe his brow, pushing his hat farther back on his head. His freckles stood out individually on his pale face. "Somebody cleaned

out the safe. There was forty thousand dollars in it."

"Forty thousand!"

Nolly groaned: "I wish I could remember—"

The girl said quickly: "It wasn't Val. It couldn't have been Val!" She moved as if to push past him, into the inner office where the dead man lay, and Nolly put out an arm to stop her, sensing hysteria in her voice. The topcoat slid from his arm, and something hit the floor with a metallic thump. They both stared at the ugly thing that glinted blue-black at their feet.

HE STOOPED and picked it up. It felt heavy in his hand. It was a big Colt automatic. He knew very little about guns, but he recognized this as an Army .45. He sniffed at the muzzle, but there was no smell to it. When he looked up, his eyes met Arlene's. She regarded him with horror.

"Your hands," she whispered. "Look at your hands."

He looked down and saw that his fingers were gummy with congealing smears of blood. He suppressed a shudder.

"It came from the gun," he said.

"Is that the—thing that did it?"

"I guess so." He looked around for something to clean his hands, and used a scrap of paper from the nearest waste basket. There was a dictograph machine beside Wright's desk, and a rack of cylinders neatly stowed on the shelf below. The dead man's desk was scrupulously neat and dusted, empty except for a copper ashtray that held no ashes, and a framed portrait of Mrs. Wright and two superior-looking children in front of their Long Island home. Nolly looked down at his hands again, then at the tall girl. He said: "The blood was on the gun."

She said: "It was in your coat pocket, Nolly."

"That's right."

"How did it get there? Is it your gun?"

"I don't know. I've never seen it before."

There was a kind of pause between them, a measuring and calculating of pros

and cons. Evidently the girl came to a decision. She touched his arm.

"Nolly, you didn't do it," she whispered.

"Of course not," he said.

"Look in your other pockets. You don't have the money from the safe, do you?"

He didn't. He stood still, looking at her, holding the big gun in one hand, the topcoat with turned-out pockets in the other. He seemed to be waiting for her guidance. Some of the color had returned to her cheeks. Her hair was burnished copper in the dull glow from the desk lamp. From outside came the sudden blare of a taxi horn, and then far off in the distance a siren sounded through the sleeping city. The girl said:

"Somebody else did it and got away with the money."

He didn't say anything.

"It wasn't Val," she went on. "He wouldn't do such a thing. But he knew something was wrong, and after he took me home he said he was coming here to check up on things. It's like I told you, Nolly. I found you on those steps."

He didn't seem to be listening to her, but to some sound from beyond the big shimmering windows open to the night.

"I think the police are coming," he said.

They both listened to the approaching clamor of the siren. Nolly didn't move until there was no longer any doubt that it was headed their way. The girl's eyes filled with horror.

"We must get out of here," she whispered.

"We can't do that," Nolly said. He felt scared. "They'll expect us to stick around. It's the law."

The girl said: "But I didn't call the police, Nolly! Don't you understand?" He shook his head blankly, and she went on: "Somebody else called them. *You* didn't—you were out cold, on the steps. I know I didn't. So it was someone else, someone who telephoned you at home and got you down here purposely, just to knock you out and leave you here to be found. He wants the police to catch you here, Nolly."

"But I haven't done anything," Nolly said.

"They'll think you did. That gun in your pocket, and Mr. Wright dead! They'll think you fell down the steps accidentally, because you'd been drinking. And there's that open safe, and——" She paused abruptly, her voice sharpening. "Did any of the others know the combination to the vault?"

"No," Nolly said. His stomach turned over. "Just me."

"Did Mr. Wright?"

"Oh, yes. He knew it. Both of us knew it."

"Well, you see? It will look bad for you, Nolly. This is murder, and I'm not getting mixed up with the police until I find out more about it. Until I find Val, anyway. If you're smart, you'll get out with me."

"But I——"

She swung decisively for the doorway, her high heels clicking over the stone floor. Nolly started after her, struggling with the confusion that clouded his mind.

"Arlene, wait!" he called after the girl.

She didn't seem to hear. Her topcoat swirled around her legs as she ran for the stairs. The sirens were very close now, moaning to a halt nearby. But they seemed to be in the street behind the building, rather than at the front entrance.

"Arlene!" he called again.

PANIC drove him after her, dodging among the desks in his way. He scooped up his shoe as he went, but he had no time to put it on, and went hobbling across the open floor of the main office to the corridor doors. The broad hallway was empty and shadowed. The wheeled mailing carts of the Hommeyer Merchandising Company made grotesque puddles of darkness at the far end of the hallway. The girl's heels clattered on the main stairway to the street. She was already down to the landing where he had awakened. The street door shimmered blankly beyond her hurrying figure.

Nolly hobbled down after her. He wasn't running away from the police. He had just one thought in his mind: he needed Arlene Douglas to verify his story, which was better than nothing at all. He couldn't let her run away. It was the

wrong thing to do. She had to tell the police how she found him senseless on the stairs.

She was only moments ahead of him as he hopped down to the street entrance. The swinging door came back at him with reverse impetus from the girl's push. He palmed it open and limped out to the sidewalk.

At that dismal, chilly hour of the morning, the street looked oddly distorted, like an empty movie set. The tall buildings, so crowded during the daylight hours, were deserted and abandoned to the chill night wind that blew from the North River. A street light a few paces away cast a pool of congealed, buttery light on the pavement. The girl had just reached the lamp post. She wasn't running any more. She had paused and was looking back at him. Her face was alive with panic.

"Arlene!" he called. "Wait a minute!"

She just stared at him. Content that she wasn't running away any more, he knelt and slipped on his shoe. When he looked up, the car was there, a green and white coupe, a prowler car. Radio patrolmen slid from each door, moving grimly and purposely toward him.

"Run, Nolly!" Arlene cried.

One of the cops turned toward her in surprise. She wriggled away, bumped against the building wall, and ducked under his outstretched arm. He lunged, but she slipped under his guard, circling the lamp post and then taking off fleet-footedly up the sidewalk. The stockier of the two patrolmen pursued her for a dozen steps, then slowed to a halt and came walking back. Nolly hadn't moved. The cop's face was annoyed. He scowled at Nolly with thick dark brows.

"The hell with her," he said. "We'll pick her up later."

The taller of the two prowlers slapped his glove on his thigh and took Nolly's arm. "She with you?"

"No," Nolly said.

"The hell she wasn't. What's her name?"

"I don't know," Nolly said. "I don't mind going along with you, but leave her out of it."

The stockier one said: "What've you been up to, mister?"

"I'll speak to the officer in charge," Nolly said.

The two patrolmen exchanged glances. The stockier one said: "Fiske asked for all loiterers in the neighborhood. Lets march him topside, Ambie."

The tall one said: "What's your name, mister?"

"Arnold Bayless," Nolly said. "I'm cashier at the Globe."

"Hell," said Ambie. "You're the fella Fiske has been yelling for."

The shorter cop laughed.

"Let's go, killer."

III

IN A MATTER OF MINUTES, THE whole aspect of the Globe Building had changed. Lights were on all over the place, bathing the stairway and corridors in garish brilliance. Someone had shoved most of the Hommeyer carts out of the way, jamming them against the entrance to the other company's door, helter-skelter. Inside the main office of the finance company, the ceiling lights blazed down on little knots of men who moved quietly and purposefully about their duties.

A man in a gray topcoat was lounging against the pebbled glass doorway, quietly smoking. He eyed Nolly without interest as the two prowlies brought him up the stairs.

"One for Fiske," Ambie said. "This bird is the cashier."

The man in the gray coat said: "That's a hot one. Where did you boys pick him up?"

"Right outside."

"That's a hot one, all right." The man dropped his cigarette, put his heel on it, and took Nolly's arm. "Lieutenant Fiske would like a few words with you, young fellow."

There was fingerprint men already at work in Mr. Wright's private office, and other men with cameras and flashguns were exploring Val Douglas' desk and Ken Wimbaugh's corner of the room. Two others were examining the open safe without much interest. No one seemed to

be bothering much with the dead man who sprawled near the big mahogany desk

"In here," said the man in the gray coat. He prodded Nolly into his own office marked with his name and the title, *Cashier*, on the door. His office looked unfamiliar now, crowded with strange men, some in uniform and some in plain clothes. A spare man with gray hair sat at Nolly's desk, leafing through the memo calendar and listening to someone on the other end of the telephone held to his ear. His eyes flicked to Nolly and he nodded to the gray-coated man, who went out quietly, closing the door after him.

Nolly felt his throat go dry. No one spoke to him for a long moment or two. He felt his knees tremble, and he tried to control the spasmodic twitching of his leg muscles. The thin man with the gray hair listened to the telephone and answered in monosyllables and kept leafing through Nolly's records. A few of the men drifted out. A uniformed patrolman came in and whispered something in the gray man's ear, and Nolly caught the name of Fiske.

He waited. There were three of them left in the room when Fiske put down the telephone, sighed, and looked up at Nolly. His eyes were a startling, pale blue in a weatherbeaten face. His clothes were neat, his necktie a dark polka-dot, and his lean hands were hugely freckled.

"You're Arnold Bayless?" he asked quietly.

Nolly's heart thumped. "That's right."

"Cashier here."

"Yes."

"Are you the one who called us in?"

"No, I didn't call you," Nolly said.

"Was it your girl friend who called us?"

"No," Nolly said.

Fiske regarded him with quiet, speculative eyes. Nolly wished he could sit down, but the two extra chairs in his office were already occupied by detectives, and the third man leaned against the closed door and smoked a cigar, watching Fiske. None of the others looked at Nolly, except Fiske.

After a moment he took the big gun from his pocket and said: "I found this here. I think this is what killed him."

HE wasn't prepared for the reaction. The man at the door instantly slashed down with the hard edge of his palm, cracking on Nolly's wrist. Pain flared up to his elbow. He dropped the gun with an involuntary exclamation. The man in the nearest chair picked it up gingerly by the muzzle and put it on the desk in front of Fiske.

"How do like that, Lieutenant?"

Fiske alone seem unperturbed. They were all looking at Nolly now, their disinterest gone. Surprise and antagonism glittered in their flat eyes now. Under the brims of their hats, their shaded faces looked suddenly hard and blunt and grim.

"It's loaded," Fiske said drily. "What the hell. Remind me to say a few words to those prowlies."

Nolly said: "I wasn't going to——"

"All right," said the man at the door. His voice was angry. "You got what was coming to you."

Nolly's hand felt limp. He massaged it carefully, aware of hot needles in his elbow where an outraged nerve flamed in protest.

"I didn't stay here to be pushed around," he said. "I could have run away from here long ago."

"Indeed," said Fiske. "You've been on the premises quite a while, then?"

"About half an hour," Nolly nodded.

"Perhaps you'd better tell us how you happened to be around when Wright was killed, Mr. Bayless."

It sounded simple enough when Nolly told him. Too simple. Inadequate. He started out speaking rapidly and crisply, and slowly he found himself groping for words, his attempts to explain the night's events ringing clumsily and untrue even in his own ears. His story of awakening on the stairs—he omitted all mention of Arlene—had a flat, unconvincing tone, as flat and unconvicted as the faces of the homicide men who listened to him.

"You say somebody telephoned you after you got home and told you to come down here?" Fiske asked quietly.

"Yes."

"And you didn't recognize the man's voice?"

"No. That is—I thought it was Mr.

Wright's. But I'm not sure. I can't say whose voice it was, for certain."

"But it was familiar?"

"Yes."

"So you just upped and came down here?"

"Yes."

"We can check that with your wife, you know," Fiske said.

"No. I mean, she wasn't home when the telephone call came. I didn't see her."

"Did anybody see you?"

"I don't know."

"The doorman? The elevator man?"

"It's an automatic elevator. No. Nobody. It was quite late. I'm afraid nobody saw me. I fed the dog and then the telephone call came and I went out. Maybe you can check with the taxi," Nolly said suddenly, "but I don't remember the cabby's name or anything. I didn't look."

"Hardly anyone does," Fiske said drily.

Nolly didn't say anything.

"And you were slugged when you walked in here, and when you woke up you found Mr. Wright dead?"

"Yes," Nolly said.

"So you picked up the gun?" Fiske said.

"I didn't realize," Nolly said. "I couldn't think."

"Didn't you intend to kill him?"

"What?" Nolly asked.

"Mr. Wright," Fiske said patiently. "Did he surprise you at the safe?"

"I didn't kill Mr. Wright," Nolly said.

"Then where is the money?"

"I don't know."

"And who did kill him?"

"I don't know."

FISKE looked at him and then at one of his men, and without any verbal orders the man got up and went out of the office. The tall homicide man who'd knocked the gun out of his hand remained at the door.

Fiske said quietly: "I'm a working man, Bayless. We are all just trying to do our jobs. It's almost four in the morning, and we're tired. You must understand how this thing looks to us. Why don't you confess, and then we can all go home?"

"I haven't anything to confess," Nolly said.

"Who knew the combination to the safe?"

"Mr. Wright knew it."

"And you?"

"Yes."

"How much money was in it tonight?"

"Forty thousand dollars," Nolly said, tonelessly.

"Is it usual to keep that much money in the safe?"

"No," Nolly said. "Mr. Wright added twenty thousand in cash this noon-time. Yesterday noon, I mean."

Fiske nodded slowly, consulting a slip on his desk. "That's right, that checks. Who knew about that extra twenty thousand? Just you and Wright?"

"Ken Wimbaugh went with us to the bank," Nolly said, and instantly felt as if he was talking too much. "Ken's the company investigator. He acts as guard on these trips."

"Wimbaugh," Fiske repeated. He nodded. "Used to be a private eye?"

"That's right," Nolly said.

The tall homicide man by the doorway said: "I remember Ken, Lieutenant."

Fiske asked an unspoken question with his eyes, and the tall man at the door nodded: Nolly's eyes flicked from one man to the other. His throat ached, and the back of his head throbbed, but he was cold sober, stone sober, and he was having a nightmare, a bad dream reflected in the impersonal stare of the homicide men who regarded him.

Fiske said: "It won't do any good to lie to us, Bayless. We've already sent for Pillman and Wimbaugh and that Douglas fellow you claim you were with. We'll get the truth of it from them, you know—unless they're in this with you. In that case, we'll find out about it soon enough too."

"They weren't in anything with me," Nolly said.

The homicide man who had gone out came back again. In the moment the door was open, Nolly glimpsed the uniformed prowler, Ambie, standing out there, and a lot of other men in the main office of the finance building. There was a good deal of activity going on out there.

"The girl," Fiske said suddenly. "Was she your accomplice?"

Nolly didn't say anything.

"What's her name?" Fiske asked. "The redhead I mean?"

"I don't remember," Nolly said. He had to keep Arlene out of it, somehow, until he saw how things stood.

"She had the money, then. She got away with it, but you couldn't, because the prowler car stopped you."

She didn't have the money, Nolly insisted. How did he know? Fiske demanded. Nolly didn't know.

"Where is the money, then?" Fiske asked.

"I don't know."

THE tall detective left his post at the door, walked casually toward Nolly, and at one pace away suddenly lashed out with his right, catching Nolly unexpectedly on the cheekbone. The blow rocked his head back; his shoulders slammed against the wall.

"Maybe that'll help you remember," said the tall man.

Fiske said sharply: "That's enough, Fallon!"

"He thinks he's kidding us," said the tall man truculently.

"Keep your hands to yourself," Fiske rapped.

Nolly said nothing. His head was ringing, and a quick, helpless anger added to the red scar on his cheek. He moistened his lips, felt the dry scratch of his throat. His hands twitched as the muscles of his fingers jumped independently of his will. He watched Fiske's eyes grow calm again, and then Fiske said:

"Let's go into Mr. Wright's office."

They formed a grim little procession, with Nolly between a stout detective named Geiger and the truculent Fallon. Fiske nodded a fingerprint man out of the room and shut the heavy door to the private office. The indirect lamps behind the paneled walls made soft highlights on the massive desk, touched a spot of clever red on Henry Wright's sporting prints, and cast a sheen on the deep rug where the dead man sprawled. Nolly glanced at the body only briefly. The office was silent, filled with the living and the dead.

Fiske went around the big, spotless desk

and looked with pale eyes at the tooled leather blotter, a clean copper ashtray, and the desk calendar. His long fingers flicked the leaves of the calendar pad, but there was nothing there. He looked at Nolly.

"Sit down, Bayless."

Nolly sat down. He was grateful for the chair to support him. His legs felt weak. He watched Fiske look around the office and settle on the dictagraph machine that stood on a rubber-wheeled table against the opposite wall. Beneath it, on a V-shaped shelf, were four cylinders of recorded dictation, waiting for Gladys, Wright's secretary, to type. Fiske snapped his fingers restlessly, then wheeled the table to the desk and settled down in the dead man's big leather chair. Nolly felt his throat go dry as the detective inserted one of the cylinders and snapped the switch, turning the earphones toward Nolly. Fiske's face was smooth and blank; the other detectives stared at nothing at all.

It was strange, hearing Wright's monotonous dictation of business letters while he sprawled in death three feet away. The first cylinder contained only two letters, both of a routine business nature. The second yielded several inter-office memoranda. The third cylinder was even less promising, although it consisted of personal letters to friends of the dead man, concerning a college class reunion. Nolly stirred restlessly. He wished Fiske hadn't brought him back to this office. He knew they were testing him, watching him with eyes that didn't seem to look at him. He tried to keep his face passive, and felt sweat trickling down his back, under his shirt.

Then a new message began. Evidently many hours had passed between this and the others. Henry Wright's voice was different, his crisp enunciation blurred by liquor, and the sounds of daytime traffic that had been in the background of his other dictation were gone now. There was only a faint humming, as if a vacuum cleaner were being operated somewhere in the outer office.

Nolly sat up straighter. He sensed a stiffening in the attitudes of the detectives around him. Fiske looked up sharply at

the white coffered ceiling, then looked at him and listened to the faint, tiny voice that came from the earphones:

"Gladys, this is just a note for you to take care of tomorrow morning" Prophetically, the dead man went on. "I won't be in the office over the weekend—won't even be in town, so you must take care of this for me. Get hold of Bayless, if you have to; he knows something about it. Ted Lomax delayed his arrival from Detroit until Sunday, and there's some money due him in the safe. Ask Bayless to handle it for me. Take care of Lomax, get him a hotel reservation. It's important, they're floating a big loan with us. Lomax will be in on the eight o'clock plane at LaGuardia. . . ."

There was a sudden interruption. Distinctly cutting through the dead man's words came the sound of a slamming door.

Wright's voice said: "What the devil . . . !"

Then the humming came back, while Nolly sat in strained tension. It was too much too hope for—that the murderer had entered the office while Wright was dictating . . .

Abruptly, the dead man's voice came back again:

"You, there! I say, what's going on here? What on earth do you think you're doing?"

Although he made every effort, Nolly could catch no response on the recording. The cylinder hummed, then: "Yes, of course. Uh . . . that's all, Gladys. See you Tuesday morning."

Then—*click!* The cylinder went dead.

NOLLY was suddenly aware that he had been sitting forward on the edge of his chair. Fiske put the earphones away under the dictagraph machine, pursed his lips, put his toe against the wheeled table and gave it a little shove. The machine rattled across the carpet and stopped a foot from the wall. He looked at Nolly.

"Almost got you didn't it?"

"Yes. No. I mean, that must have been the killer who interrupted him."

"It certainly was. Familiar, wasn't it?"

"No. I didn't kill Mr. Wright."

"That's what you've been saying. Too

bad the machine didn't catch your voice. We could turn it all in, then, if it had gone on for another minute."

Nolly didn't say anything. Fiske turned to Fallon. "Check on this Ted Lomax, George. Maybe he didn't miss that Detroit plane after all. Maybe he showed up here as a little surprise for Wright."

"Sure thing," Fallon said.

"And see what's keeping those boys from rounding up Bayless' friends."

Fallon nodded and went out. Two men were outside the door, in white coats, holding a wicker hamper between them. Fiske sighed and stood up and turned to the remaining detective, the stout one.

"Take him downstairs, Geiger. Use the super's office, and let him think it over a bit. I've got other things to do."

Geiger took Nolly's elbow and they went out through the doorway. The men with the wicker basket squeezed past them into the office. Fiske didn't come with them as they crossed the echoing outer room. Two patrolmen were posted in the public hall, but they paid no attention as Nolly preceded Geiger downstairs to the main floor. The stout man opened a small office marked *Building Superintendent* and nodded him inside. There was a desk, two chairs, a cot, and a gaudy calendar on the wall. The detective indicated the cot for Nolly.

"Sit down and relax."

Geiger took one of the chairs and leaned it against the wall near the door and sat down on it. Nolly rested on the cot. They exchanged meaningless stares, while footsteps went up and down the corridor outside. He took out a cigarette, and a pack of matches landed in his lap, tossed by Geiger. The homicide men said nothing as Nolly used the matches and inhaled deeply. But smoking didn't help. Nothing would help, he thought. He was in something pretty deep, something he didn't know much about, beyond his experiences. These men knew what they were doing, but he didn't. His story must have sounded pretty thin to them. He couldn't tell what they were thinking. He felt trapped and hopeless and angry.

He went over the evening again, minute by minute. He couldn't get anywhere with

it. He was trying for the fourth time when the two men came into the little room.

"Bayless," one of them said. He looked like a mature college student with corn yellow hair under his dark green hat. He wore a silk scarf in an Ascot knot between the upturned lapels of his tan topcoat. His teeth were white and strong. "Come along, Bayless."

Geiger let his chair down with a thump, his eyes puzzled.

"Wait a minute, you two."

The short, stockier one of the newcomers said: "Bayless is coming with us."

"The hell he is," Geiger said. He made a flat scooping gesture toward his coat pocket, and the taller of the young men made a similar gesture, completing it long before the detective could do anything about it. There was a flat, cracking sound and Geiger reeled backward and collapsed on the cot. Blood trickled down his scalp. His eyes were sightless, blank.

Nolly stood up. The stockier of the two men opened the door a crack and listened, then opened it wide on the lobby of the building. "All right, Ches. Let's go."

The blond man said to Nolly: "Isn't the girl here?"

"No," said Nolly.

The short one said: "The hell with her. All we want is Nolly Bayless. Let's go."

"I don't understand—" Nolly began.

"You will," said Ches. "Our orders are to bring you with us."

Nolly looked at the unconscious detective.

"Whose orders?"

"As if you didn't know," Chester said pleasantly.

He had a gun in his hand, prodding him. Nolly felt stunned. He wondered fleetingly if he was still in his nightmare. But the gun in the blond man's hand was no dream. Nor was the tense, impatient note in the other man's voice.

"Walk quietly. Outside, to the sidewalk."

Two men were ascending the stairs from the lobby to the Globe offices on the second floor. Two more men were at the street door. With Nolly between them, Chester

and his companion calmly paused to close the door, adequately concealing Geiger's sprawled body, and walked casually to the street. The uniformed cops stepped aside without interrupting their own conversation.

Outside, the street was dark and deserted as before, except for the parked police cars and one or two loiterers. This was almost exclusively a business district, and no crowd had gathered at the building entrance. With Chester's touch guiding him, Nolly turned to the left, passed the lamp post where he had last seen Arlene, and reached a club coupe parked near the opposite corner.

"Inside, friend," said Chester. "In the back. Get on your hands and knees and keep your head down."

Nolly did as he was told. It was humiliating to crouch in the narrow back seat of the car. The gun in Chester's hand hurried him. The last thing he remembered was the sudden skirl of a police whistle and the sound of a night-stick beating the pavement. After that he wasn't sure what happened. His stomach came up and his head seemed to twist itself on his neck, and he was back on the hands of the clock again, spinning around and around on the minute hand. This time it wasn't Susan who was screaming at him and trying to snatch him. Arlene Douglas took her place, and her face was a death mask contorted in a scream; but no sound came from her. It was as if the world was quietly wrapped in cotton wool.

IV

DAWN MADE THE BIG FRENCH windows gray, and a breeze puffed the gauze curtains inward. Nolly huddled on one end of a long, modern couch and shivered. A reflector lamp in the far corner of the big room began to dim as daylight touched the apartment. His body felt cramped but something warned him not to move. He sat there without lifting his head, absorbing his surroundings.

He'd been here for several hours, he knew that much. He remembered being lifted from the green coupe and set down

on the sidewalk under a little maple tree. There'd been no doorman under the canvas canopy that stretched to the curb. The elevator was automatic, silent, like the apartment now. Silent, but not empty. The two collegiate-looking men were quite close at hand. He was sure of that, and little else.

By keeping his lids lowered and sliding his eyes from right to left, he took in more of the big room, from the french windows to the sliding doors at his right. His gaze slid along the deep-piled gray rug touched a scarlet barrel chair, gave a little hop over the coffee table in front of the fireplace, and settled on two pairs of feet under another table set up close to the fire. Chester and his squat companion were grim with concentration, playing chess with a beautiful set of ivory pieces. The fire was almost dead in the fireplace. Beside the chess-board were two guns, one a .45 very similar to the one from Nolly's coat pocket, and the other a snubby-barreled revolver that looked dark and dangerous.

Somehow he had the impression that the tall windows opened on a deep void, perhaps twelve or fifteen stories high. He could see rooftops vaguely through the blowing golden curtains, and a little farther off the trees of Central Park, touched by the dawn.

He said abruptly: "How long have I been here?"

Their heads swiveled as one. Then they both placed their hands flat on the table and stood up. Chester hesitated over the chessboard and said: "I'm castling." The squat one picked up the snubby revolver and put it in his pocket. Their eyes observed Nolly with quiet objectivity. The dawn breeze ruffled Chester's yellow hair.

"Do you think he sees us, Les?"

The squat one shrugged, his shoulders heavy and solid in gray tweeds. "How would I know?"

"Are you really awake this time?" Chester asked Nolly. "You passed out, you know."

"With your eyes open," Lester added.

Nolly groaned. "You snatched me from the cops!"

"You need not thank us," said Chester

gravely. He slumped down on the couch beside Nolly, plunging his hands deep in his pockets, and staring at his polished shoes. There was a Phi Beta Kappa key on his key-chain. His voice was as casual as if they were at a fraternity meeting. "What were you drinking last night, *tovarich*?"

"Everything," said Nolly. "I guess."

Chester said: "I never saw a lad get higher than you. You talked coherently enough, but—"

"His syntax was garbled," Les put in.

"Only a little. It doesn't matter. He's with us now."

Nolly's head ached, as if a dozen gremlins were busy inside with trip-hammers. "I don't understand any of this."

"Maybe we can help you," Chester said.

Nolly pointed at his squat, scowling companion. "What's his name?"

"I'm Lester," said the dark man.

"Chester and Lester?"

"That's right."

"You're kidding."

"Nobody ever believes us," said Chester, "but it's true."

Nolly said again: "I don't get it. Why did you pull me away from the police like that?"

CHESTER grinned. "Let's understand each other. You really are Arnold Bayless, aren't you?"

"Of course."

"You live at 1414 Champlost Street, don't you?"

"That's right. Was it one of you fellows who called me down to the office last night?"

"That's funny." Lester pushed forward belligerently. "Let's stop swatting at flies. Where is the money you owe us?"

"What money?"

Chester said: "Let me rephrase the question. Where is the twenty thousand dollars you owe Mr. Orditch?"

"Orditch?"

"Our employer." Chester nodded.

Nolly said: "I never heard of him."

"You owe him twenty thousand dollars," Chester repeated. From his coat pocket he took an ostrich leather wallet, opened it, and fanned out a series of pink printed

slips. "These are your IOU's. Isn't that your signature?"

Nolly looked at the slips without touching them. He shivered inwardly, and felt himself sinking into deeper confusion. The IOU's were in thousand-dollar denominations, payable to Otto Orditch, and were signed in a clear, square script—*Arnold Bayless*.

"Those aren't mine," Nolly said. "I never signed these things. I don't even know your Mr. Orditch."

Chester did something with his fingers and Nolly's worn billfold appeared in his hand, opened to his driver's license. Nolly's signature was plainly visible. It was identical with the signatures on the IOU's.

"I know," Nolly said. "But those notes aren't mine. Somebody must have used my name and copied my handwriting."

Lester laughed. "Are you still drunk, chum?"

"No," Nolly said, and he wasn't. He thought he was going to be sick. "This is all a mistake," he said. "The police are looking for me, you know."

"That's all right," said Chester. "You're safe here."

"It isn't that. I want to go to *them*. They're under the impression that I killed Mr. Wright."

"And didn't you?" Chester asked.

"No," said Nolly. "I'm sure I didn't."

"And you didn't lift forty thousand out of the office box?"

"No. Somebody else did that."

Chester said: "The deal was for you to do it. Otto gave you until last night. You said you would deliver, and that's why we were waiting for you. It really wouldn't be advisable to keep this up, Mr. Bayless."

"To hell with you," Nolly said. "I'm getting out of here."

He stood up, found his hat and put it on. He was surprised that Chester remained slouched on the seat beside him, not alarmed. The only thing that happened was that Lester moved to his side. But Lester's gun was not in sight.

"So long," Nolly said.

He took a step and Lester did something to his arm, and he found himself sailing through the air. He landed with a thump,

back on the couch again. His hat fell off and looped across the floor.

"Don't try it," Chester said amiably.

"Unless you want an arm broken," Lester said.

Nolly straightened, shook his head, and climbed to his feet again. His mouth was stubborn. "I'm getting out of here."

This time Chester snaked an arm around his neck, did something to a nerve in his shoulder, and Nolly crashed to the floor. It was not as soft as the couch. He lay still, looking up at the two men who towered over him. Morning sunlight poured quietly and peacefully through the tall french windows. It took a long time to get his breath back.

Chester said: "I guess we'd better call Mr. Orditch."

OTTO ORDITCH arrived in half an hour. He was a short, stout little man with a fringe of gray hair around a clean pink scalp, and quick, impatient gestures. Everything about him was agitated. His topcoat failed to fit his sloping shoulders, and his gray fedora was completely shapeless, as if he'd crushed it in his fist. He peeled his gloves with difficulty, breathing heavily. His walking stick went to the coffee table. He stared at Nolly without friendliness.

"Lester," he said. "A glass of milk."

The dark young man vanished toward the kitchen. Orditch sat in a chair and regarded Nolly with a sigh. "I can't play poker any more." He tapped his fat little stomach. "Gambling is killing me. Just killing me."

"I want to know what this is all about," Nolly said.

"So do I," Orditch said. "You're not Arnold Bayless."

Confusion flickered over Chester's face. Lester came back with a glass of milk and put it down beside the stout little man and just stared. Chester said: "He says he is Bayless, Mr. Orditch. His wallet and papers prove it."

Orditch drank his milk greedily. Lester said: "He admits it sir. But he says he doesn't owe you any money."

"Naturally. Bayless owes me money. He isn't Bayless."

Chester said: "But he was at the Globe Building. The cops had him. Les and I had to pull a fancy one to get him out of there."

"You picked the wrong man. Unless, of course, he had the money on him—?"

"No, he didn't," said Chester and Lester, together

Orditch looked at Nolly. "You were at the Globe Building last night, weren't you?"

"I was lured there, yes. Then I was brought here. Both times it was against my will."

"Did you take the money from the safe?"

"No."

"Who did?"

"I don't know."

"You're lying."

"I wish I were," Nolly said. "I'd feel better if I knew the truth about this. All I know is that somebody killed Mr. Wright and then, instead of letting me explain things to the police, your hoodlums brought me here."

"Hoodlums!" Lester muttered indignantly.

Orditch said: "Shut up." He looked wearily at Nolly, and fingered the empty milk glass. His voice was unpleasant. "I think I know what happened. This louse, Bayless, thought he'd put one over on me."

"I didn't."

"Not you. The other Bayless."

"I don't understand," Nolly said.

"Somebody used your name and signature, mister, to borrow money from me. I feel sorry for you because I don't know how you're going to get out of the mess you're in with the cops now, thanks to Chester's stupidity last night. But somebody used your name to sign those IOU's with me. He was supposed to pay off last night. What I want to know is, which of your friends would pull that stunt?"

"I don't know," Nolly said.

"Somebody who doesn't like you very much."

Nolly frowned. "But I haven't any enemies."

"Who'd be able to forge your signature so perfectly?"

NOLLY was silent. For the first time since the nightmare began, he was thinking swiftly and clearly. The ideas that came to him were not pleasant ones. They angered him. Somebody had used him as a dupe and framed him for murder. Only a limited number of people could have done that. He could count them on the fingers of one hand. He sat still and stared at Orditch.

"I'm waiting," said Orditch.

"I don't know anyone who would do such a thing," Nolly said. "I'm tired of all this. I want to get in touch with my wife, and then go back to the police."

Orditch laughed. "You won't have a chance if you go back to the police. What's your wife's name?"

Nolly felt a sudden panic. "Leave her out of this."

"I will if I can. Her name is Susan, ain't it? And you're a cashier, right? How much do you get a week?"

"Sixty."

"And you live on Champlost Street?"

Nolly nodded.

"Expensive, ain't it?"

"I never thought much about it," Nolly said. "Susan likes it there."

"Does she play the numbers much?"

"I don't think so. I don't think she ever did."

"She doesn't gamble?"

"No."

"What does she do with herself all day?"

Nolly felt confused. "I don't really know. It doesn't matter. I don't see where you're interested in her, anyway."

Orditch said: "You've got a lot to learn, Bayless." He kept his hand flat on his stomach in a Napoleonic gesture. His silk tie was half hidden under the ridiculously long points of his soft, crumpled collar. "Look, Bayless, money is my business. I have a certain capital and I lend it out, you see? I lend it to friends and people who can't go to legitimate places like Globe, for one reason or another. So I charge him a little higher interest than you people do. A little higher than the law allows. So I can't allow any welching on the debts these people owe me. I mean to get my money back, that's all."

"Did you ever see me borrowing money from you?" Nolly demanded.

"No," Orditch said. "Not you."

"Then who was it? What did he look like?"

Orditch contemplated him with blank eyes.

"I think," he said, "that's my business."

"Why not tell me? Whoever it was, he did the killing last night, didn't he? He ought to be turned over to the cops!"

"Not until I get my twenty grand," Orditch said. "Now shut up. You upset me."

He put on his crushed felt hat, jammed his gloves in his pocket, and picked up his cane without taking his eyes off Nolly's tense, seated figure. It was very quiet in the apartment. The golden curtains blew gently inward from the tall windows. Nolly looked around and saw french doors opening to a very feminine bedroom.

"I'm not sure now that I know anything," Orditch said quietly. "I haven't got it figured at all. Maybe all this is just a smart play to confuse me. Maybe you're not as dumb as you look. All I'm interested in is the money that's due me. It's not a legal debt, and murder isn't legal, either. I've got nothing to do with the law. That may be tough on you, and maybe it isn't. I don't know yet. All I want is my money."

He turned to the two young men. "You stay here and see if you can get this yokel to think some more about it."

Lester said: "We'll work on it, Mr. Orditch."

Nolly braced himself for a very unpleasant day.

HE WAS NOT disappointed. They kept asking him the same questions. First Chester would ask the questions, then Lester. They were the politest gunmen Nolly had ever heard of. They would have been two likable young men, fresh from college, except for their persistence and occasional trick of judo. It was difficult not to answer their questions. They were repeated over and over again.

There were some memory lessons applied with a twist of the wrist and pressure on various nerves. Nolly found himself sprawling on the floor, covered with cold

sweat, shuddering with remembered pain. None of the lessons left him badly damaged, after they were over. Each time the two young men would apologize and give him a chance to recuperate, while they returned to their chess game. One chess game was finished at noon, and they paused for lunch, prepared by Lester. A second chess game was completed about four o'clock. Chester won both games.

About five o'clock, the girl came in. Nolly wasn't aware of the outer door opening or closing. He didn't know the girl was there until she came sauntering in front of him. He heard Lester say, "Hello, chicken," and the girl said, "Having fun?" When he turned his head he saw that she was a small girl, with dark glowing hair and a lovely cameo face. She was wearing a fox fur over a gray pin-stripe suit, and she looked expensive. She seemed familiar with the apartment, as if it was her own. She looked familiar too. Nolly remembered her. Her name was Delia.

"Hello, Delia," he said.

She looked down at him without recognition in her eyes.

"How do you like that?" she said.

"Like what?"

"Getting familiar." She was talking to the tall blond Chester. "He thinks we're buddies."

"He acts as if he knew you somewhere before," Chester said.

"He acts nutty. Have you been bouncing him off the walls?"

"A little." Lester grinned. "It couldn't be helped."

"I'll bet not." Delia walked with swinging hips toward the coffee table and lit a cigarette. Her eyes watched Nolly over the flame of the match. There was no expression on her face. Nolly decided it would be best to remain silent. She didn't want him to recognize her, evidently. He didn't even try to figure this one out. Instead, he waited.

The girl said: "Anyway, it's all settled. Mr. Orditch has his man."

Chester said: "The real Bayless?"

"I guess so. He told me to tell you to beat it. I say the same thing. You haven't any right to use my apartment for things

like this. I'm going to tell Otto off about it, too."

Lester grinned. "Yes, you'll tell him."

"I will," the girl said. She blew gray smoke toward Nolly, as if he wasn't there. Nolly hungered for a cigarette, but he didn't say anything. He studied the carpet at his feet. The memory of aches and pains came back to him. Delia was saying: "Anyway, this fellow isn't the man Otto wanted."

"Well, what shall we do with him? He's hot, you know."

Delia shrugged her tailored shoulders. "I don't care what you do with him. Just get him out of here, that's all. I'm not anxious to have the cops find him in my place. That makes me an accessory, and I'm not having a piece of that, thank you."

"Didn't Otto give you any instructions?" Lester asked. He scowled with his heavy dark brows. "What are we supposed to do stay here with him indefinitely?"

"Leave me your gun," said the girl. "I'll take care of the bright boy while you go find Mr. Orditch."

"I can telephone him," said Chester dubiously.

"He won't answer. You know that. He never answers his phone in the afternoons."

"That's right," said Lester. "Well have to go over there."

"Just one of us," Chester said, "I'll stay here. I'm not giving you a gun, sweetheart," he told Delia.

Delia said: "As you wish. As long as you do something about it."

LESTER picked up his hat and left the apartment without a word. Chester sat in the scarlet barrel chair and cleaned his gun, wiping it with a silk handkerchief until it shone. The big .45 was still on the chess table. Delia disappeared into her bedroom, and after a while there came the muted sound of a running shower. Nolly relaxed a little on the couch and waited. Something was going to happen. Something would happen pretty soon.

He didn't have long to wait. The shower was still going in the bathroom when the buzzer sounded. It rang once, then again, in quick succession, and then there

was a pause. Evidently it was a signal, for Chester was not alarmed. He put away the handkerchief and the gun and picked up the Colt from the chess table and went through the foyer, out of Nolly's sight. Nolly got to his feet. He had been sitting in the couch for a long time, and when he stood up he felt stiff all over. He felt hollow inside, too. Beyond the big windows the wind had stopped blowing. The sky was purple, the whole day had gone by, almost twenty-four hours. Nolly put on his hat and started across the room toward the fireplace, toward the rack of brass pokers.

Voices sounded in the foyer. They were louder than the hiss of the bathroom shower. There came the sound of a sudden blow, a sharp cracking of knuckles, and then the thump of a body. Nolly grabbed at a poker and started walking toward the foyer entrance.

From behind him, Delia said:

"Drop it. We're pals."

Ken Wimbaugh came in from the foyer. He was smoothing his dark hair and a very handsome grin on his handsome face. He looked immaculate, except for a crease of blood on his knuckles. He looked like a million dollars.

"Hi, Nolly," he said.

"Chester?" Nolly asked.

"Out like a light. We're moving you out of here, pal."

Nolly looked at Delia. The shower was still running in the bathroom, but she was fully dressed. She was pulling on her gloves and smiling. The smile was a little grim.

"I'd better draw it for you. Nolly," she said. "Ken hasn't anything to do with Otto and his boys, in case you get ideas. I'm the one who's the missing link. And just as dumb. They were using my place just because I'm a—a friend of Otto's, and I didn't like it. I knew Ken was your friend, so I told him what was happening and where you were, and we figured out this way to get you away from here."

"We'd better get going, too," Ken said.

"I'm willing," Nolly said.

They had to step over Chester's unconscious body, sprawled in the foyer. Nolly remembered the big Colt and paused to

retrieve it from Chester's coat. He dropped it into his own pocket. Then they went out together.

V

IT WAS EVENING. NOLLY KEPT his eyes alert as they stepped through a smart little lobby to the street. Tiny maple trees made shadow dumplings along the curb. Tall, stately apartment buildings stretched toward the park. He walked quietly between Ken and Delia toward a small blue coupe parked under the little maple trees.

Delia said: "I'm going to leave you here. I've done my share, Ken. I hope you think better of me for it."

"You were swell, Delia. Nolly's my friend, and I just had to help him, don't you see?"

"Sure," she said wryly. "'But I'm your friend, too.'"

"You can straighten it out with Orditch."

"Sure, I can straighten it out."

Ken said: "Take care of yourself."

"Same to you," said the girl. She looked at Nolly and gave him a brief, tired smile and then she walked away quickly, as if she was afraid to slow down or she'd return and stay with them. Ken slid behind the wheel and said: "Let's roll. That Chester might wake up or a cop might come along."

Nolly hesitated as a thought struck him. He didn't get into the car. "You don't think I have the money, do you, Ken?"

"No Nolly."

"And I didn't kill Wright, either."

"I don't think you did. Get in the car. We'll drive around and think about it. The main thing is to get away from this neighborhood. Delia said those two boys are tough."

"They're tough," Nolly nodded. He stepped into the car.

Central Park was cool and shadowed. The little coupe took the winding curves easily, going not too fast and not too slow. They headed uptown, keeping well within the park drives. After a while they turned west into a shabby crosstown street of old brownstone tenements. Kids were

playing ball and people walked the sidewalk returning from work. Nobody paid any attention to them as they parked.

Nolly said: "I appreciate what you are doing to help me, Ken. I don't know what to do, myself. I don't even know what it's all about."

"Do you have any idea where to start?"

"I think I'd better call Susan. Then I'll go back to the police."

"You can't do that," Ken said. "That's a crazy thing to do."

"Why?"

"Because they've got you tagged and measured for the chair. Nobody has any doubt that you did it—that is, nobody who doesn't know you. And look—let me tell you something. It won't be easy to take."

"Go ahead," Nolly said.

"Susan says you never came home last night."

Nolly looked at him. His mouth felt dry, and a queer pounding began in his chest.

"No," he said. "No she can't have said that. She wasn't there herself."

"She says she was," Ken went on flatly. "And the cops found her at home in bed and asleep, when they got there."

"But she wasn't!" Nolly said angrily.

Ken shrugged quietly: "Well, maybe she'd just stepped out for a minute, just when you got home, and you missed her. It could be as simple as that."

"But she knew I was there! I fed the dog—"

He was silent, not saying any more. He thought of the emptiness he had found in the apartment, and a sick feeling of helplessness smothered his words. He couldn't think of anything to say.

KEN SAID: "I believe you. Nolly, but the cops don't, and you can't blame them, after the way you escaped from their very hands last night. They're mad as hell over the panning the papers are giving them. I don't think you should even consider going to the cops."

Nolly looked at the evening headlines which Ken dropped into his lap. He felt a sinking sensation when he saw his picture on the front page. MURDERER ESCAPES NET

AFTER KILLING. That was in red type. Underneath, it said, *Cashier Eludes Trap After Anonymous Tip To Police . . . Kills for \$40,000.....Police Shakeup Demanded . .* The story took three columns under his picture, and was particularly lurid in dealing with Nolly's escape from the police with the aid of his "henchmen." Nolly didn't read too much of it. A panic rose up inside him, and he felt breathless. He began to shake all over.

"I'm sunk," he whispered.

"No, you're not," Ken said. "We'll figure something out. I've a little experience with these things, from the days when I starved as a private eye. It's better than if you were all alone, Nolly. They'd get you sure. This way we can figure out what really happened and what to do next."

"But I don't know what happened," Nolly said. "I've told the truth. Somebody called me down there, from my apartment, and I went to the office and I don't remember anything after I opened the door until I woke up there. I don't know who called me. I thought it was Mr. Wright, and it could have been him, or anybody else. I just don't know what goes on, Ken."

Ken said: "If I'd known how you really were, when we broke up at Emmett's place, I'd have taken you home myself. I didn't know you were that high."

"But I wasn't that bad!" Nolly said. "I remember what happened to me, all right. Except for the time when I was knocked out, that's all."

"We'll have to find out," Ken said. "The main thing is, you're away from Orditch and his two stooges. He's a mean fellow to tangle with. I can't figure Val and Arlene, though. What was she doing in the office when you woke up there? We'll have to get his and Emmett's story about last night, too. After all, we're in this together, even if the police have settled on you. They had me down at headquarters all morning. But between the four of us, we ought to get some line on how to help you, Nolly."

"I hope so," Nolly said. "I certainly need help. I don't know how to handle a thing like this." He paused and stifled a growing tautness in his chest. "I'd like

to call Susan before we do anything else, though."

"Sure thing. It will take something off your mind anyway."

They got out of the car and walked to the candy store on the corner. Teen-age boys were pitching coins across the pavement. There was a single telephone booth in the candy store. Nolly felt in his pockets for a nickel, found one, and was surprised to find his wallet in his coat, too. The few bills left from his pay were still there. He watched his fingers tremble as he dialed. The telephone in his own home was picked up almost immediately, as if someone had been waiting for his ring.

"Susan?" Nolly said.

A man's voice said: "In a minute. Who is this?"

"I—is this Waring 9-5290?"

"Sure. Who's talking?"

"I want to speak to Susan."

"Are you Mr. Bayless?"

"Yes. Is something wrong?"

"No, Mr. Bayless. But look here—"

Ken's voice was in Nolly's other ear, rapping desperately: "Hang up, you fool! It's the cops!"

The policeman at the other end was saying: "Listen, we just want a word with you. If you'll just tell us where we can meet you—"

Nolly hung up. He was trembling. He felt cold. He followed Ken out of the candy store and back to the car. Ken drove away from there, fast. Neither said anything until they turned into upper Broadway, then Ken parked in front of a large chain drugstore.

"You see how it is, Nolly. You stay here. I'll call Emmett Pillman and see if he's in the clear. We can't take any more chances on running into the cops. You wait here."

"I'll wait," Nolly said.

EMMETT PILLMAN lived in a small walk-up apartment near Columbia University, on a steeply pitched crosstown street that slanted precipitously down toward Riverside Park and the Hudson. It was dark when they got there. They had stopped at a small hamburger joint and taken three to go, with coffee in a paper

container. The food and the hot coffee made Nolly feel better.

It was a bachelor place, warm and leathery and full of the smell of cheap pipe tobacco. Newspapers were scattered haphazardly over the rug. Two blue shirts hung over the back of a spindly chair, and a pair of old flannel trousers were crumpled in a sagging easy chair. The bed in the bedroom wasn't made. A table lamp made a cone of yellow light over the chair, mellowing the shabbiness of the room. The blinds were drawn. From somewhere down the outer corridor came the sonorous fragments of a Wagner recording.

Emmett Pillman shut the door quickly and leaned back against it, staring at Nolly with incredulous eyes. The thin strands of hair on his bald head looked wispy and grave. "Nolly, for Pete's sake!"

Nolly grinned a little. "I know how you feel." He looked up and saw Valentine Douglas' big figure coming through the hall doorway. The redheaded man was wearing his hat and coat, and carried his pipe in his hand. His grip was strong and massive. Nolly said: "You here, too?"

Emmett said: "I called his sister's place just before I heard from you fellows. He drove over."

Val said: "The cops gave me the once-over all day today, Nolly. All about you."

"But I didn't," Nolly said.

"That's what I told them. But they're hard to convince."

Ken interrupted. "We've got to put our heads together on this thing. It's good that we're all here. We've got to shake Nolly loose from this somehow."

Emmett looked helpless. "I don't see what we can do. It's up to the police. They think Nolly killed old Wright."

"But I'm sure I didn't," Nolly said.

Val Douglas rumbled: "I don't know what we can do. Nolly, if you need money to get out of town, we could all chip in—"

Flight from the city hadn't occurred to Nolly. He turned the idea over in his mind, turned it this way and that, and didn't like it. He shook his head.

"That won't solve anything."

"What we must do," Ken said quietly, "is to find out what happened last night. With all of us." He turned to Emmett.

"We left Nolly at two, remember?"

"That was after I quit to take Lenny home," Val Douglas said. He sprawled his legs out in front of him and sucked moodily at his pipe. "I want to know what happened after that."

"Ken and I left Nolly right here," Pillman said.

Nolly interrupted. "It wasn't one of you fellows who called me, was it? Val, you thought something was going on. Did you call me?"

"No," Val said. "You'll have to take my word for it."

"Didn't you see who hit you, Nolly?" Pillman asked.

"I don't remember anything until I woke up afterward." Seated on the couch, Nolly repeated what he knew. He cracked his knuckles nervously as he talked. He felt terrible. He knew he looked terrible. He was confused, and he knew he sounded confused as he talked. He could see his three friends exchange significant glances as they watched him. He looked from one to the other, and then at the drawn blinds, and then at the door. There was no other exit that he could see.

Finally Emmett said: "Val you're the one who can help us here. You and your kid sister." He scratched at his bald scalp and rubbed his heavy chin. He was in his skivvies, and his suspenders dangled around his broad thighs. He looked much older than his forty years. "You and Arlene know more about it than we do."

"I botched things last night," Val said. "If I'd been smart when I first spotted those two pups following us, nothing would have happened. I could have stopped it."

"That's why I'm going to do what I can to help Nolly out of all this mess."

NOLLY'S fingers were trembling a little. He reached for a cigarette, but he didn't light it. He kept it in his hand and looked at the big man.

"Tell us what you know, Val," he said.

"It's not very much." The big man ran thick fingers through his red hair. His hands were white, the nails well manicured and clean. "Look, I spotted those two boys even before we met Arlene and

Delia. They tailed after us wherever we went, from one joint to the next. It was no coincidence. It couldn't be a coincidence."

"No, it wasn't," Nolly said.

"At first I figured it had something personal to do with us. I told Lenny about it, and she agreed it was something about the four of us, from the Globe office. I thought about the money you and Ken said was in the safe, and I got plenty worried. I had a hunch there was trouble brewing. You get hunches like that once in a while. So I took Arlene home. I don't know if you remember that. We were in a place called Marco's, over on the East Fifties. I told Arlene I'd go back to Marco's to pick up you fellows and then we'd all go to the office and check on things."

Ken said: "You didn't tell us about all this."

"No, I didn't. I wasn't sure about it."

"But you told Arlene."

"I was worried, so I had to tell her. But when I returned to Marco's, you were all gone, and the place was closed. It was past two in the morning by then. The college boys were gone, too. So I went to the office alone. I should have called Lenny then, she was worried about me; and she got the idea to meet me at the office. She got there first, I guess. She was looking for me when she found Nolly, instead. It was all over by then. Wright was already dead. By the time I got there, the place was filthy with cops and everybody—I mean you and the boys and Arlene—were gone. I didn't hang around."

Nolly said quietly: "Did you try to get hold of Ken or Emmett right away?" He could feel a tension spring into the atmosphere with his question.

Val's voice was calm. "They weren't in. I telephoned, and then went over to their places, but neither was in. By the time I called your house, the cops were already there. They wouldn't let me talk to Susan. I didn't try to see her. I wanted to find you first, and learn what had happened."

"That doesn't help much, does it?" Nolly said.

"That's all we've got. We have to make

something out of it." Nolly didn't say anything. There was a little silence.

Emmett frowned and said: "What I can't figure is this Otto Orditch fellow. Otto's a big name in illegal financial circles. He started out as a check-cashing operator and went on into usury-financing crime. black markets, and bookies—for fancy interest rates. If somebody used your name to rack up a stack of IOU's with him, that's bad. Otto won't take any welshing. He'll get that money back, one way or another. And one thing sure, he and those cute boys of his won't let loose of you, Nolly, until they settle it. They don't give a damn about Wright being murdered. That's all in the day's work to people like them."

Nolly drew a deep breath and looked at the three men.

"But who'd know my signature so well, and use it like that?"

Ken said: "I guess we ought to face it. It was one of us. That's what you're thinking, isn't it, Nolly? It has to be one of us at the office."

"I don't like to think about it like that," Nolly said.

"Well, that's the way it looks to me," Ken said.

Emmett Pillman scowled. "That's lousy."

"But it's true," Ken insisted. "It has to be one of us."

THEY were all quiet again. It was not a pleasant silence. There were things in it that slithered and circled and darted like snakes through the room. Nolly put on his hat again and waited. He wished he could think of something to do next, and then he thought of it and didn't like it.

Pillman said: "Ah, none of us would do a thing like that."

"Not as far as we know," Val Douglas said quietly. "But this thing has to be settled. We can't hide Nolly from the cops forever."

Nolly felt a little better. He stood up, feeling the weight of Chester's big Colt in his pocket, and then he just stood there because the others didn't get up. They were all looking at him, as if they were

waiting for something. He turned and met their eyes. There was something else, then. They wanted to ask him something else.

Pillman looked uncomfortable. "Nolly, we've got to be sure we're doing the right thing. We've got all the faith in the world in you, but the police asked me some pretty peculiar questions."

"Like what?"

"They wanted to know what your salary is."

"You know how much I'm getting,"

Nolly said. "Sixty."

"Then they wanted to know how come Susan wears a mink coat."

"Why, she saved it," Nolly said. "She saved for it out of her pin money."

"You don't get mink coats for pin money."

"Well, I don't know. I mean, I never thought about it. She's economical, I guess, and she just saved for it. It's not an expensive mink," he added lamely.

"All mink is expensive. That's what the cops wanted to know about today. A mink coat costs three thousand, at least. Maybe two thousand, for the cheapest kind." Pillman looked at Val; Val was staring at Nolly. "The police figure you were taking money from Globe, Nolly. That's what is on my mind. I must be honest with you. If you can explain it, well and good."

"I can't explain it," Nolly said. Then he was struck by something he remembered. He felt his face grow hot. "Unless it was that extra twenty-dollar bill last night. Remember?"

Ken said: "I remember it. From your pay envelope."

"Maybe I got a raise and didn't know about it, and she saved the money."

"Wouldn't Susan have told you?"

"I don't know. It would pay for the mink coat, wouldn't it?"

"I guess it would, over a time."

"Does that satisfy you?"

Pillman said: "Oh hell. Yes, Nolly, I'm satisfied. I know you well enough to trust you. I think we'd better—"

There was a knock on the door.

Emmett was just reaching for his shirt when the knock came. It sounded like the knock of doom. It went right through

Nolly and shook him to his heels. He stood and stared at the others, and Val came to his feet, huge and silent. They all looked at each other. It wasn't a mistake. Somebody was out there all right. Somebody wanted in.

The knock was repeated.

Ken called out suddenly: "Who is it?"

Someone on the other side of the door said, "Open up!"

"Who is it?" Ken repeated.

"Just open up!"

It was quiet inside the apartment. Pillman reached for his necktie and then held it in both hands, staring at the door. Val Douglas put away his pipe, frowning. Nolly didn't breathe. They looked at each other then at the door. The knock was repeated, imperative, demanding.

"This is Lieutenant Fiske, Mr. Pillman." It was a cold, precise voice. "I must ask you to let me in."

NOLLY didn't know what to do. He swallowed pain in his throat and Pillman whispered hoarsely: "He'll find you here, Nolly."

"Did you call them to say I was coming over?"

"Don't be a fool. Look, you go into the bedroom."

"That won't buy anything," Nolly said.

"Use the fire-escape there. Get out, Nolly—step on it!"

A sudden slamming sound came from the door, as if someone had hurled heavy shoulders against it. The door jarred inward and came almost off its hinges. Someone out there rapped: "Open up!"

Nolly felt Val Douglas' hands on him, pushing him, thrusting him away from the door and through the archway into a tiny, dark bedroom. The back of his knees bumped against the bed and he almost sat down. He grabbed at Pillman as he came in.

"Listen, I don't get it. He knows I'm here! How could he know that?"

"What's the difference?" Pillman breathed angrily.

"I don't want you to get into trouble!"

"We'll say you weren't anywhere around tonight. We'll be all right. We'll get together later and work this thing out."

Val said: "I'll go with him, Emmett. He needs a hand."

"All right," Nolly said.

"Use the fire-escape. I'll go right behind you."

"I'm going," Nolly said.

He turned to the window. The crash of heavy shoulders sounded again on the outer door. The whole building was waking up to the sound of it. He heard a woman screaming for help, and then the noise became much louder. He realized that Emmett and Ken had opened the hall door and gone out in there to further delay Fiske. At the same time he heard a whistle blowing crazily, then more whistles, blowing all over the place.

"Come on, Nolly." Val pushed him. "Let's get going."

He opened the window as high as it would go, then threw one leg over the sill and felt around in the darkness until his feet touched the iron slats of the fire-escape platform. Then he climbed all the way out. Val Douglas was right behind him. The wind almost took Nolly's hat off. He clapped it down harder on his head and looked down. The street sloped sharply down toward the park and the river. The moonlight made a silver streak across the shimmering water. The park was in deep shadow. He began to run down the steps. Val's shoes clattering behind him on the iron treads. Then he went, slower, not so much because of the noise, but because his knees were trembling. He didn't think they would hold him up. He didn't think he could go down another flight.

"Keep going!" Val whispered angrily behind him.

Then he was on the lower platform and he was still moving, and there was hardly any breath left in his lungs. The pipe railing was cold under his fingers. He went down two more flights, and above them a window shot up and light streamed out and someone screamed: "He just went down here!" Nolly ducked flat against the wall beside Val. Then he realized they couldn't stay there and he began to run down the last flight of iron steps. The woman above yelled again. She sounded triumphant. Something exploded loudly up

there, with a sharp, slamming sound, and a bullet hit the platform with a loud *whang!* Nolly looked down at the sidewalk twelve feet below and slid under the iron railing and swung there for a moment, dangling by his fingertips. Val waited above him. There were footsteps on the upper fire escape. There was no one on the street below.

HE remembered to keep his knees loose, and his legs buckled under him. His chin slammed down on one flexed knee and he toppled sidewise, his hands splayed out, skinning across the pavement. He rolled over once, then scrambled to the side of the building and began to run down the sidewalk toward the darkness of the park. High above him the gun exploded again. The bullet spattered on the concrete just behind him. He turned his head and looked for Val. The big man was just dropping from the fire-escape. A uniformed cop pounded out of the apartment entrance close by. Val's figure slammed into him and both men rolled over and over across the sidewalk. Nolly took a step back toward them. Then he saw Val's fist cut across the cop's face, and Val stood upright, staggering. Nolly turned and ran with all his strength for the park. There was a flame in his lungs and his throat. His heart seemed as big as a watermelon, hammering against his chest, bursting out against his ribs. He couldn't run another step.

Then he rounded the first corner and someone was there waiting for him.

"Nolly?"

It was a girl. She was standing beside a car, with the door open, her back to a street lamp a little farther down the sidewalk. She was tall and slender and her hair caught the light and turned it into a brush fire. I was Arlene Douglas. Her face was a dim white oval, turned toward him.

"What happened to Val?"

"I don't know. He tried to help me get away. I think they got him. I'm not sure." He looked toward the empty corner.

"Get in, Nolly. Quick!"

He scrambled into the car. The girl ran around the front and slid behind the

driver's wheel on the other side. By that time Val was up to the car and piling in beside Nolly on the leather seat. His big body slammed Nolly against the girl. His face was lathered with perspiration. His eyes looked desperate.

"Get going, Lenny," he told the girl. Keep your lights off. We don't want them to tag the license plates."

She had the motor running already. She flicked the gears and gave it the gas. The car leaped ahead like a hound unleashed, spinning straight across the street from which they had come. Two cops were there, halfway up the block, running down the sidewalk. They were far behind. Nolly didn't think they had much chance of identifying Arlene's car.

She was a good driver. She swung into the park, roaring into the Drive across a red light. A taxi swerved out of their way with a screech of frightened tires. The road curved, swung upward, and then flattened out under a tunnel of trees. The river winked placidly on their right, reflecting the big electric signs on the Jersey side. They passed a Riverside Drive bus as if it were standing still.

There was no pursuit.

Nolly said finally: "I guess I ought to thank you."

"Don't bother to thank us," Val grinned.

"You helped me out of a sweet jam. I couldn't have made it if you didn't come with me, Val."

"Forget it."

"You took that cop off my tail on the sidewalk. He'd have gotten me for sure, if you didn't handle him for me. He'll remember you, Val. You shouldn't have done it."

"There was nothing else to do. I don't think he saw who I was."

Nolly looked at the girl on his left. She was giving all her attention to traffic. Her face looked lovely in the dim light reflected from the instrument panel.

"Where are we going?" Nolly asked.

"You're going to Arlene's place. She'll take care of you."

"What about you?"

"I'll be all right. Don't worry about me."

"All right," Nolly said. "Let's go to Ar-

lene's place. As long as the cops aren't there."

"The police don't know about Arlene." Val said. "I hope they never know about her."

"I wish they never knew about me," Nolly said.

VI

HE KEPT WATCHING THE girl's feet. She had changed to bright red slippers with little silver bells on the ends of the cord laces. The bells gave off tiny silvery sounds with each step she took. Her silken slacks slap-slapped in rhythm with the jingling bells. The girl's steps went into the kitchen for the last time, and then they paused in front of him and Arlene said:

"The eggs are getting cold, Nolly. You must be hungry."

"I don't feel much like eating," he said.

He looked at her, where she stood waiting, smiling. Her face looked scrubbed and shining. She looked wonderful. He envied Val Douglas for having a sister like her, and then he was very glad that Arlene was not his own sister. There was a sadness in her eyes when she looked at him, a calm that reassured him and told him of things he was only vaguely beginning to feel. The apartment was like Arlene, a small place in the Village, quiet, scrubbed, shining; a place of comfort and understanding. For some reason, then, he thought of Susan. He wished he could call her and tell her he was all right, that he had friends who were taking care of him.

"You're being pretty good to me," he said.

Arlene said: "You're a pretty good guy, Nolly. Val thinks you are, and that's good enough for me."

"I didn't kill Mr. Wright," Nolly said.

"We don't think you did, either."

"And I didn't take that money. I don't know if I gave away the combination to the safe or not, last night when I was drunk, but I don't think I took that money."

"You didn't," said Arlene.

"Then who did?"

"That's what Val is trying to find out," she muttered.

"You two oughtn't to get mixed up in it," Nolly said.

"We're mixed up in it already. It's too late to quit now."

"I ought to get out of town."

"Do you want to run away?"

"No. I want to settle it. I didn't do anything; I don't like to be hunted like this. I'm all mixed up. All I know is that I didn't do it."

"Eat your eggs," Arlene said. "It will do you good. And there's more coffee perking."

Val Douglas hadn't said anything all this time. He sat in an armchair near the fireplace, and smoked his pipe and stared thoughtfully at the toes of his shoes. He looked shaggy in his brown tweed suit. He wore a thin red woolen shirt under the coat, buttoned at the neck, but without a tie. His craggy face was creased by thought.

"Val," Nolly said, "do you suppose somebody tipped off the police that I was at Emmett's place?"

The big man knocked the dottle from his pipe over the fire-screen. He pulled his legs up under him and leaned forward, elbows on knees. His reddish eyebrows crinkled.

"I don't know. Let's look at it. I arrived at Emmett's after you and Ken called, and he told me he'd spoken to Ken and that you were coming over. He didn't call after I arrived, but he had a chance before that. For that matter, how do you know Ken didn't call the police while he was in the booth, before or after he spoke to Emmett?"

"I don't like to think that any of them —"

Val shook his head. "Nolly, Ken was right when he said it could be one of us. Pillman doesn't seem to be the right type for it, but Ken does, he knows the underworld and he's been a private detective. But looks are deceiving. After all, who is what he actually appears to be?"

Nolly said: "Well, you took chances helping me tonight?"

The big man shrugged. "You needed help."

"But you don't owe me anything—neither you or Arlene."

Val looked at his sister. "You kept Arlene's name from the police, so they don't know about her. You're staying here. As far as the police are concerned, we'll go to them when we have a story for them, and not before."

Nolly blinked. The room blurred before his eyes, leaving only the leaping brightness of the fire. Arlene crossed the room and sat down beside him, and her toes gave off little silvery tinklings that blended with the soft crackling of the pine logs. Her hand felt cool and comfortable, slipping into his. The coffee he had consumed made him feel warm and relaxed.

"If I could just rest for a couple of hours," he said.

He stretched out on the couch with his eyes closed, while Val and Arlene remained in the room near the fireplace. It was good to rest, to stretch out, to float slowly off into warm darkness. He knew when Val left, murmuring something to his sister at the door. The fire crackled and hissed. He heard Arlene say something and then the bells tinkled and came near again and there was a blanket over him. He slipped deeper into the blanket. It was like sliding down a long, dark tunnel, sliding easily and gracefully into darkness and rest and warmth...

HE SLEPT for almost sixteen hours. Late afternoon sunlight, pouring through the casement windows, awakened him. His body felt light and free, and his head was clear. At some time during the night or early morning someone had moved him from the couch to the bedroom. It puzzled him only vaguely.

Then he remembered what had awakened him, and he sat upright in the bed, his heart thumping.

The sound of the bell was repeated, and he sat with his body taut, resting on his elbows, and listened to the rapid tick of Arlene's footsteps, going toward the door. A murmur of voices followed. Then a brief silence. Arlene invited the visitor inside.

Nolly swung his legs over the side of the bed, carefully planting his feet on the

floor. He was rather surprised to learn that his shoes were missing, and that he was dressed only in his trousers. Outside, a sparrow chirped in the bedraggled trees that graced the Greenwich Village court. Quiet sunlight bathed the window, touched the girl's dresser and vanity mirrors. The door to the bathroom was ajar, and Nolly looked in there, saw that the window was far too small for him to squeeze through.

The voice of the visitor was clearly distinguishable now. Calm and persuasive, with a gray weariness in the words.

It was Lieutenant Fiske. He was saying:

"I am happy that you see fit to cooperate with us, Miss Douglas. We need every grain of information we can get. Last night we also managed to take this Bayless man into custody, but he eluded us with the help of a man whose description fits your brother."

"Indeed," Arlene said coldly.

"I have no proof of that, of course. They escaped in a car, but unfortunately my men had only a glimpse of it, not enough to furnish any kind of description as to make or model. I would appreciate the opportunity to interview Mr. Douglas, if you know anything about it."

"There is very little to tell you," Arlene said. Her voice was calm now, soft and a little husky. "I admit I'm Val's sister, but beyond furnishing a character reference for him, I can be of no assistance. I don't know what happened last night any more than my brother does, I'm sure; and that's precious little. I'm sure if you asked him——"

"We cannot locate him, Miss Douglas. I hoped he was here."

"There is no one here but myself," said Arlene flatly.

"Are you quite sure?"

Arlene said: "You may search, if you like."

Her invitation came like an explosion in Nolly's ears. He stood upright all at once, and the bedsprings creaked, released of his weight. His legs trembled. There was a momentary silence from the room beyond the door. He felt around for his shoes and found them under the bed, and tried to poke his toes into them while

keeping one eye on the doorknob. He wondered if Arlene had asked Lieutenant Fiske up here of her own accord. Maybe it was a plan to drop him into the hands of the police, for reasons of her own. Perhaps her only interest in him was to protect Val. He frowned and listened.

"A search won't be necessary," said Fiske. "I'm sure you have nothing to conceal, Miss Douglas. You didn't know Arnold Bayless, did you?"

"No," said Arlene. "All I know about the affair is what I read in this morning's papers."

"And you haven't seen your brother since Friday?"

"Quite right."

"Very well, then," Fiske said.

There was a pause, and Nolly stood still as Fiske's steps retreated. Nolly released a long, silent breath. His face in the vanity mirrors was stark and pale; his eyes were haunted.

The bedroom door opened and Arlene came in.

HER SMILE was tremulous. She stood there in a jade housecoat, holding a breakfast tray of orange juice and bacon and eggs and a silver pot of coffee. Nolly delved into his pockets for a cigarette and stuck one between his lips. She looked wonderful. Her red hair shimmered softly in the calm sunlight that came through the casement window. Her face was pale.

"He's gone, Nolly," she said.

"I know," he said. "How did he find out about you?"

"He was looking for Val. He doesn't know I was there with you that night."

"Maybe not," Nolly said. He put on his shirt and sat down to lace his shoes while Arlene busied herself with the tray. He washed in the tiny bathroom, found his necktie, and knotted it loosely under the soft collar before seating himself across the table from her in the kitchen. The kitchen was small and white and shining.

"Feel better," Arlene asked.

"Rested," he nodded. "What did you put in my coffee last night?"

"A sleeping pill. Val thought you needed one."

"I guess I did," he nodded. "Where is Val?"

"He left after you went to sleep. He usually spends his Sundays in Jersey—he has a little shack out there, and he likes to spend his time outdoors, when he can. I don't know if he's out there or not, right now. I thought the police might be questioning him, but he hasn't gone to them yet, evidently. I think he should talk to Fiske, though, don't you?"

"About me, yes," Nolly nodded. He tried some of the steaming, golden coffee, and it was good, warming his throat and stomach. Some of the tension slipped out of him as he watched the girl across the table.

It was very pleasant, to sit here and have breakfast with her on Sunday afternoon. He wondered a little about the night that had passed, but he said nothing about it. He wished he never had to leave here again. He said abruptly: "I've got some things to do."

She said: "The thing for you to do is to stay here. The papers are still full of it. You mustn't go out until Val says it's all right for you to do so."

"Does Val think it's all right for me to stay here?"

She looked at him. "No, he doesn't think it wise. He thinks I'm falling in love with you."

He said quietly, "And are you?"

"I think so." She moved away from him, and spoke calmly. "In any case, now that Lieutenant Fiske has already been here, this is obviously the perfect place for you. Don't you understand?"

"I understand." He felt savage anger with himself. "But I'm going, anyway. I want to find out about my wife."

"She's all right," Arlene said.

"How do you know?"

"Well, I just suppose——"

"I must find out for myself," Nolly insisted. "And then I have some other things to attend to. I can't just sit here and wait for them to find me. That would mean a lot of trouble for you. I have to do something about this for myself, can't you see?"

She looked at him for a long, seaching minute.

"Of course," she said. "I can't stop you."

"No, you can't."

"If you want my car, it's parked right outside. You can't miss it. It's the convertible. The police don't know it's the one used last night."

"Yes, I heard," he said. "You're awfully good to me."

"I wish you'd stay until Val comes back. Perhaps he'll take you to his place in Jersey."

"I can't stay," Nolly said. "I'm going now."

She got up silently and found his hat and coat for him. He took a few minutes to shave with an electric razor he found in the bathroom, and then he put on his topcoat. The girl sat silently in the living-room, watching him with secrets in her eyes. The time when he had danced with her in Sadie's Sin seemed long, long ago. She rubbed her cheek with the palm of her hand as he put his collar up. He hesitated and looked at her.

"I had a gun," he said.

She nodded, then shook her head. "You don't want it, Nolly."

"Yes, I do."

"It will only get you into trouble," she protested.

"Or maybe out of it," he said. "Where is it?"

She got the Colt .45 for him, the one he'd taken from Chester. She had kept it in the drum table in the living room. She held it by the muzzle as if it were a dead rat. Taking it from her, he checked the clip in the magazine; it was a standard Army-type pistol, and he was familiar with it. He dropped it into his pocket and accepted the car keys from her. At the door, she said:

"Be careful, Nolly. Don't let anyone see you. There may be detectives at your place."

"I suppose so," he said. "I'll be careful."

She said:

"Are you coming back?"

"I hope so," he said.

He shut the door.

VII

THE outer corridor was empty and quiet. He found the stairs and went down silently, drifting down two floors to the street entrance. The old building had been reconverted recently, and now boasted a tiny, ultra-modern lobby. The porter was dusting around down there, a thin shadow of a man who gave Nolly only a casual glance. Nolly paused at the tall mirrors on the wall and pretended to adjust his knitted tie. The porter went on working.

He walked around the porter and came out on the street, blinking in the bright sunshine. The car was where the girl had said it was, parked just a little way down from the entrance. The street was calm, with a Sunday calm. Toward the corner was an Italian grocery, and a man with a dog was entering it. In the other direction was the faded green and brown of Washington Square. Nobody was alarmed when he got into the convertible and drove off toward the square and Fifth Avenue.

I've got to find out if I did it, Nolly thought. Maybe he did do it. He was drunk and he wasn't happy about Susan. He never could get her all the things she wanted. They hadn't been getting along too well, and it was always because of money. She doesn't want too much, maybe, but she wants me to make something of myself. Maybe I ought to go to a psychiatrist, or something.

"Shut up," he told himself. "You're in a squirrel cage."

He paid attention to traffic after that. It took most of an hour to reach his home in the Bronx, even using the highway. It was strange to drive slowly back through the streets of his own neighborhood. As if he'd been away for years, instead of for two days. It was not the best street in the world, nor was it the worst. It was quiet, with tall brownstones converted into apartments, and with little patches of ripe autumn green around the basement entrances.

It was an extraordinarily long street, without a break in it, curving a little southward toward the subway entrance.

His own apartment at No. 1414 was at the end of the long block, the far end. Nolly drove slowly down the quiet, placid street. A little slower than normal. He could see his own apartment windows now. The blinds were drawn against the glare of the setting sun. Green blinds, and Susan's geraniums in the window box. Dead leaves flurried across the sidewalk. He could see a man leaning against a fire-plug across the street, and Mrs. Cassidy coming home with a bag of groceries, and the familiar brownstone steps, the polished mailboxes. Mrs. Cassidy and the man lounging across the street. Nolly touched the gas pedal and went on by.

There was another man seated in a parked car farther down toward the subway kiosk. He wasn't watching Nolly's convertible. He was watching the entrance to No. 1414. So was the man at the fire plug. Nolly drove across the intersection, then turned north and parked beside Adam's delicatessen at the opposite corner. The shadows were deeper in this street that lacked the sun's direct rays. He lit a cigarette and sat behind the wheel and then got out of the car and started back toward the subway kiosk. A third man was there, quietly smoking a pipe and looking up the street, beyond the corner, toward 1414. Nolly paused to examine his shoes, then turned and walked in the opposite direction as if he had forgotten something.

THE apartment house around the corner from No. 1414 was eight floors high, the same as his own, and an automatic elevator carried him silently and unobserved to the rooftop. From the corridor doorways came the clatter of dinner dishes and the discord of radios as he climbed the last flight of stairs to the roof.

The setting sun was still visible up here, just seen over the silver thread of the Hudson in the far distance. A woman stood on the tarred and graveled roof about twenty paces from the tinued doorway. She looked his way casually, then resumed work at a line of washing. Nolly sauntered past her, crossing to the next roof.

He was over his own apartment now. The elevator housing and the stairs down to the top-floor hall off to the left. There was a trapdoor nearby, which opened into a pantry closet in his apartment kitchen, and he considered it for a moment. Looking back, he saw the woman with her washing, staring at him.

Nolly turned to the stairway shaft, swung the heavy fire-proof door aside, and went down on swift, silent feet.

At the corner where the stairs turned into the hallway he paused, flattening against the wall to listen. There was no sound. There didn't seem to be a policeman posted here. He looked cautiously around the corner, ready to bolt at the slightest alarm. The hall was empty. No one stood at his door.

His key made no sound as he turned the lock. He paused, the door still shut, and took the gun from his pocket. He kept it pointed toward the floor; he didn't want to use it. He didn't think he would use it, no matter what happened.

A scrabbling of paws came from the foyer beyond the closed door, then an anxious whining sound. He had forgotten Loopy Lu, the cocker spaniel. The scratching went eagerly up the door, and foot-steps tick-ticked toward him. The steps hesitated, then they came on.

He opened the door.

Loopy Lu threw herself ecstatically upon his legs, tail wagging in furious glee. Susan stood behind her. He couldn't see anyone in the living room beyond. He shut the door swiftly, crossed the room, looked into the bedroom, and entered the kitchen. There were no policemen. He turned, and Susan stood in the kitchen doorway behind him.

It was a strange, eternal moment, while he looked at her. He felt weak with relief. She was alone, the kitchen was empty behind her, all porcelain and green and ivory enamel. The red pots of geraniums stood on the window sill, a stack of unwashed dishes were piled in the sink, and crumbs littered the breakfast nook. It seemed ages since he'd used the percolator that stood on the electric stove. He patted Loopy Lu's head and smiled.

"Arnold," Susan whispered.

"Hello," he said.

She was a tiny golden doll, a lovely little puppet, wearing a thin red silk blouse and dark navy slacks and her usual high-heeled pumps. Her tiny, heart-shaped face was blanched. Her red mouth quivered, and he heard her abrupt breathing, saw her breasts rise tautly against the silk blouse. Her eyes, enormous and blue as an inland lake, moved from his face to the gun in his hand. Her fingers touched her lips.

"Oh, Arnold!" she breathed.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

She nodded, mute. He stepped out of the pantry, his feet light and careful on the waxed kitchen floor. He listened. There was no sound in the apartment. No one came through the arched entrance to the living room.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Of course," she said. "Put the gun away, Arnold."

He looked down at it and grinned and put the Colt away in his topcoat pocket. He knew he looked disheveled. He could see the criticism in her eyes, a familiar measuring look that he knew only too well. It didn't bother him now.

"I need some money," he said. "That's why I came back."

She said quickly: "I haven't any money."

"Are you sure?"

"Arnold, you'd better get out of here. The police——"

"I know all about the police," he said.

He watched her face slowly regain composure as he walked around her, not touching her, not wanting to touch her, aware of the way she shrank back a step from him, aware of her big childish eyes watching him, weighing him, with their eternal, secret contempt deep inside them. The dog whined a little and followed at Nolly's heels. He reached down and scratched her ears absently.

SUSAN followed him with watchful eyes as he moved from the kitchen to the short hallway that led to the living room. There was a thin layer of dust on the antique furniture which Susan had chosen to accent her own delicate size. The rose drapes were motionless over the open

window. Nolly stood to one side and peered down. The detective was still patiently waiting across the darkened street. Then he crossed to the foyer and checked the lock on the hall door. When he returned to the living room, Susan was lifting the telephone.

"Put that down," he said sharply.

She didn't move. Her mouth smiled. The dog whined.

"I'm going to tell them you're here," she said.

"No."

"If you were innocent, you wouldn't be afraid of the police," she said. "I think you've got a hell of a nerve, coming back to me, to get me into trouble with you!" Her tiny voice rose above its usual lilting whisper. He didn't think it was cute any more. Her words cut at him like the slash of a whip, but he didn't wince. "You did a bad, crazy thing, Arnold, and you expect me to get in trouble over you, but I'm not going to do it! Not me! You can go to the devil your own way, but without me!"

"Susan," he said quietly, "I didn't kill anybody. Put that telephone down."

"I won't!"

"Please!"

Her mouth was scornful, watching his tall thin figure as he advanced toward her from the foyer. She thrust a thin little finger in the dial and spun it once. Nolly seized her arm with one hand and recovered the telephone with the other. He was surprised at her thin, childish body, as he always was, ever since they'd been married. Surprised, too, at the wild, furious strength she possessed as she struggled against him. The cocker began to whimper, then barked in terror. Susan's face turned red; her hair tumbled down around her shoulders. For another moment she strained against him, her breath panting. Then her nails raked across his neck, drew stinging fire from his skin. She pulled away and he aided her retreat with a push that sent her staggering. His face was dark with anger as he cradled the telephone.

"You're a hell of a wife," he whispered.

"You're nothing but a common murderer!" she panted.

"I didn't do it, I tell you."

"Then tell it to the police."

"I can't," he said. "Not until I learn the truth of it." He watched her little figure relax, and deliberately tightened her up again by adding: "And you're going to help me get the truth, Susan."

She just looked at him. The dog had stopped her barking. Her round eyes looked completely baffled, switching from Nolly to Susan. Nolly said: "You're going to help me, Susan, whether you like it or not."

She shrugged. Her eyes were filled with tears, shockingly real. But there was a prim set to her mouth that aroused an old fury inside him.

"Where were you Friday night?" he asked.

She said nothing.

"Why did you tell the police you were here, when you know you weren't here at all? I fed the dog, you must have seen the bowl I left on the floor. Why did you tell them I hadn't come home?"

"Because it was true," she said briefly. "I fed the dog myself."

"Susan," he said quietly. "Please. You know you weren't here."

"I was."

He looked into the face of her lie and felt helpless. His frustration reverted to his old fury again.

"I think you're mixed up in this," he said. "I'm almost sure of it. You're going to talk to me."

"Am I?"

"You're not just going to sit there with those big eyes and keep your mouth shut. This time you're going to answer me. This time you're not just going to shake your head and smile."

She shook her head and smiled.

"First, I want some money," he said.

"Find it," she told him.

"Get your purse."

"Get it yourself," she told him. "I won't help a murderer."

"You don't believe that," he said.

"You're a murderer!" she flung at him. "Nothing but a murderer!"

He was alarmed as she raised her voice. "Be quiet."

"I won't be quiet! I'll——"

"I don't want to sock you," he said. "But I will."

She looked at him. She shook her head. She smiled her little smile.

"Get your purse," he said again.

SHE shrugged and looked at him as if she were studying a problem in geometry. Then she turned on her tiny high heels and went into the bedroom. He followed her silently. The dog's claws clicked on the floor after them. The bed wasn't made; the chenille covers were tossed in a heap at its foot. Susan's filmy negligee lay on the floor near the vanity, and her closet stood open to exhibit a careless array of costly clothing and racks of shoes. He looked at the mink coat hanging there, and frowned. She picked up her purse from the vanity and handed it to him. She smiled.

"Help yourself," she said.

It was a tiny pillbox of black patent leather, with a delicately filigreed gold clasp. He rummaged with one hand among the cosmetics inside, his gray eyes never leaving her. He came up with a shockingly thick roll of bills. They were mostly tens and twenties. There must have been at least two hundred dollars in the roll. He dropped the bag on the nearest of the twin beds and held out the money in his open palm.

"Where did you get all this?"

She shook her head and smiled.

"Answer me," he said.

"You can have it all, Arnold."

"Where did you get it?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she lisped.

"I don't really care. I just want to get things straight between us, that's all. It doesn't matter to me any more."

She said in her tiny, plaintive voice, mocking him: "Why, Arnold, don't you love me any more?"

"I don't know."

It was the first time he had ever denied her an affirmative.

She shook her head and smiled.

"Killing Mr. Wright has hardened you," she said.

"I didn't kill Mr. Wright."

"You know you still love me," she said.

"I don't know," he said again. He looked at the open closet door and said: "They seem to think I stole the money from the office to pay for your mink coat."

Her eyes grew wide and silent, staring at him.

"Your mink coat," he said again. "Who paid for it?"

"You did, Arnold," she said softly.

"Not on my salary."

"I saved for it, Arnold."

"No, you didn't," he said. "Who gave it to you?"

She shook her head and smiled once more.

"I've got to know, Susan." His voice sounded strange and harsh in his own ears. "You've got to tell me. I don't care what you've done to me, behind my back——"

She was silent. She isn't very clever, Nolly thought. If you back her into a corner, she can't think up an answer. She won't even make the effort to invent a plausible excuse. She just shakes her head and smiles.

The telephone began to ring in the living room. It was a muted bell, burring softly through the tension that charged the atmosphere. Nolly watched Susan's gaze flicker hopefully to the doorway. He didn't move. The dog trotted into the living room, then came back and wagged her tail excitedly. The telephone kept ringing with long, humming sounds. Susan smiled and turned toward the living room. He followed close behind her. The telephone stood on a low taboret of veneered mahogany at one end of the long couch. It was quite dark in the room now. The draped windows shimmered blankly with the night. Susan went to the telephone and was about to pick it up when Nolly changed his mind. He covered her small hand with his.

"Don't answer it," he said.

"But I have to. It may be the police. They know I'm at home. They'll think it's funny if I don't answer it."

"Let them think what they please."

The telephone stopped ringing. The white plastic dial gleamed faintly in the shadows. Beneath the telephone, on a lower shelf of the taboret, was a scratch

pad and a little golden pencil. There was writing on the pad. Nolly picked it up and saw it was a name and an address. Susan made a gesture of protest. Her face was as dim and pale as a wraith in the gloom. Her luminous eyes were suddenly wide with fear.

"What the hell," Nolly said aloud.

He looked at the name on the scratch pad. It was in Susan's thin, spidery writing.

"Delia DeWolfe," he read. "Twenty-five Mountain Street, Queens."

SUSAN'S voice suddenly cut at him from the shadows, thin and high with offensive anger that attacked him with sharp fury.

"Yes," she said, "Delia DeWolfe. You seem to think you're the only injured party around here, Arnold Bayless! But what about me? You have girls calling you up at all hours of the night! How long has that been going on? You look at me as if I were a tramp, while you've been playing around as much as you please, with a string of girls on the hook. But I know all about you now, Arnold Bayless, so you might as well climb down off that high horse and admit that you've been cheating. And you seem to think I'm the one who's been unfaithful!"

Her attack had left her with gathering breathlessness as she flung the words at him. He didn't move, didn't say anything. He stood still and watched her tiny figure trembling with artificial fury, and he knew it for what it was.

He shook his head and smiled at her.

"Who is this Delia?" Susan finished. "What is she to you, anyway?"

He said quietly: "When did she call?"

"This morning," Susan snapped. "Four o'clock in the morning. She seems to think she owns you, doesn't she? Did you neglect to tell her we were married? You belong to me, Arnold Bayless, don't you forget that! When I'm through with you, she can have you, but not until I'm good and ready. I'm going to——"

"Shut up," he said. "She's not my girl. She belongs to Ken."

She looked as if he had struck her.

"Ken?" she repeated.

"Ken Wimbaugh. He works at the office. You've met him."

She drew a deep breath. "I don't believe it. She wanted you to meet her at that place in Queens. I suppose that's where you always meet her!" She sneered. "Is that your little love nest?"

"I don't know what it is," Nolly said. "When did she want me to be out there?"

She said: "Is she really Ken Wimbaugh's girl?"

"Of course," Nolly said.

She was silent for a long time. It was silent in the room, silent outside. Silence brooded over the whole city. The shadows veiled Susan's little figure, but he could see her eyes grow soft and wistful and suddenly plaintive. It shocked him.

"When did Delia say she wanted me to go over to that place?" asked Nolly.

"Tonight," Susan said. "At nine o'clock." She hesitated and asked wistfully: "Is Delia as pretty as I am?"

"No," he said. "Not like you, Susan."

She came close to him and leaned against him, a little way she had that made him feel her soft little body, pliant and warm and completely feminine, yielding to him in a manner that had enthralled him from the very beginning.

Her whisper was a shadowy as the evening shadows.

"Do you still love me, Nolly?"

"Yes," he said.

"Are you sure?"

He shook his head and smiled. He took her arms from around him and picked up his hat. She stood very still. Very silent. Her dim face looked stricken as he bent and patted the cocker spaniel's eager head. Loopy Lu made a lonesome sound and licked his hand. He looked up at Susan. "Don't forget to walk her."

"Are you going now, Nolly?"

"Yes."

"There's plenty of time. You're safe here. Stay for a little while. I've missed you, Nolly."

"I can't stay," he said.

She said quietly: "Don't you want me, Nolly?"

"No," he said.

He put on his hat and opened the corridor door and left the apartment. There

was no sound from Susan, behind him. He could hear the dog whimpering until he turned the corner in the hall.

VIII

HE WENT BACK THE WAY HE had come, over the roof-tops to the building on the next street. There was no difficulty getting down. No one saw him. He found Arlene's convertible where he had left it, parked in shadows near the corner, and slid in. His body ached with nervous tension. The clock on the dashboard read a few minutes after six. He lit a cigarette and smoked quietly for a few moments, listening to the street sounds around him, half expecting the sudden wail of a police siren. Nothing happened. Then Effie Simpson came out of the Castle Hill lunch-room on the corner and walked toward him. Mrs. Simpson occupied the apartment across from his own. She was a good neighbor. They had played bridge together on many a rainy night.

She looked different now. Nolly felt his legs tighten as he saw the prim purse of her mouth. She was looking at the car. He couldn't tell if she had identified him behind the wheel or not. She looked at the car, at the license plate, and turned her head to keep on looking as she went by. Nolly started the car and drove away from there.

Tension clawed at his stomach. Maybe Effie Simpson had recognized him, and maybe not. In any case, she had noticed Arlene's car, and he didn't want to risk entangling Arlene in the mess. He suddenly knew that he couldn't use the vehicle any more. It was too dangerous—for her. He turned downtown, back to the Village again, and presently his mind, numbed by the encounter with Susan, began to function along rational lines. He drove automatically, thinking of Susan, of his days and years with her. He felt free and unshackled for the first time in a long time; but perversely, he drew no joy from it. He kept remembering Susan as he had known her; how he had thought she was, and how she had been. The first time he saw her was in the USO canteen,

downtown. He had been enthralled from the start, had asked her to dance; had noted that she dwelt with satisfaction on the campaign ribbons. He had shown her the others in his pocket, too, and her enormous eyes were adoring, worshipful. She seemed so helpless, such an adorable feminine child, full of secrets. They met outside, after the canteen closed. Against the rules, of course.

"I want to take you home," he said.

It was a cold night, with stars flaring in a black sky and a bitter wind on the streets. At the corner they ran toward each other, each a flame drawn irresistibly into the other's arms.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"Uptown. I'm all alone, you know."

"Not any more," he said, and wondered where he got the courage to say it. "Not alone any more, ever."

They were never apart for a moment during that first forty-eight hours liberty they had, and they married the second day. Later, when he was overseas, he tormented himself because he received no letters from Susan for long periods of time. When he did hear from her the words were brief and inadequate, and he wondered sometimes, with a traitorous feeling, whether she was occupied by someone else. She always insisted she wrote regularly, and she supposed that her letters, or most of them, were lost in the mail. Yet his mail with other people was always received regularly.

There were other troublesome little things: the way Charley Magnussen came back from thirty days Stateside and reported having looked up Susan for Nolly. His grin was embarrassed when he told Nolly he'd taken her out on a date, and that he was a lucky fellow to have such a girl for a wife. Charley was a little evasive about the details of Susan's new apartment, and soon afterward they weren't friends any more, for no apparent reason.

When he came back with a touch of malaria and was discharged, he found Susan waiting for him in the Bronx apartment. For three days all was well between them. It was like falling in love all over again. Then he wanted the money

she saved for him, in order to set himself up in his own office as an accountant; but she had spent most of the money, she whispered shyly, furnishing their new home. In any case, her good friend, Mr. Wright—Uncle Henry, she called him—had promised Nolly a job with Globe Finance. He didn't like it, but he thrust his annoyance away and went down to see Henry Wright, in the building on Dugan street.

Like Charley Magnussen in the Pacific, there was an odd embarrassment about the older man when Nolly met him, but the job as cashier was his. For a short time afterward, Henry Wright dropped into the apartment for dinner, but then his visits grew less frequent and eventually they stopped altogether. When Nolly was troubled by it, Susan chided him out of it and once, when he went off in a jealous rage, inspired by nothing definite at all, she wept and curled into his arms and melted his anger.

The next day he walked into Henry Wright's office and resigned.

"I'm quitting," he said. "I've been a damn fool. But I have enough pride to know when I ought to pull up stakes."

UP to that point, he hadn't liked Mr. Wright very much. The lean gray-haired man, smelling faintly of luxurious toilet waters, horses, and the bouquet of fine bourbon, took his stormy, white-faced challenge with an astonishingly patient smile.

"Sit down, Bayless. Cool off."

"There's nothing more to say." Nolly remembered the way his fists ached from clenching them. "I'm quitting, that's all."

"It's because of Susan, isn't it?" Wright said quietly.

"Leave her out of it."

"I can't," Wright said. "I know more than you do, my boy, and I can understand the torment she gives you. Susan was born to torment men. I hoped you would be strong enough to handle her and bring her to her senses."

Nolly was silent with surprise. Wright went on: "I've known Susan for a long time, and known her family even better. I've been keeping an eye on her, more or

less, for old time's sake. She knows her powers over men, and she has used them, yes, for a number of flirtations; but there is nothing for you to worry about. I hoped you would be *the* man for her, that's all. And I refuse to accept your resignation."

He remembered how simple everything had seemed after that. His relief at finally understanding Henry Wright made him happy for a long time after that.

But now Henry Wright was dead. Murdered . . .

ARLENE'S house was dark when he parked the car across the street and walked along the sidewalk toward it. No one paid any attention to the convertible. The passersby didn't look at him, nor did the women standing on the brownstone steps just ahead. He turned into the little lobby and found Arlene's mailbox and thumbed the door-bell. There was no answer. He waited, standing in the shadows for a moment; and rang again. There was still no answer. He couldn't tell if she was in or not; her windows faced on the court at the rear. He rang a third time, uselessly. A hunger for her gnawed inside him. He felt alone and lonely, barred from a safe refuge. He looked at the car keys in his hand and dropped them into the slot of her mailbox. She would find them easily enough. Whatever happened, he couldn't risk implicating her any more than he had. He turned up his coat collar against the bite of the wind and went down the street on foot, toward the subway station.

His loneliness increased. Up to now, he had been with one or the other of his friends. Now he suddenly realized that he had no place to go, that the streets were a constant source of danger to him, danger he could not avoid. Any one of the people passing by might suddenly recognize him and shout for the police. He shivered inwardly. A sense of despair almost overwhelmed him. The streets were quiet and dark with Sunday-night calm. For a moment he debated trying to telephone Ken Wimbaugh or Emmett Pillman. He decided against it.

A subway kiosk beckoned at the end of

the long, echoing street. A news-stand cast a glow of light on the sidewalk, where two or three people were waiting for a crosstown bus. He walked quickly through the patch of light and down the subway steps.

When the Queens train came in, he was waiting for it at the far end of the platform, where the cars were least crowded. He got aboard and saw two women and one man seated on the straw seats, their eyes dully regarding the advertising placards that described a world of amenities beyond their reach. He stood in the vestibule of the car, staring at his own reflection in the glass door. There was nothing left for him anywhere. Nothing but danger and death. Nothing but the hope that Delia DeWolfe would be able to help him.

IX

RAIN WAS FALLING IN THIN, misty curtains as he walked a long block of suburban houses from the subway and turned into the darkness of Mountain Street. He walked slowly, looking through the rain for the house numbers. The road twisted flatly and without reason ahead of him.

A car passed in the opposite direction, splashing slowly through the puddles, headlights swinging over a row of low bungalow-type houses behind shrub-lined lawns. Far off in the distance, the night sky over Manhattan had a reddish glow. But there was an air of suburban desolation, marked only by the faintly gleaming street lights at the corners.

No. 25 Mountain Street was undistinguished from any of the other cottages on the twisting street, except for a small wooden sign staked in the lawn, indicating the number. Nolly walked slowly by. The cottage itself was a dim blur through the dark, driving rain. There were no lights in the lower windows, but a dormer in the rear cast a yellow rectangle into the night. A car was parked two doors down, silent and dark in the rain. There were lighted windows in the cottage across the street from Number 25, and when Nolly paused on the sidewalk

he heard the strains of radio music and then the cackling of a Sunday night radio comic. The radio was playing very loudly. It came from the lighted cottage across the way. There was only darkness in Number 25.

He turned up his coat collar against the cold drive of the rain, shivering a little as he trudged up the flagstone path to the cottage. The nearest street lamp was at the corner, too far away to cast any light underfoot. He almost stumbled over a raised brick patio before the front door.

The comic finished his hackneyed routine and the orchestra blared forth in a painful effort to cover up. Nolly paused to glance at the car parked down the street. It stood silently in the drumming rain. There didn't seem to be anybody in it. The whole street seemed to have an air of detachment from the rest of the world, as if New York didn't exist just over the horizon. He shivered again, but not from the cold rain this time, and sought the bell.

The sunken doorway had a rounded brick arch on top and four little squares of glass that passed for windows set in the upper half of the panels. In a brass bracket over an old-fashioned pull bell was a name, deeply etched on dull metal. Nolly struck a match and looked at the name.

J. C. DeWolfe. He let the match go out and dropped it into a puddle of rain-water at his feet. *J.* wasn't Delia's initial, but he didn't think it was her big brother's either. The place could be what the newspapers called a love nest, or a hideout for Orditch, but there was nothing about it to suggest a suburban family residence.

There was a key in the latch when he bent to try the thumb latch.

NOLLY stood quite still. He counted ten while he stared at the dimly glistening bit of brass. It seemed to await him there in the lock, and without touching it, he knew it offered him entry into the dark and silent bungalow. He didn't touch it. There was something familiar about that key in the slot. A familiarity of habit he had long associated

with Susan. It was one of Susan's little idiosyncrasies.

He wondered if Susan was here. It didn't seem likely, but she knew this address. She had taken Delia's message for him. On the other hand, the key in the lock might be a simple invitation to his own death.

He turned back into the rain and stood on the soggy lawn, looking down the street. The parked car was still where he had last seen it, down the street from the cottage. The wind had risen, thrashing through the tops of invisible trees behind the bungalow. Nolly turned away from the door and trudged silently across the lawn to the back of the house. A concrete drive looped in from a hidden court behind the bungalow row, lighted by the back kitchen windows of the neighboring houses. But no light came from the kitchen window he examined. A dark sedan was parked before the closed doors of the cellar garage, however. He tried the lock on the car, but it was fast. He tried the kitchen door, very softly, but that was locked, too.

Shrugging, he returned to the front door and turned the accommodating key in the lock and stepped inside out of the rain.

Warm perfumed air engulfed him. Familiar warmth and familiar perfume that tantalized him with its vague identity. He kept one hand on the gun in his pocket and heeled the door shut, cutting off the taut sound of the wind and the rain. Darkness surrounded him.

And silence.

"Delia?" he called softly.

There was no answer. But someone was in the house, someone nearby, waiting silently. Dim light filtered through, from curtains in the back somewhere, enough to help him make out his surroundings after a moment. He remembered the dormer window that shone yellow from where he had observed the house outside. Where he stood now, just inside the door, he could make out a long living room, just beyond the foyer. An ivory baby grand glimmered faintly, and two long streaks of pale yellow over the fireplace were presently identified as enormous tapers in

Florentine silver holders. Nolly took the gun from his pocket and stepped through the arch.

"Delia?" he called again.

There was still no answer. Faint embers glowed in the fireplace under the tall candles. The embers cast a pink glow on a Roman striped couch, a solid maroon rug, a flowered barrel chair on stubby legs drawn up near the hearth. Curtains of oatmeal-colored monk's cloth hid the rest of the house from his sight.

There was no one in the living room.

She wasn't here. But she had to be here. Then his glance fell on the round coffee table drawn up between two low stools near the wide windows. A set of chessmen were set out in red and white phalanxes, little ivory warriors who looked compact and competent before the game began.

Nolly thought of Chester and Lester, Orditch's intellectual hoodlums. A shiver went up his spine, and his mouth hardened. This time he had no intention of being tossed around like a sack of old potatoes. He was through with that. He hadn't spent more than forty-eight hours of desperate flight without learning something.

He brushed aside the tall monk's cloth curtains and stared into the dimness of the next room. The drumming of the rain followed his soft, silent footsteps. The scent of perfume was heavier in here, cloying the warm, stuffy atmosphere. It was Susan's perfume, he was sure of that. But it wasn't Susan who was sprawled on the floor in a dark, shapeless heap. The sight of the figure at the foot of the tall book cases in this little, leather-furnished room seemed to rob him of every ounce of strength.

"Delia," he whispered, and his voice was flat, dropping to a dull and helpless conclusion.

X

HE HAD been thinking of her as he remembered her in that Village nightclub the night of the murder. And again, when she and Ken Wimbaugh contrived to set him free of Otto Orditch's

men. He remembered her sleek, dark-haired figure, and she had remained in his memory like a dark flame, a contrast to Arlene's warm friendliness, indrawn, remote, and very lovely.

Delia wasn't lovely any more.

A long red Russian style housecoat flared in loops and swirls around her crumpled body. Her dark shimmering hair partly concealed her face. She sprawled between a leather chair and the bookcase, legs scissored, arm outflung, her sightless eyes staring back at Nolly as he stood between the rough, parted curtains.

She had been shot in the throat and the bullet had come out at the top of her head.

Nolly's voice was just a breathing sound above the solemn beating of the rain.

"She had something to tell me," he said aloud. "So they killed her."

There was not trace of the gun that had ended her life. He wondered if he should touch her, or if he should search the house for any message she might have left him. Then the thought occurred to him that the murderer would have taken care of that already.

It was warm and peaceful and quiet inside the cotage. He listened to the rain and again to the sound of a car passing on the street outside. The scent of perfume seemed to be stronger than before. He looked back through the monk's cloth curtain to the chessmen aligned on the little table near the front windows, and his nerves tightened painfully.

No one was in this room, either. A doorway between the tall bookcases led to a short hall and the kitchen at the other end. One corner of the room was occupied by a narrow, curving staircase that reached up into a dimly lighted hall. The dormer window he had seen from the outside was up there. He half turned toward the stairs, gun in hand, then he paused as the sound of footsteps ticked lightly on the ceiling overhead.

SUSAN came down the steps. She came on fairy feet, her figure petite and tiny as she approached him. Her little face wore a calm, fixed smile, a smile of amusement as she examined his

tall, thin stature. She was wearing the mink coat and a tiny pillbox hat trimmed with mink, perched on her golden, fluffy curls. Her wide gray eyes didn't touch the dead girl on the floor at Nolly's feet. She had a small, shining gun in her little hand.

She descended the last two steps with her little lilting walk and drew nearer. She still didn't look at the dead girl. Nolly watched her with incredulous eyes. The gun in her hand was pointed at his stomach. It looked like it might be the murder gun, judging from the size of the wound in Delia's neck. Somehow he was quite sure it was the murder gun.

"What are you doing here?" he asked hoarsely.

"What do you think?" she smiled.

"I'm not thinking. I'm just asking."

"Guess," she said archly.

He looked at the gun in her hand. "Is that what did it?"

"Certainly," Susan said. "This did it. This did it for Delia." She giggled and made a clicking sound, her pink tongue thrust between white teeth. "This is the gun, all right."

"Give it to me," Nolly said.

"No," she said, and pouted. Her mouth was bright and wet with Chinese red lipstick. "I'm going to keep this gun."

He told himself he must control the impatient fury that welled up inside him. This was no time to lose his head. Danger screamed all around him. He looked up the stairs again, but no one was there.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

She nodded brightly. "Yes, I'm alone, Arnold."

"Did you come here alone?"

She smiled at him. "Yes. I wanted to see what Delia DeWolfe looked like. After all, she stole you from me, and you kept her here. I was naturally curious."

"You know that's not true," he said.

"What is true, then?"

"Did you kill her?" he asked.

She giggled. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I intend to find out," he said grimly. "This isn't child's play. Your cute little ways won't impress the police."

"Are you going to call the police?" she

asked, and giggled again. "What will you tell them, Arnold? Will you tell them that you found your wife here with Delia murdered, and that I had a gun in my hand?"

He struggled with his voice and asked again: "Did you kill her?"

"What if I did?" she challenged. "What if I did shoot her? It's good riddance! She was just a common slut!" The softness left her voice, and her words sharpened themselves on her anger. "She deserved what she got! She died too easily! I'd have killed her in a different way, if it was up to me!"

SHE half turned toward the dead woman on the floor, shaken by her spiteful fury. Nolly pocketed his own gun. The small automatic in Susan's hand wavered and pointed toward the curtains. He lunged for it. She spun back toward him, yanking her hand around, but he was quicker than she. His fingers closed around the muzzle and he twisted sharply. She made a little spitting sound and kicked at him with her high, spiked heels. He paid no attention. Her eyes filled with rage. She kicked at him again. Her nails clawed his face. Then her fingers relaxed and the gun fell to the floor. It made a dull thumping sound and skittered off as if alive toward Delia's cold, outstretched hand. At the same time Susan suddenly slumped with her weight against Nolly. He went down to the floor with her, and instantly her body was alive, wriggling like a snake with her unsuspected strength. Her breath panted in his ear.

He slapped her lightly, smearing her lipstick. He got one knee under him, half rising, and she suddenly raked her nails down from his eye to his chin. He felt the blood well from the jagged scratch. Her giggle echoed in his ears as she squirmed out from under him and lunged on her hands and knees for her gun. Nolly scrambled after her, knocked her off balance before she could reach it. She kicked at him again. He slapped her a second time, and tears of sudden pain filled her eyes.

"Now behave," he breathed.

"All right, Nolly. I'll do anything you say."

"Just tell me the truth," he said heavily. "What happened here?"

"Delia was killed."

"Who did it?"

She smiled. "I did it, Nolly."

"No," he said. "You didn't."

"You don't want to believe me, do you?"

"I killed her because I was jealous of her, that's why."

"There was nothing to be jealous about."

"I thought there was," Susan said. "She was waiting here for you, all alone, and she wasn't surprised when I showed up. She thought you sent me here. It was easy to do."

"You're lying," Nolly said.

Her little hands appealed to him. "You've got to help me. Are you going to call the police? If you call the police, you've got to say you did it."

She wet her lips. She sounded breathless. "It won't matter to you, anyway, would it? They know you killed Henry Wright. It won't be any worse if you say you killed Delia, too, would it? Please, Nolly!"

He looked at her with incredulous eyes. She was quite sure of herself. Her little voice registered pathetic appeal.

He said: "There's just one thing wrong. It makes a very pretty picture, assuming the burden of this murder for you. I might consider it, if you had all the facts straight, Susan. But you haven't. You see, I didn't kill Henry Wright."

"But the police think that you're the murderer—"

"I know. And so do you. But I didn't." He stared at her with grave, impersonal eyes. "Do you still want me to confess to the police?"

"What else is there to do?"

"But you know I didn't kill Delia. You were here when I arrived. You were waiting for me."

She was silent, her small face flushed and worried.

"How long have you been here?" he demanded.

"About twenty minutes."

"And no one else was here except Delia?"

"That's right."

"Where did you get the gun that killed her?"

"I—Delia had it. I took it away from her." Her eyes were fixed on the rug, and she began to pout again. "I thought you loved me, Nolly. You used to say you'd do anything for me. You used to say you couldn't live without me, that you'd die for me."

"Is that what you want me to do?"

"It wouldn't—it's just that I'm in terrible trouble, Arnold. I counted on you to help."

"On me?"

"Of course," she said simply. "You love me, don't you?"

He touched his face. There were four welts where her nail had raked him. He took a cigarette from the crumbled pack in his shirt pocket, lit it, and blew out the match. He looked around for an ashtray and dropped the match into a crystal box. The smoke felt raw in his throat. Turning from Susan, he dropped to his knees beside Delia. The dead girl's eyes were glazed by eternity. She hadn't expected to die. There was no emotion stamped on her coldly chiseled features. There was nothing to indicate she had been surprised when death walked up to her with a shining little gun in its hand. His gaze shifted to the weapon he had taken from Susan. He picked it up and wiped it clean with his handkerchief. Only one shot had been fired from it. He put it down carefully near the dead girl's hand and straightened. Susan was watching him with wide eyes, a little smile playing on her red mouth.

"What's upstairs?" he asked.

"Just two bedrooms. A bathroom."

"What were you doing up there?"

"I telephoned the police," Susan said quietly.

NOLLY'S face settled into a flat mask. He was beyond surprise. He turned on his heel and went back into the living room. The embers were dead in the fireplace. The wide windows rattled with the gusts of wind and rain. The red and white chessmen gleamed in the dim light

that followed him as he parted the cloth curtains. He found an ashtray and crushed out his cigarette. The clean crystal box hadn't been used before. The crushed cigarette stood out against the clear glass and he paused, picked up the butt and dropped it into his pocket, then carefully dusted the ashes and wiped the tray with his handkerchief before putting it back. He wished he had a drink, to wash away the dirty taste in his mouth. Susan followed him about on quick, anxious heels as he opened the front door and peered out into the cold, wet night.

"Nolly," she said, "they'll be here soon. What will you do?"

"Nothing," he said. "You've done it all."

The street was empty except for the other car he had seen when he arrived. It was now standing directly at the end of the flagstone walk to the pavement, in front of the house. It had been two doors down before.

Nolly said: "What do you want me to do?"

"Are you going to stay here?" Susan asked.

"Perhaps."

"Then I'd better go, before the police arrive. That would be best, wouldn't it? You tell them you did it—"

"No," Nolly said. "I'll tell them the truth."

Her pale little face floated in the dimness behind him. She started to go past him through the open door, out into the rain, but he barred her exit with a stiff arm and thrust her back inside.

"You're staying here with me," he said harshly. "You and the murderer you're hiding."

"Nolly!"

He said bitterly: "I'm not going to be the fall guy for you or anyone else. Especially not for old time's sake."

She laughed suddenly. A very unnatural laugh, close to the giggle she had used before. As suddenly as it began she ended it.

"All right, Nolly."

"You didn't kill Delia, did you?" he asked.

"No."

"But you know who did?"

"Yes, I know." She was very cool, very quiet now. "But you'll never find out from me."

Before he could stop her, she turned from the rain-swept doorway and flicked a switch in the foyer wall. Two bronze-trimmed lamps splashed a yellow glow on the wet, red-brick patio, and as quickly went out. Nolly swung violently toward her. She laughed at him. From the street, he heard a car door slam. Dimly he saw a man's figure move purposefully up the walk toward the house. At the same time, a police whistle suddenly skirled through the sound of the wind and rain. The shrill blast came from farther down and across the street, from the doorway of one of the darkened houses there. Two more figures suddenly appeared, running through the puddles toward the cottage. The man on the sidewalk hesitated, then came on, his figure somehow grim and dangerous in the wet darkness.

Nolly spun on his heel. Susan's little body blocked his way.

"It's no use—"

"Get away from me!" he rasped.

He knocked down the hand she put up to detain him. Running footsteps were converging from all around the house. He crossed the living room with long strides, parted the curtains to the den, and paused where Delia's body lay. The room was silent. No one came down the curving stairway. He was a little surprised at that. The hall to the kitchen was short and narrow, moving into dark shadows at the other end. From behind him came a crash as the front door slammed inward. He heard Susan's gasp, and her voice suddenly shrilled: "No, don't!"

Nolly hesitated. More police whistles skirled. The place was a trap, but he wasn't sure for whom the trap was set. He didn't think Susan had really called the police. He had the impression that she was as surprised as he.

A SHOT suddenly flared and roared at him from the living room. The bullet report was thunderous in the narrow little house. The bullet crashed into the wall, inches from Nolly's head, and he ducked violently, backing into the kitchen

corridor. He glimpsed only a shadowy outline of his big assailant. Nolly backed all the way into the dark kitchen. There was no point in fighting it out with the man from the car—not with the police all around. The thing to do was to get away, and get away fast. He didn't have a chance, but he had to make one. He couldn't give up now. He backed to the kitchen door and threw the bolt open, groping in the darkness.

Another shot roared down the black hallway. From the front of the house came the sudden screaming of brakes and an impatient pounding on the door. He heard Susan's voice rise in indignant protest. Nolly reached for the back door again, and again a bullet smashed into the panel. A splinter of wood skimmed wickedly past his cheek. He didn't return the fire. Evidently his opponent had command of the back door, from where he stood, and could see Nolly's movements in the darkness.

He turned back to the little window. From his earlier circuit of the house, he remembered the strip of lawn that went around to the back, and the looping driveway between this row and the opposite bungalows on the next street. There was no time to get the window open and climb through. He backed up a little, aware of a sudden tumult in the living room and the loud rush of burly voices and heavy feet. There were no more shots. Nolly dived headlong through the glass of the window, shielding his face with his arm.

Shards of glass exploded all around him. For a moment he plummeted headlong into darkness, then his hands went out, jolting on the dark wet lawn, and he rolled over and over. There was a shooting pain in his right elbow, and he scrambled awkwardly to his feet, bumped into the dark car parked behind the garage, and staggered erect.

Rain whispered coldly on his face. Damp air cooled his lungs. The sudden flap of a rubber slicker warned him. He turned to meet the charge of a dark, bulky figure that rose up from behind the car. A uniform cap was momentarily outlined against the lights popping on in all the nearby kitchen windows. Nolly swung hard

at a dim face, felt his knuckles crack with unsuspected violence on the cop's jaw. The man staggered back with an oath. Nolly swung his left again, driving his fist into the other's stomach. The man squawked with pain and dropped to his knees. Nolly spun around him and raced for the concrete drive between the houses.

There was a full hue and cry behind him. Dark puddles of rain glittered in the path ahead. He splashed through them, unheeding. He looked back once, and saw the cop he had bowled over on one knee, metal glinting from his poised revolver. Nolly swung sharply right, into the shadows of the opposite bungalows. Overhead, a light streamed into the dark night, and a man's excited voice said something to his wife about burglars. Nolly flattened against the wall, trying to control the wild pumping of his chest.

The cottage he had left was ablaze with lights now. He had no time to wonder what had happened to Susan, or what she might be telling the cops now. He had a fragmentary vision of her trim, figure poised serenely in the circle of tenderly solicitous homicide men, ruling over them with her coyness, like a queen. His mouth twisted harshly as he turned to examine his avenue of retreat.

The driveway was as open as a target gallery. He slid around a corner of the house that sheltered him and ran over slippery, mucky lawns to the next street, emerging between two tall oaks that sighed with their burden of wet wind.

He was not prepared for the sudden slamming pain that seared his shoulder. He heard the thump of the shot a fractional second later, saw the yellow muzzle flare from a corner of his eye. One of the cops, perhaps the one he had slugged, had paralleled his course and emerged on the same street. The impact of the heavy bullet knocked Nolly to his knees. He dropped his own gun, scrambled for it, and tried to rise to his feet again. His left shoulder felt as if it was shattered to ribbons.

He groaned, bit his lip until blood came, and began crawling slowly over the wet, muddy lawn, back to the shelter of the oak trees.

XI

FOOTSTEPS POUNDED up the slippery sidewalk, reached the lawn, and went on by. Nolly wriggled along on his elbows, hauled himself half erect on a sign staked into the lawn. *A. M. Carlson, M.D.* It was a little rectangular electric sign in black and white, but it wasn't working. The cottage was in equal darkness. Nausea pounded through him in great, spasmodic waves.

Other footsteps approached. Far down at the corner came a prowler car. The spotlight flickered like a probing finger over the dark lawn, touching the squat houses, prodding the shrubbery inquisitively, restlessly. Nolly roused himself and drew back deeper behind the oaks on the doctor's lawn. But even here there was no protection from the approaching spotlight. And men were scouring the lawns farther down, inevitably drawing closer. He raised his head carefully and looked around. The effort sent new waves of pain down through his shattered shoulder. Across the street were two slickered patrolmen, searching the lawns with flashlights. As he looked at them, one turned away from his partner and came across the street through the rain, toward Nolly's lawn. Nolly crawled back between the two houses, into deeper darkness. But there was no shrubbery here to protect him. Only a concrete garage driveway, and the wet brick wall of the bungalow.

He hugged the wall. He was on his hands and knees, and the effort to move was rapidly draining his strength. His left arm was useless. His body was wet, through and through, with rain and sweat. A flicker of light shot far down the area-way between the two bungalows and he flattened, trying to squeeze himself into the mortar between the brick. Astonishingly, the wall yielded to his frantic pressure. A narrow cellar window, half hidden in the autumn weeds, opened inward as his body leaned against it. From the sidewalk behind him came a man's grumbling voice, and then the beam of light began a methodical swing back and forth over the driveway.

Nolly pushed the window all the way

in with his right hand and slid and wriggled and shoved his body inside. For a moment he thought he wouldn't make it. He couldn't get in. His wounded shoulder scraped on the wooden sill and blinded him with an indecent pain. His left hand left a dark imprint on the ground as he flexed his leg through. The flashlight slid by within inches of the spot he had just left. He forced his way all the way through and dropped into complete darkness. His out-flung hand hit a bench, his knee cracked painfully on something solid and metallic. The bench partly checked his fall. He kept going headlong into the black, hit concrete with a sickening thud. Overhead, the window dropped back into place with a dull thump. For a moment it was illuminated by the cop's probing flashlight, then it went dark again.

It was warm and dry in the cellar. There was no sound of alarm from anywhere inside the house.

HE LAY STILL. He could hear the sound of his own breathing, gasping and rasping through the darkness. His hat had fallen under him and he raised himself a little and shoved it out from under his chest. Then he sprawled flat on his stomach on the cold floor. He could see nothing at all in the cellar. After a moment the narrow oblong window was lighted again over his head as the cop retraced his steps. Nolly was surprised at the height of the opening above him. It had been a long drop. Then the darkness came back again. A siren wailed in the street outside. A man cursed, standing in the rain on the lawn in front of the house. Voices sounded, surprisingly loud and clear.

"He ain't here, Lieutenant."

"Are you sure you winged him?"

"Dead sure, Lieutenant."

"He can't have gone far, then."

"You want we should keep looking, Lieutenant?"

"No, to hell with him."

"Well, we'll get him Lieutenant. He ain't going to travel far with that slug in his shoulder."

"What about the other man?"

"He got away, too. Took out the kitchen door right after Bayless."

"All right. Go back to the cruiser, Maguire."

"Yes, sir."

Silence came back to the dark, warm cellar. Rain drummed monotonously on the window and hissed on the wet ground outside.

It seemed an hour before he got his coat off. His left arm was useless, paralyzed. The bullet must be still in him, he decided; perhaps pressing against a nerve. His topcoat was still in fairly presentable condition. He folded it over the bench under the window, crawling erect with a vast effort.

His grating breath vied with the solemn, somnolent tapping of the rain outside. From somewhere in the rear of the cellar he could make out a dim blue flame, probably a pilot light on the gas furnace; he couldn't be sure. His suit was a mess, particularly the left side. He felt with fumbling fingers along the shoulder, found the wet rent in the cloth where the bullet had gone in. By twisting a little, he felt along his shoulder blade, in the back, but there didn't seem to be a hole there. The bullet was still inside him. There was nothing he could do about that.

He shrugged the jacket off his right arm, then carefully peeled the cloth down off his sleeve. His shirt was sodden. He tore the shirt sleeve off at the shoulder, loosened his tie, and got that off too. His skin felt warm and wet and slippery. He touched the wound, just below the collar bone, and a hammer of pain almost drove him to his knees again. The wound was almost closed, but the bullet wasn't too deep below the surface. Evidently the shot had been almost spent before it hit him; otherwise it would have gone through cleanly. It would have been better that way. He might have taken care of it himself, then. Now he needed help. But he would have to do without it.

With his teeth, Nolly managed to tear a strip of broadcloth from his shirt. He had to sit down for what was coming now. Sit down or fall down. He lowered himself to his knees and leaned his back against the invisible table legs behind him, then carefully wadded a small strip of cloth between his fingers, braced himself,

and packed the wad into the little hole in his shoulder.

He was surprised that it didn't hurt more than it did. With the rest of his shirt, he dried the blood on his naked arm, cleaned his hands as best he could, and then with his necktie, he bound another pad of cloth in place, looping the tie around his neck and under his armpit. He was trembling and exhausted before he was through. He shoved the remnants of his shirt as far under the table as he could reach, and then got his suit coat back on again. There was a dull, throbbing pain in his shoulder now. But no more blood.

TIME became a sluggish river, dappled with dark drops of rain. He floated on the dark water, half asleep, but wakeful, aware of the throbbing in his shoulder, but comfortable now, leaning against the bench leg, watching the pinpoint of blue flame that hissed somewhere in the black of the cellar. The house was quiet. Perhaps the people who lived here were out of town. He didn't quite conquer his inertia to look at his watch. It didn't matter just now how long he remained here. There might still be cops in the neighborhood, although he heard no further sounds of a search party. He was safe. He was warm. He wasn't sure whether he dozed or not.

He wasn't sure just when the man appeared, either. He didn't hear him come down the cellar stairs. He didn't see him until a blaze of light exploded in his eyes, shining between his lowered lids, blinding him. A voice said:

"All right. On your feet."

Nolly started for his coat pocket, then abruptly stopped. There was a gun in the newcomer's hand. He squinted into the dazzling glare of the flashlight, but he could see nothing of the other man. Metal glinted on the gun barrel, pointed at him as if it were disembodied, floating out of the darkness. All he could see were vague, stubby legs and a fat pudgy hand with a thick mat of hair on the knuckles, holding the gun.

"On your feet," the man said again. "No funny stuff."

"Who are you?" Nolly asked.

"I live here. This is my cellar you're hiding in."

"You're not the police?"

"Obviously not. Get on your feet."

He clambered erect, swaying awkwardly and clinging to the bench under the cellar window. He discovered that if he looked away from the direct beam of the flashlight, he could make out a little of the cellar in the reflected glow. He could see a flight of wooden stairs and an open door above, dimly illuminated. The cellar walls were panelled in knotty pine, and the room was furnished with a tiny bar and tubular chrome-and-leather chairs. Nolly's left arm hung limply at his side. He tried to peer again beyond the glare of the flashlight, but he could make out nothing of the man with the gun. The other's voice was deep and professional. The gun was steady.

"You've been shot?"

"In the shoulder," Nolly said.

"Still carrying the slug?"

"I think so."

"How long have you been down here?"

"I don't know. An hour maybe."

"Then the police don't know you're here."

"That's right."

"What do the police want you for?"

"Murder," Nolly said.

He blinked into the flashlight beam. Whatever happened, he wasn't going to lose his head and run wild again. He was in enough trouble. A little more wouldn't make much difference, on the record, but there wasn't much he could do, with the slug in his shoulder.

"Murder," the man repeated from beyond the light.

"Yes."

"And I suppose you didn't do it. That's what they all say, isn't it?"

"That's right," Nolly said. "I didn't do it."

The man was silent. The flashlight beam didn't waver. Nolly closed his eyes and leaned back against the bench. He didn't think he could remain on his feet much longer.

"Who scratched you?" the man asked abruptly.

"What?"

"Your face is scratched. Pretty badly, too. Who did it?"

Nolly thought of Susan. He didn't say anything. He became aware of smarting pain in his face, now that he was reminded of it. It intruded on the agony in his shoulder. He kept his eyes closed and was silent.

The man said: "Give me your gun. Don't try to be smart."

Nolly took the Colt from his pocket and handed it to the man.

"All right. Come upstairs. You first. Be careful, and I'll give you a drink. Can you make those steps?"

"I can make it," Nolly said.

GOING up those wooden steps was like a torture from purgatory. He had to think about each movement of his legs, and he clung to the banister with both hands as he went up. The man didn't offer to help him. He didn't touch him. The flash shone on each new step he had to take, and he wanted to sit down and die, before lifting his foot to step up, and then he took the step and there was another, and then he was at the top and walking down a dim corridor toward the back of the house. There was a deep blue, silky Sarouk rug in the hall. He paused as the pudgy hand reached ahead of him and slid open double doors.

"In here. My study."

A Chinese jade lamp with a huge pink shade cast a soft glow over paneled walls. It stood on an eighteenth century table topped with gray marble. Another lamp of white crystal illuminated what might have been an original Frans Hals on the wall. Heavy satin drapes shut off the windows, if there were windows. A log fire crackled in the fireplace. Two small settees were drawn up at right angles to the hearth, with a regency coffee table set with a decanter of liquor between them.

Nolly turned and looked at the man behind him.

He was a dwarf. A stout little dwarf, scarcely four feet tall, with gray jowls and a round, bald head and pale, dominating eyes that flicked up and down Nolly's figure and expressed nothing at all. The man rubbed his jaw with his hand and made a

sandpapery sound. He clicked off the flashlight and tossed it to a Queen Anne chair by the door. He lifted thick ropes of eyebrows.

"Let's have a drink, murderer."

He moved on his stubby legs, waddling to the table and pouring rye from the decanter. Nolly stood where he was. The dwarf regarded him with intellectual objectivity as he handed Nolly a tumbler. There was no soda in the drink.

"You think I'm a freak?" he asked.

"No," Nolly said.

"Yes, you do. After all, that's what I am. Drink up. You must get that shoulder attended to, you know."

"I know."

"It's a miracle the hemorrhage stopped."

"I plugged it myself," Nolly said. "I learned something useful in the army, anyway."

"Yes. Quite so. They wouldn't take me."

"In the army?"

"Of course. Would you?"

Nolly shrugged. The liquor burned a fiery course down his throat and settled in a flaming pool in the pit of his stomach. It made him feel better. He didn't sit down, and the little man didn't offer him a chair. The dwarf turned away from him, pocketing the gun, and took a very small drink for himself. He was wearing a quilted smoking jacket, corduroy trousers, and an immaculately white scarf knotted at his throat. His big bald head looked oversized on his stumpy body. Nolly listened to the sound of rain outside the house. There was no sound anywhere in here. He wondered if he and the little man were alone.

"I'm Dr. Carlson," said the dwarf.

"I need a doctor," Nolly said.

"Quite true. But I shouldn't attend to you. That would be against the law, you know."

Nolly didn't say anything. The man was quite calm about finding a murderer in his cellar. Perhaps he had already called for the police, and was merely delaying him until they arrived. He wondered how long Dr. Carlson had known he was in the cellar.

"How did you know I was here?" he asked.

"I heard you arrive. You were not exactly quiet when you fell on that bench. But I had a highly nervous and excitable patient upstairs with me, and I dared risk nothing to alarm her. I had to wait until I got her out of the house. By that time, the police had given up hope of finding you in the neighborhood."

"Have you called them yet?"

"No," said Carlson. "I'm not sure I intend to."

"But—"

"I am a rather social citizen, I fear, despite my profession—or perhaps because of it. I really don't know. I've seen enough of the human race and its inherent cruelty to unfortunates to stifle effectively any impulse on my part to meddle further with its ills." The little man grinned. "Have another drink."

"I think I'd better find another doctor," Nolly said.

"At the point of a gun?"

"If necessary."

"Sit down. Do you trust me?"

"I don't know," Nolly said.

"You can go out the front way now, you know. It should be perfectly safe. But I think I'd better take that slug out of you." The little man shrugged at Nolly's surprise. "If you are guilty, you will meet your punishment, sooner or later. I am no judge. In any case, we can decide what to do with you later. For the moment, at any rate you are perfectly safe."

Nolly listened to the rain pattering on the windows behind the drapes. His left arm was beginning to go numb. He wondered if he would ever feel safe again...

HE LAY on his back, staring up into a blinding floor-lamp. Carlson had spread a rubber sheet over one of the settees and rolled a small table containing a tray of surgical instruments into the room. Nolly listened to the snapping sounds as the little man drew on a pair of rubber gloves and then sponged his shoulder.

"This will hurt."

"Go ahead," Nolly said.

"I don't want you to scream."

"I won't."

"One peep out of you, and the neighborhood will be down on our neck. The people next door are nosy enough as it is."

"Go ahead," Nolly said again.

Pain roared through his shoulder. He couldn't see anything beyond the intolerable, torturing glare. He closed his eyes, and that helped a little, but not too much; the light pierced his eyelids and set fire to his brain. He was only dimly aware of the prick of a needle in his shoulder and the rattle of a steel probe on the enameled tray-table.

Carlson's voice came from somewhere beyond the haze.

"I have a friend, a girl, you know; but I'm glad she's not here. She plays at being nurse. She always hopes there will be a lot of blood." He sounded as if he were talking to himself. "She likes to watch me work, because she likes to see men suffer. It's the breath of life to her. Women can be extremely sadistic."

Nolly stared up into the blaze of light.

Carlson said: "She's, a tall girl. She wears platform shoes just to make me feel shorter. As if I'm not short enough."

THERE was little delay between the anaesthetic needle and the sharp, sickening entry of the probe. Pain was a living thing, a cat that spit and tore through his body and drove every thought before it with its grinning, antic gestures. Afterward, Nolly wasn't sure how long it was before he heard the welcome clink of metal as the doctor dropped the slug into the tray. He smelled the pungency of cigarette smoke and felt a cigarette thrust between his dry lips. The doctor's hand withdrew. He sucked the smoke greedily into his lungs and watched the gray tendrils twine around the glaring, solar bulb overhead. Antiseptic flamed and writhed inside the wound, then came tight, competent bandages around his shoulder, under his armpit, soothing him with a sense of security.

The lamp overhead was turned off. For a long minute he lay in darkness, his eyes refusing to adjust to the diminution of light. Through the darkness he heard

Carlson removing the surgical instruments. Then the doctor's voice reached down to him.

"How do you feel?"

"Like last year's washrag," Nolly said.

"You ought to. That was no regulation police bullet I took out of you. The police use .38's. That was a .45 slug, a big chunk of lead. Did you get into a scrape with one of your pals?"

Nolly didn't say anything. He thought: *Here it comes. Now. Now he's going to call the police.*

Carlson said: "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to. But the papers played you up as a lone wolf, Bayless."

Nolly stiffened on the settee.

"How do you know my name?"

"Pictures in the papers. I have a good memory. Since it wasn't the police who shot you, who did?"

"I don't know. There were police there, anyway." His vision returned slowly. He sat up and saw Carlson at the coffee table, pouring himself another drink. His left arm felt numb again, but this time there was no pain. The anaesthetic needle was working belatedly. He looked for his shirt and torn coat and couldn't see them.

"I'd like to get dressed," he said.

"What for?"

"Aren't you going to call the police now?"

"Should I?"

"No, I wish—"

"Relax. You can't go out in this weather now. Anyway, your clothes are ruined. I wouldn't be responsible, in your present condition. Just take it easy. You can stay here a while."

"I thought you were going to turn me in."

"I thought so, too, until I saw that slug. I don't want to interfere. It wasn't a police bullet, which means that someone else was wherever you were, in the neighborhood. I'm inclined to believe your story, and to think you're a little like me, Bayless."

"How do you mean?"

"You can't make the world believe what you truly are. They think I'm an ugly, distorted, grotesque little man who would

have made an admirable court jester in the Middle Ages. And they think you're a murderer."

"Yes," Nolly said.

Carlson grinned and inclined his bald head toward a tumbler he extended to Nolly. Somehow his extreme shortness was compensated for by a sense of ruthless, independent power in his chunky shoulders and large, barren skull.

"You can sleep here tonight."

LATE morning sunlight flooded through the casement window. The colored diamond panes cast a spot of warm cherry red on Nolly's hand, a ray of emerald green on the bureau, and touched the low wardrobe chest with aching yellow. He turned his head and looked through the window at the bright sky outside. It was quiet and warm in the little bedroom. Steam rattled faintly in the radiator under the window bench, and there was a whisper of autumn wind in the barren trees around the house.

He lay quietly on his back, remembering. His shoulder felt stiff, but there was no pain under the tight, compact bandages. He thought of Dr. Carlson and looked at his watch. He was surprised to see that it was almost noon. The doctor must have put a sedative in his drink last night.

At least he hadn't awakened in a prison cell.

He sat up carefully and took a cigarette from the fresh pack on the bedside table. His wallet, keys and gun were on the table with the cigarettes. The Colt was still loaded. He felt better with the first drag of smoke. The sky outside was a clear, washed blue, and the night of rain was just a memory. He smoked the cigarette all the way down and felt the hunger inside him, strong and healthy. He watched the colored ray of light move infinitesimally across the floor. He rolled over and tested his wounded arm. The shoulder bandages restricted his movements somewhat, but other than a dull ache there, he felt fine. He put both feet on the floor and stood up carefully to look for his clothes.

Steam knocked peacefully in the radiator. The closet was empty. No clothes. He went

to the hall door and opened it and stood in the hall. Nobody was in sight. He called the doctor's name. No answer.

He frowned and went back into the room and opened the casement window. A blast of cold air rushed past him, the wind was blowing his hair awry in long, straw-colored loops. The fresh, cold air eased his aching lungs. He looked down at the lawn and at the quiet suburban houses across the street. He closed the window and saw a dressing gown folded on the window bench at his side. He threw the silk robe over his shoulders, unable to get into the doctor's diminutive size, and went downstairs.

Nobody was in the house. He searched every room, including the little study, and the formal reception room and medical office in the front of the house, and then the kitchen. He found breakfast ready for him in the kitchen, eggs and bacon and coffee set out for cooking. A note was on the kitchen table.

"Gone out on call. Good luck."

Nolly looked down at the dressing gown and wondered how he was expected to get into the little doctor's clothes. There was no sign of his own suit, anywhere. He turned to the stove and made his breakfast, sitting quietly in the sunlight and eating, not thinking of anything, just resting and gathering strength for the day. He had an extra cup of coffee and another cigarette. He was just finishing the cigarette when the front door chimed.

He crushed out the cigarette and then didn't move.

The doorbell rang again and he stood up. A number of possibilities flickered through his mind. It could be a patient for the doctor; it could be one of the doctor's friends; it could be the police. The house and the neighborhood was strange to him. He would give himself away if he went to answer the doorbell. The chimes sounded again, liquid notes going through the quiet house. He turned and went to the front door and opened it.

It was a delivery boy, a freckle-faced kid of twelve in an army windbreaker and pegged pants. He was carrying Nolly's suit, cleaned and pressed and repaired, and

a paper-wrapped parcel. The boy looked at Nolly with alert eyes.

"Here's the rush job, from Henry's," he said. "You Dr. Carlson, mister?"

"No. But I'll take it."

"Okay. I got the shirt and tie, too."

"Thanks," Nolly said. "How much?"

"Dr Carlson paid for it. I got change—a buck ten." The boy was looking at Carlson's tiny dressing gown over Nolly's shoulders. Nolly pulled the silk closer over his chest. He knew the boy had seen the white bandage. The boy said: "Hey. You heard what happened over on Mountain Road last night? A dame was bumped off. Lots of shooting, too. Hey, you heard about it?"

"Sure, I heard. Thanks. You keep the change," Nolly said.

"Okay. So long, mister." The boy turned and grinned. "You kinda outgrewed that thing you're wearing, didn't you, pal?"

"Yeah," Nolly said, and matched his grin.

The boy clattered down the front steps and walked off, up the street without looking back. Nolly closed the door and went up to the bedroom and dressed as quickly as he could. His stiff shoulder gave him some trouble, but he managed the new shirt and the coat without too much difficulty. He shaved with Carlson's razor in the bathroom, noting the long dark scratches on his jaw where Susan had used her nails on him. He powdered them, but the welts still showed up. He distributed his wallet and keys in the freshly cleaned and repaired suit and went downstairs again. The house was still empty. He found his topcoat and hat in a closet, near the front hall. He put his gun in the side pocket. The topcoat had been brushed, and the bullet hole roughly mended, apparently by the doctor himself. Nolly stood in the study for a minute, thinking of the little man, and then went out.

or

XII

HE TURNED WEST IN SEARCH of the local subway station. His clothes looked fairly presentable, and he wondered for a moment what the tailor must have thought of the bullet hole and

blood stain. Perhaps Dr. Carlson had explained it as an accident to a patient. He hoped the little doctor wouldn't get into trouble over it, if the tailor connected the event with what happened on Mountain Road. He had a feeling that the doctor would be able to take care of himself.

The subway was located in a neighborhood shopping center. The wind was boisterous and clean, and the sky had a clear washed look to it, after the rain of the night before. He bought an early afternoon newspaper and read it over another cup of coffee in the big corner drugstore. The noonday crowd at the lunch counter provided him with a sea of anonymous faces in which he felt reasonably secure. The murder of Delia DeWolfe was briefly mentioned in a small column on the lower right of the front page. There was no mention of either Arlene Douglas or Susan in the story. Evidently Lieutenant Fiske was playing his cards close to his vest.

He ordered a second cup of coffee and considered several courses of action. He had to think twice to realize that this was Monday, the third day of his fugitive existence. There was sharp danger in attempting to telephone or see Susan. He faced the issue squarely. He wanted to see Arlene, not Susan. He paid for his coffee and used a public telephone booth in the rear of the drugstore to call her.

The telephone rang three times without an answer. A stout man in a black derby came and leaned against a magazine stand and stared placidly into the booth at Nolly. Then the receiver clicked and there was Arlene's voice, soft and husky—a little breathless, more than anxious, making him wish he was with her as he stood in the little booth, now, this instant.

"This is Nolly," he said quietly. "Are you all right?"

There was silence. Then: "Oh, my dear—!"

"Are you all right?" he asked again.

"Yes, yes! And you?"

"So far," he said, and paused. "Have you seen the paper?"

"Yes."

"About Delia?"

"Yes. Don't talk about it, darling."

"I didn't do that, either," he said.

"Aren't you alone?"

"I am for the moment."

"Is it the police?"

"They've been here. Asking about Val."

"What about Val?"

"They can't find him."

"Do you know where he is?"

"I'm not sure. He was here last night, and we read about the mur—about Delia, in the papers. Then he went out again."

"Did you find your car keys in the mailbox?"

"Yes, I've got the car again. Why did you return it?"

"I didn't want to involve you any more than I can help," Nolly said. "Fiske hasn't said anything about it yet, has he?"

"No. Maybe he knows we used it the other night, but I can't tell. I just don't know."

Nolly looked through the glass panel in the telephone booth. The man in the derby hat was still there, staring blandly at Nolly, inside. He turned back to the telephone.

"Arlene," he said. "I want to see you."

"I know. But you can't come here. The police may be watching me now."

"Can you get away?"

"Not now. I don't think so."

"Later?"

"I'll try. Wherever you say, Nolly."

"Make it Sadie's Sin. Where we met."

"Very well. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Of course," Nolly said. "Make it at six tonight. But be very sure that you're not followed."

"I'll be careful."

There was a pause. The man in the derby wasn't looking at Nolly any more. He was reading a newspaper, the lower half of the front page. Nolly's hands felt sweaty.

Arlene's voice came again: "Haven't you seen Val, darling?"

"No, of course not."

"Didn't you see him at all yesterday?"

"No."

"He said you should be careful about Ken Wimbaugh."

"Ken? Why?"

"I think Val believes that Ken did it."

"Ken?" Nolly said again.

"It's just Val's idea. I don't know. I can't think any more. Just be careful, darling."

"Sure," Nolly said. "At Sadie's Sin. Six o'clock."

"I'll be there."

He hung up. The man in the derby was still reading. Nolly took another nickel and dialed Ken Wimbaugh's apartment. The telephone rang for a long time, but there was no answer. He recovered his nickel. The man in the derby had disappeared. Nolly stepped out of the booth and walked toward the drugstore entrance, past the crowded lunch counter, looking for him. The derby hat was visible over the apothecary jars, talking rapidly to a startled clerk. Neither saw him go by. He continued through the revolving door and turned to the subway kiosk and took an express downtown.

As far as he knew he wasn't followed.

KEN WIMBAUGH lived in a small midtown apartment hard by the theatre section. It was after two o'clock when Nolly pushed through the overflow from Times Square and found the address. The first two floors were occupied by an art gallery, and the entrance to the apartments above was reached by a narrow sunken vestibule to one side of the exhibit windows.

Nolly thumbed the bell under Ken's name and waited. Traffic rumbled past the lobby door, and all he could see of the passersby were their legs, moving along the sidewalk. There was no answer at Ken's. He rang another bell at random, and after a moment the inner door buzzed to admit him. He pushed through into a dim modernistic lobby with a discreet automatic elevator and artistically boxed Chinese shadow prints on the pastel walls. A flight of spiral stairs looped up to the second floor around the paneled elevator shaft. A rear door opened into a dim, forgotten court.

A man stood on the spiral staircase, waiting for him. He wore an old brown sweater and paint-daubed slacks belted below his navel. Between the sweater and his belt was a bunched handful of orange shirt. The man had wispy gray hair and

glazed eyes. He smelled of liquor. He was tighter than the paper on the wall. He made a sucking sound with his teeth as Nolly paused.

"Heard you ringin' Wimbaugh's bell. He ain't at home."

"Are you the super?" Nolly asked.

"Yep. Bashaw's the name. Wimbaugh's out."

"When will he be back?"

"Can't say. Who're you?"

"Homicide," Nolly said.

The gray-haired man looked disgusted. "Another copper. How many times does the city hafta send you guys around on one job?"

"Don't worry your head about it," Nolly said. "Let's use your passkey, Pop."

The man hoisted his sagging trousers, shrugged, and began climbing the spiral stairs. Nolly followed to the third floor. Midway up the last flight, the elevator began to work, sliding downward between the coiled steps. The super dangled his keys wearily and weaved down the hall. Nolly followed in the wake of whiskey smells.

"Them two young fellers," said Bashaw. "They'd make better crooks than cops."

"What two young fellows?"

"Them other cops. Nice young fellers. Gimme a quart of Hannigan's, they did. They been around every day."

"Oh, them," Nolly said. His face betrayed nothing. He thought of Chester and Lester, Orditch's gunmen. "Were they here today?"

"This morning, mister. And yesterday, too. And the day afore that. Each time they brung me a full quart."

"I didn't know you touched the stuff," Nolly said. "When did you see Wimbaugh last?"

The super put the key in the lock and pushed open the door. "Same old questions. You guys ought to get together to see what the others are doin'! Wimbaugh ain't been back since his boss got knocked off. You fellers ought to get together, all right."

"Hell," Nolly said. "If that happened, you wouldn't have to pay so much taxes."

The man snickered. "I don't pay no taxes. Got six kids."

NOLLY closed the door on him and stood still for a moment, his face was quiet and thoughtful. He had been here in Ken's place only once before, two years ago. The furniture was expensive then. It was more expensive now. An air of quiet bachelor wealth and comfort pervaded the silent rooms. The prints on the walls bordered on the pornographic, but could pass as art; the open bar glistened with an opulent array of bottles. The venetian blinds were partly drawn, and the heavy carpet and solid furniture looked tenantless, patiently waiting, shrouded in shadows. There was no sound. He went from room to room on silent feet, and glanced out the bedroom windows. The view opened on the inner court, a formal little garden in dark shadow at the bottom of the surrounding buildings. The house across the way was a loft of some kind. A woman was hanging stockings from a window in an el of the same building he was in. It all looked very quiet and peaceful.

He lit a cigarette and went back to the living room, pocketing the match. There was a thin film of dust on the bar. There was dust on the mantel over the brick fireplace. The air felt heavy, as if the windows had been closed for a long time.

The apartment was not compatible with a salary of sixty a week. Nolly frowned, crushed out his cigarette in a crystal tray that held no ashes, and went back to the foyer to examine the closet. Ken's topcoat was gone. There was an overcoat, a London raincoat, and two hats on the top shelf. He closed the foyer closet and went into the bedroom to the double doors of the wardrobe chest there. There were two suits, each worth a hundred, but only two. Nolly pinched his chin and drifted back to the living room, his face stiff with thought. The fact that Orditch was interested in Ken, and that Ken had deserted his apartment, could mean any number of things, all of them unpleasant to contemplate.

His glance drifted to a photograph of Delia, in a silver frame atop a mahogany radio-phonograph console. The dead girl looked out at Nolly with demure eyes. She looked softer and sweeter than he

remembered her. He wondered again what the tie-up was between Ken and Orditch's girl, and he liked less and less the direction of his thoughts.

A small kidney desk stood opposite the photograph, with a bare polished top that had been neglected since Friday, judging by the desk calendar. The center drawer was locked, and with it the wing drawers. Nolly rummaged in the kitchen cupboard for a stout knife and returned to the desk. The blade scarcely bent as he inserted it between the lock and the mahogany and used a little leverage. The lock sprang open after a moment with a sharp snap.

There were pencils, a box of clips, a file of carbon-copy reports written on investigation cases for Globe—part of Ken's job. There was a workmanlike air about the reports that contradicted Ken's personal air of casual elegance. His work was thorough and complete. As if to round out his character, there was a pair of crumpled nylons in the bottom of the drawer, and an empty bottle of Irish. There were a few personal letters from his friends, but none were familiar to Nolly, and none of them had any significance that he could see. There were a good many bills: for stationery, clothing, furniture and liquor. A good many for liquor. Some of the bills were six months old and were accompanied by nasty little notes. The last was dated only a week ago and was for a suit of tailored clothes. Nolly frowned again, looked around the apartment, decided there was nothing else to look at. He went out, snapping the lock shut as he departed.

The super was in the hall, holding an empty quart bottle in his gnarled hand. The man's eyes were sly.

"He ain't there, huh?"

"No."

"Your face looks kinda familiar, coper. I guess I seen it somewhere before, huh?"

"In the funny papers," Nolly said. "Was Wimbaugh behind in his rent?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it. I think it was the front page."

Nolly said: "What was on the front page?"

"A picture of you, mister." The gray-haired man grinned, sniffed, and hitched up his pants over his little pot belly. His orange shirt collar was curled up around his wrinkled neck. "I sure wisht I had another quart of this stuff."

"How much?" Nolly asked tightly.

"'Bout a hunert bucks."

"Twenty will have to do," Nolly said. "And don't bother to check on my credentials."

The super shrugged. "Makes no difference to me, Mac. None at all. You ain't caused me no trouble. That's all I care about."

Nolly gave him the twenty and used the spiral staircase to reach the street. He didn't think the super would raise an alarm."

THE SIDEWALK was as crowded as before. The art gallery next door maintained a discreet aloofness by ignoring the passersby, even ignoring the clients who wandered inside. Nolly crossed the street and turned west. A prowler car went by in the stream of traffic and paid no attention to him. The wind whipped at the women's dresses and sent a man's bowler looping under the wheels of a green taxi. At the corner, an urchin a red turtleneck sweater plucked at his sleeve, a boy of eleven with a shock of hair like a screen over bright, expectant eyes.

"Hey, mister!"

Nolly looked at the boy's kit. "I don't want a shine."

"I ain't givin' you one, mister. Ken wants to see you, that's all."

"Ken?" Nolly controlled his surprise and looked at the crowds on the sidewalk, but he didn't see Wimbaugh. "Where?"

"Up in his room. He gimme a quarter to get you. He seen you on the street."

Nolly looked up at the facade of tall office buildings. "How do I get up there?"

"Side entrance. I'll show you. He said you'd give me another quarter."

"It's a deal," Nolly said. "Lead on."

It was a small room, a shabby room, jammed between a hat factory and an architect's office on the seventh floor of

an evil-smelling old building diagonally across from the art gallery. Traffic flowed irritably down the canyon below. The floor and the walls were bare. The furniture consisted of an army cot, covered neatly with brown blankets, a swivel chair, an empty orange crate, and a telephone on the bare floor. Two empty bottles of rye perched on the window sill, their flight ended. The machinery from the hat factory made the floor vibrate underfoot.

Ken Wimbaugh admitted him with a rueful smile. His hand shook a little as he drew Nolly inside and closed the door. Nolly kept his face stiff to hide his shock. The dapper Ken had a two-day beard and his eyes were the eyes of a hunted man. The weekend seemed to have burned him out, leaving dark hollows in his face and a general air of swift and complete degeneration.

"I was over to your apartment," Nolly began. "The super seems to think you've run out."

"I saw you go in," Ken nodded. "Sit down." He indicated the cot and chose the orange crate for himself, at the window, where his view commanded the street. "I've been hoping you'd show up. But the cops have infested my place for the last two days."

"So have Orditch's boys," Nolly said quietly.

Ken grimaced. He looked at the two dead bottles on the window sill and sighed. "Delia and I had to get you out of her apartment, and they learned about me. They don't forget such things."

Nolly said: "And I suppose Orditch wasn't too happy to learn that you and Delia were going around together."

Ken's eyes were shadowed. "You know, I was going to kill you, Nolly. Because of Delia."

Nolly didn't say anything.

"I thought you were the one who murdered her," Ken said.

"I didn't," Nolly said.

"But Susan was there."

"I know that. But neither of us killed Delia."

"But you were there," Ken repeated flatly. "You know what happened. Who did kill her?"

"I don't know," Nolly said. "I thought it was you."

Ken's face twitched. He laughed, a sound as dry and dead as ashes. Nolly sat down on the cot and kept his hand in his pocket, on the little gun he had taken from Sandra. He watched the tall man.

Ken said softly: "I didn't kill her. I was crazy about her. The only girl I was ever crazy about. I loved her, Nolly. I couldn't ever hurt her. We were going to be married."

"Married?" Nolly asked.

Ken's mouth was wry. He fumbled in his pockets and took a crumpled, folded paper and tossed it into Nolly's lap. "Our marriage license."

Nolly unfolded it slowly, trying to straighten out his confused thoughts. This didn't fit with what he'd decided while in Ken's apartment across the street. He refolded the paper and handed it back. Ken stared at it for a moment and then slowly, bitterly tore it up into little pieces.

"She's dead now," he said quietly.

"Nolly said: 'What did Orditch think about it?'"

"He didn't know. Delia was afraid to tell him. She was afraid of him, no matter how I tried to encourage her. He was jealous and possessive, and of course he'd given her a lot." Ken waved his hand wearily. "I didn't care what she'd been to him, or what he'd given her. It didn't matter to me. I loved her and we were going to get married."

Nolly said: "Maybe she was stringing you."

Ken looked at his hands, then raised darkly glowing eyes. "No, she never tried to fool me about anything. She was four-square with me. Maybe you don't think so, judging from the little you knew of her, but she was sweet and good and honest. How she got tied up with Orditch is a long story; she told me about it when we first met, and I'm ashamed now that I was careful enough to check on it. She didn't deserve to die, Nolly. All she was guilty of was loving me and trying to help me out."

"I didn't kill her," Nolly repeated.

"I'll find out for myself." Ken kept his eyes level on Nolly. "Maybe you think

I'm the one who killed Wright and started all this. I suppose you're bound to think that, considering that Delia was Orditch's girl and the way I barged in to yank you out of there. But the truth is that she didn't know anything about it until Orditch told her what had happened, and then she got in touch with me and we went in to get you out and learn what had happened. As I said, we were going to get married, and she figured now was the time to prove to Orditch that she was really through with him."

"Did Orditch tell Delia anything about the murder?"

Ken shrugged. "If he did, she didn't tell me."

"Didn't Delia know where the money is? She called Susan to get me out there in Queens. She wanted to tell me something. Don't you know what it was?"

"Delia never had a chance to tell me, Nolly; she couldn't reach me. I was hiding out here. The cops are beginning to figure I might be the lad who slugged you and Mr. Wright."

"Why should they figure that?"

"Because I went with you to the bank Friday and knew about the extra twenty grand Wright stowed in the office safe."

Nolly said: "But Emmett and Val Douglas knew about the money, too. Anyway, why should you run from the cops?"

"I wanted to be free to help Delia," Wimbaugh said. "I was afraid of what Orditch might do when he realized she was serious about breaking off with him."

"Do you think Orditch or his boys killed Delia?"

"I don't know. Susan was there. That doesn't make sense."

"Do you think I killed Delia?"

"If you did," Ken said quietly, "I'll kill you myself."

Nolly eyed him silently. Ken's bitter anger seemed to be sincere. There was an air of quiet waiting about him, a remorseless tone of anticipated vengeance in his voice. Nolly shook off a little chill and said suddenly:

"We're not the only one who knew about the money. Wright may have told anyone. He certainly told that Detroit fellow."

Ken waved a shaky hand. "The cops questioned Lomax last night. I looked into it myself, too; and he's out of the picture." He shook his head. "No, the answer is still between the four of us."

Nolly stood up. "Well, I'm not going to sit still and wait for things to happen to me. I'm through with that. I'm sick and tired of being hounded like a criminal for something I didn't do."

Ken looked mildly surprised.

"You've changed, Nolly."

"I'm just sore," Nolly said. "And I'm staying sore."

"What happened to your arm?"

"Somebody shot at me," Nolly said, "after I found Delia."

"The cops?"

"I don't think so," Nolly said. He adjusted his hat. "You have any objections if I just leave you here, Ken?"

"None at all," Ken said quietly. "I'll find you if I want you."

XIII

ARLENE'S CAR WAS PARKED across the street from Sadie's Sin, down in the Village. It was just six o'clock. The nightclub had put on a different air for the dinner hour. The clients were now family groups from the immediate neighborhood, or vestigial remnants of Village bohemian life. The place was dim and quiet and smelled of good food. The soft-footed Chinese waiters moved efficiently and almost invisibly among the tables.

Arlene was in a booth at the rear, beyond the empty dance floor, within a small alcoved space containing only four booths in all. The others were empty. She was wearing a small gray hat that perched on the back of her brush-fire hair, and her face was pale and calm as she looked up at him and smiled. Her coat was also gray, with a gold bowknot on the broad lapel. Her fine eyes were warm and happy as she greeted him, and she extended both hands silently as he slid into the bench across from her. Her hands were firm and friendly.

"Nolly, darling."

"Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Now that you are here, yes. But you have an unhappy penchant for worrying me."

"It couldn't be helped," he said, and smiled, feeling warm and comfortable with her. "I called you as soon as I could."

"I know. Who scratched your face?"

He thought again of Susan, and said:

"It's nothing. He would remember Arlene's voice, he thought, forever. A warm, sincere, and friendly voice—everything that Susan was not. A Chinese waiter put water glasses on the table and said to Arlene: "Now, miss?" and Arlene nodded. The waiter went away and she said: "I've already ordered dinner. You must be hungry."

She touched his hand across the table, and shadows crossed her eyes. She looked at his left arm, held carefully against his side, and she made a small sound in her throat. Her fingers tightened on his.

"What happened to you——"

"It's nothing. It's getting better now. Have you heard from Val yet?"

The shadows deepened in her wide eyes. "Not yet. I'm worried. He might be in his shack in Jersey, but there's no phone there and I can't imagine why he should go there, anyway. We quarreled about you last night, before he left. He's quite disturbed over my falling in love with you, Nolly." She looked at his hand beside hers. "He's always had such a wonderful opinion of you, too. But he doesn't want me to——" She paused again. "He didn't report to the office today, you know. Lieutenant Fiske was around, asking about him, just after you called. He stayed for several hours."

"You weren't followed here? You're sure?"

"No, I was quite careful."

The Chinese waiter came back and took their order for wine and drifted away again. The little restaurant felt warm and friendly. The sound of voices from the main room came in a soft, lazy murmur into their alcove. No one else entered to occupy the adjoining booths.

"Emmett was looking for you, too," Arlene said. "He came around earlier than Fiske. He seemed quite upset. He

didn't say what he wanted, although I told him I expected to see you."

"You didn't tell him we'd be here?"

"No, I didn't tell anyone."

She took her hand from his and searched in her purse for a cigarette. He held the flame for her, but her eyes didn't lift to meet his. Her lower lip trembled a little, and a tiny muscle twitched in her soft cheek. Nolly wanted to kiss her. He sat quite still and just looked at her. That was enough. She was good to look at. He wanted to be where he could see her all the rest of his life. He knew what was coming even before she finally raised her eyes to meet his glance.

"Nolly, what about Susan?" she asked.

"I haven't seen her since last night," he said. "Let's not talk about her now."

"But we must," she said. "You know I've fallen in love with you, Nolly. What are we going to do about it?"

"I don't know," he said. He watched her fingers tremble as she played with the cigarette. Her eyes were unnaturally bright.

"Do you still love her, Nolly?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"Do you love me?"

"Yes, I love you," Nolly said.

HE WANTED to take her in his arms and hold her and kiss away her unshed tears. He felt like a heel. He didn't know what to say. He watched a waiter put a wine bottle on the table. Somebody in the front part of the restaurant put a nickel in the juke box and a Debussy recording floated mistily around them.

Arlene said quietly: "Let's run away, Nolly. I'll go with you, wherever you say. I have a little money. Everything I have is yours. I don't care what happens, as long as we're together. I don't ever want to be separated from you again, darling. We can go anywhere, to another town, maybe the West Coast, or Canada, where nobody knows us and we'd never be found."

He listened to the piping flutes of Debussy.

"No. I'd like to go with you, Arlene.

But there are a few things I must do first."

She said: "Nolly, it's no use. They've decided on you, and they won't change their minds. Val says that lots of innocent men——"

"Don't you believe that I didn't kill anybody?"

"Of course I believe you, Nolly."

"Then I'll have to take the chance and stay here. I want to straighten this out. It's more than just my own neck now. I want to know the truth of it."

A silence came between them. Arlene toyed with her wine. Her face was pale and solemn. The gold bowknot shimmered on the lapel of her gray coat. He watched a little nerve twitch in her soft throat, and picked up his own glass, but he didn't drink. His eyes were caught by a calm movement near the entrance to the alcove where their booth was placed. The little Chinese waiter was talking anxiously to two men who had come in and were quietly surveying the booths. Nolly recognized them. His hands tightened on the edge of the table. They were curiously cut from the same bolt, these two men—but one was fair and the other was dark, and both had amused, sophisticated eyes that touched Nolly and smiled. Chester and Lester. Otto Orditch's scholarly gunmen.

Arlene followed Nolly's taut glance. She gave a little gasp and half rose from the bench on her side of the booth. Nolly reached out and gripped her wrist and forced her down again.

"There's no place to run this time," he said quietly. "It's all right. I've been wanting to see them again. I've been dreaming about it."

Chester moved first, strolling quietly past the helpless waiter. He still looked like a college boy. He wore a tan topcoat and a dark brown hat and a brown knitted tie knotted loosely under a soft white collar. Behind him, Lester scowled.

"Here she is," Chester said. "This is the one."

Nolly said: "Where is the boss?"

Chester said: "You're a handful, you are. You'll see Mr. Orditch soon enough. We're playing in luck tonight. We've

been looking for the girl's car, in case you're wondering. We just happened to spot it."

"So you've found us," Nolly said. "So what?"

Lester said glumly: "So let us go, friends."

Arlene's face was white. "Nolly, don't——"

"There's nothing to lose," Nolly said. "Besides, I owe these boys something."

"But they're killers . . ."

Nolly met Chester's grin. "We understand each other."

"Sure," said Chester. "We harbor no grudge."

"But the boss does," Lester said.

Nolly rose and Arlene stood up beside him, her eyes frightened. Her hand trembled as she slipped her fingers in his. Nolly said:

"Let's go, honey. This won't take long."

NIGHTFALL brought a thin fog that crept through the streets and made rainbows around the street lamps. The car turned west toward the Hudson. Nolly sat in the back, with Arlene, and Lester sat between them. Chester drove expertly through the maze of Village streets. Lights flickered through the interior of the car, then the tires rumbled on cobblestones and the smells of the river and the waterfront came to them. Somewhere a tugboat screeched, followed by the mournful hoot of a freighter's whistle, swinging at anchor in the fairway. Nolly felt the little gun in his pocket as Chester slid the car onto a wharf between two tall wire gates. The watchman offered no protest as they came to a halt on the pier.

The freighter, named *Argus McKay*, looked small and tired, covered with rust gathered on the seven seas. A light glowed on the bridge, and several beams of yellow streamed from the portholes in her deck housing. Crates were piled high on the pier, and the ship's booms were swung outboard, waiting for the morning crew of long-shoremen. Nolly paused at the foot of the gangway.

"Is Orditch going on a trip?"

"If necessary," Chester nodded.

The tramp freighter was old and dilapidated and smelled of banana oil. No one was visible on deck. Footsteps sounded on the bridge overhead as they passed down the well on the starboard side and turned into a greasy little salon. The vessel rocked faintly to the passing wake of a ship proceeding upstream near the wharf. The tugboat out in the darkness of the river screeched again. A sailor in shore-going clothes sauntered by and eyed Arlene with interest before he passed.

Orditch was in a stateroom at the end of a narrow corridor. His stout body was plumped down before a portable typewriter, on which he was laboriously picking out a letter. His fringe of gray hair stood up like a halo around his pink face, and seen in the cone of light from the wall lamp, he seemed anything but the dangerous man his reputation called for. The weekend had wrought a change in him, as it had in Ken Wimbaugh. He had aged, and the general appearance of personal neglect was even more emphatic. His necktie was loose, his clothes hung limply on his fat frame, and there was a wavering air of indecision about him. He didn't stand up when they crowded into the stateroom. He nodded to Chester and Lester, looked at Nolly, and then at Arlene.

"You're Miss Douglas?"

Arlene looked at Nolly. Orditch kept his eyes on her and pulled the paper from the typewriter and crumpled it into his pocket. His mouth was slack. "I've been looking for your brother."

Arlene moistened her lips. "Why?"

"I have a few questions to ask him. Nothing to alarm you. But I must find him before I leave. Time is growing short."

Arlene said: "What sort of questions?"

"That's of no importance to you. Where is he?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I knew," Arlene said. "I wouldn't tell you anything."

"You can be made to change your mind."

Nolly said: "Change mine for me, Orditch. What are you running away from?"

Is Val Douglas the man who borrowed money from you?"

Orditch's eyes glittered. "I'm no boy scout, yokel. Find out for yourself."

Nolly said: "Delia found out. She was killed for it. Did you kill her?"

Orditch said: "You know who killed Delia, and you'll tell me when I ask you. I know, too, but I want to be sure. Not that Delia didn't get what was coming to her, the witch. I'd have done the job myself if Wimbaugh didn't beat me to it."

Nolly didn't say anything. He grinned. He felt Arlene stiffen beside him. The girl said: "If Ken killed Delia, what do you want with my brother?"

"He was present, or on the premises when the Globe safe was cracked. He knows where the money is, and I mean to have it before I sail."

"He doesn't have the money," Nolly said. "I'm sure of it."

"How sure?"

NOLLY SAID: "I know where the money is. You won't get it, now or ever." He was conscious of Arlene's body, trembling against him. He looked at Orditch's stout, sloppy figure. Nothing changed in the usurer's face. Orditch looked at Chester and Lester, then considered his hands. He said: "All right, Bayless, you raised the question. Where is the money?"

"You won't find out by asking me."

"Perhaps we can persuade Miss Douglas to tell us, then."

"She doesn't know," Nolly said.

"But if we persuade her, perhaps you will talk."

"Go ahead," Nolly said. "You tried persuasion once before. Chester and Lester know all about it."

Orditch looked at the girl. "Your friend seems to have toughened up a bit since the last time I saw him. Or maybe he just thinks he's tough. Do you know where the money is, Miss Douglas?"

Arlene's whisper was scarcely audible. "No, I don't."

"I dislike the use of force," Orditch said heavily. "I would prefer to keep this meeting amiable and cooperative. You see, I know Bayless has been helped by

you and your brother and Wimbaugh and Pillman. His friends have a great deal of faith in him. Unfortunately, all their aid can't answer the question that must be answered if he is to get out of his difficulties. He must know the name of the man who borrowed money from me and who agreed to take a sum from the Globe Company's safe in order to repay me. I know who that man is, and I could easily solve your difficulties by so advising the police. But that would hardly suit my purpose. It would put me in jeopardy, since my own business is of an extra-legal nature. And most important of all, it would not regain the money that is due me. It doesn't matter to me if the police remain convinced of Bayless' guilt. All I want is the money. I am certain that you, Miss Douglas, or your brother know where it is."

"They don't," Nolly said.

"You sound very sure of yourself," Orditch said mildly.

"I am sure of it."

Orditch grinned. "Perhaps you know the name of the murderer, as well."

"I know that, too," Nolly said.

Chester chuckled and stood up quietly. Lester leaned against the stateroom door and looked sullen. Arlene made a sound in her throat. Her fingers slipped from Nolly's hand and she drew away from him, watching him with wide, wondering eyes. Her face was very pale. Orditch said: "Then why did you come here?"

"I didn't have much choice," Nolly shrugged. "Besides, I owe you something. I have a long memory of Friday night. I don't like to be pushed around."

Lester said. "You aren't through yet, Bayless."

Nolly spoke to Orditch: "You see, I know who was in the house in Queens where Delia was killed."

Orditch glanced at Chester and Lester.

"Did you frisk him?" he asked.

"This was supposed to be a friendly meeting," Chester said.

"Are you armed?" Orditch asked Nolly.

"This one used to belong to Chester," Nolly said, and took the Colt from his pocket. There was swift movement behind him as Lester and Chester drew their

own weapons. Nolly's face was calm.

Orditch was annoyed. "Put it away. We're friends here."

"No, we're not," Nolly said. "Because you can prove that I'm innocent."

"You said you know who the murderer is."

"I do. But I can't prove it—yet."

"Do you mind telling me?" Orditch asked.

NOLLY SAID: "You won't like it. I told you I was at the house where Delia was killed. I wasn't the only one there. I had a little tangle with another man."

Orditch regarded him with speculative eyes. "You saw him? You saw Ken Wimbaugh?"

"I didn't say it was Ken Wimbaugh," Nolly said quietly.

"He was trying to take Delia from me," Orditch said.

"So was someone else, perhaps."

Orditch said: "All right. Who was it?"

"It was Chester," Nolly said.

Arlene made a little moaning sound. Orditch regarded Nolly blankly. Chester said: "You son of a——"

Orditch said: "Chester killed Delia?"

"He was there," Nolly said. "Ask him, yourself. I don't pretend to know why, or how he got mixed up with her. He was crazy about her, though. Ask him."

Lester laughed glumly. The stout man's face was gray as he turned toward him. "What's so funny?"

"He knows it's true," Nolly said. "Ask Lester."

"I'm asking," Orditch said.

Lester said: "Sure, Chester was crazy about Delia. She was a nice bim. Lots of fellows were crazy about Delia..."

Orditch crossed the room with three deliberate strides, and Lester's voice dropped to a lower register with each step. Alarm flicked across the dark youth's face. It was there for just a moment, then the stout man's hand slapped heavily across his mouth, and came back again in a second blow that rocked Chester's head back.

"Don't say those things about Delia!"

Chester said: "Wait a minute, this is crazy——"

Lester said: "You crumb, what do you think you're doing?"

Orditch's voice shook: "I made you two out of sidewalk hooligans. I educated you and fed you and trained you to look and act like gentlemen."

"So you could have class," Lester sneered.

"I expect obedience and assistance from you. I can put you back in the gutters any time I say so."

A bright dribble of blood leaked down Lester's chin. His dark eyes were venomous. "And you can do a stretch up-river, too."

Chester said: "I didn't kill Delia. The guy's pulling a fast one——"

Orditch's heavy hand slapped across the blond boy's mouth. Retribution was swift. Lester wiped blood from his chin, reversed his gun, and brought it down with a brutal blow on the back of Orditch's head. The fat man crumpled without a sound. Chester stared with blank eyes at the body at his feet, then turned angrily toward Lester. He had no chance to do more. With a swooping movement, Nolly snatched up the desk chair and spun it across the room. It smashed into Lester's gun and pinned the squat man against the wall. Nolly followed it up, thrusting Arlene roughly aside as he lunged for Lester's gun. Chester began to gibber something and then the flat roar of a gun crashed through the room. Chester looked blank. Nolly threw himself aside, but he felt no bullet. It wasn't Lester's gun that had gone off, nor Chester's. Chester was sliding down to a sitting position against the wall. He was looking stupidly at Arlene. She had a gun in her hand, too. She was shaking from head to foot.

"He was going to kill you, Nolly," she whispered.

He was angry. "I owed them something. You should have let me pay it back."

"He was going to kill you," she repeated.

Chester said in a queer voice: "I'm not going to use my right leg again, ever. I haven't a knee left." He swallowed some-

thing in his throat. "The kneecap's gone." He began to shake. Nolly crossed the room, glimpsing his own white, excited face in the tiny mirror over the state-room washstand.

"Where did you get the gun, Arlene?"

"It was—in the desk. I fell against it when you pushed me." Her eyes were bright with growing hysteria. "I didn't know—I couldn't stand by and let him shoot you——"

Nolly took her arm, felt her muscles quiver under his fingers. The stateroom was absolutely quiet. He listened for any sign of alarm from the dock, but there was none. The ship lifted slightly to the surge of the tide, and the smell of cordite now blended with that of banana oil. Orditch was still unconscious. So was Lester. The other gunman sat with his back to the wall, his eyes blank and open, numbed with shock.

"Come on," Nolly said. "Let's get out of here."

He held the door open for the red-haired girl. She waited for him in the corridor while he took the key from the inside and locked the stateroom. Up on deck, he dropped the key into the water as they hurried down the gangplank. Nobody stopped them. The watchman at the gate tipped his hat to Arlene as they went by.

XIV

ARLENE'S FACE WAS PALE and mysterious in the shadows of the back seat of the cab.

"Where are we going now?" she asked.

"Sadie's Sin. We need your car."

He didn't want to talk to her now. A thousand thoughts came to his mind, but he was too excited to analyze them. Quite suddenly, he saw his way clear, and he knew what he had to do. It wasn't going to be pleasant. Or easy. He wished he didn't have to do what came next. But none of it was pleasant, or easy.

Arlene interrupted his thoughts again. Her voice was flat.

"We didn't have to go to Orditch in the first place," she said. "You could have

stopped them where we were eating. But you wanted to go."

"I had to find out something," Nolly said.

"Are you satisfied?"

"I feel better," Nolly said.

She was silent for a moment. "Do you know who the murderer really is?"

"Yes, I know."

"Was it Chester?"

"No, I just said that to start the dance back there. I'd found out all I wanted to know from them." He turned and regarded her for a moment. "What are you afraid of, Arlene?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid for you."

"That's not all," he said

She didn't look at him. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to see my wife. You're coming with me."

Arlene was silent after that.

Sadie's Sin was in the after-dinner doldrums when they arrived. The dinner crowd was gone and it was too early for the night club revelers. The coupe was still parked where they had left it. Nolly let Arlene get in behind the wheel, but he didn't enter the car himself.

"Wait here a minute," he told her.

The fog felt damp in his lungs as he crossed the street and went down the steps into Sadie's Sin. A waiter came toward him and he asked for a telephone. He was shown the way to a private booth. He waited for the man to drift away, then dialed the Homicide Division and asked for Lieutenant Fiske. His chest felt hot and excited as he waited. Someone named Donahue asked if it was important, and Nolly said yes. He waited another minute. There were various clicks in the receiver. Nolly slid his hand inside his coat and felt the bandages around his shoulder. The bandages were loose. His skin felt wet and slippery. His heart pumped a little faster as he looked at his fingers. They were wet with perspiration. No blood. He listened to the receiver click and then a calm voice said: "Lieutenant Fiske speaking."

Nolly said: "There's a freighter named the *Argus McKay* tied up in the North River. Stateroom C is locked. You'll

find three men in it, if you move fast enough. They can tell you a lot about the murder of Delia DeWolfe."

"Who?" The lieutenant's voice was sharp.

"Delia DeWolfe. Move fast, Lieutenant."

"Who is this, please?"

Nolly hung up. He quit the restaurant and walked quickly across the foggy street, wondering how long it would take Fiske to trace the call and send a prowler car to the neighborhood. In any case, Orditch couldn't skip the country now. His heels made a quickening sound as he hit the sidewalk. The car was still there. Arlene was still behind the wheel. He got in beside her and said: "Uptown, darling."

She said coolly: "To see your wife?"

"That's right. We'll have to hurry."

THE FOG was thinner uptown. Two tankers swung at the end of their mooring cables in the Hudson. The George Washington Bridge hung in delicate tracery against the night sky. Behind them, the city towered in a tall and glittering mass of lights that reached high up out of the mist.

No. 1414 Champlost Street was peaceful and dark as Arlene let the car drift as silently as a ghost around the corner. There were no lights in Susan's kitchen window. At the thought of seeing her again, a hand seemed to reach inside him and squeeze his stomach. He didn't ever want to see her again. But he had to. There was no other way around the problem. It was there and he had to walk into it and settle it, because Arlene was here beside him, waiting for him in faith and hope. He had to walk into it because there was Delia, a dead Delia, with questioning eyes that demanded an answer and a cause for her death.

He looked for detectives on the street, but he didn't see any. "Park around the corner," he told Arlene. "Across from the Castle Restaurant. It's the hamburger palace."

A familiar figure was seated on the end stool at the counter in the cafe. It was Geiger, the stout detective Nolly had

met on the night of Wright's death. He touched Arlene's arm warningly.

"He can watch the apartment entrance from there. Maybe he's just having coffee, or maybe he's staying thereto keep warm. My guess is just coffee—he'd be in the lobby otherwise."

"I'll take care of him," Arlene said quietly. "But I'd rather go with you."

"I can't get in there as long as that cop is watching." He looked at Arlene's pale face and tilted her chin with his finger. "Don't be frightened."

"I can't help it," she said. "But I'll take care of him. He won't see you go in."

"He doesn't know you," Nolly said. "Just get him to look the other way for a few minutes. He'll look at you, all right. If anything goes wrong, pick me up around this corner."

Her eyes were haunted. He leaned over and kissed her on the mouth. It was the first time he had ever kissed her. Her lips were cold.

"Wait for me," he said.

"I'll wait."

He got out of the door, closing the door quietly. Arlene crossed to the white-tiled hamburger cafe and sat down on the stool next to the fat detective. Nolly watched the man turn and regard her, then he went around the corner and crossed to the apartment entrance. No one came in or out of the building. The ornamental brass lamps gleamed softly outside the sedate, dimly lighted doorway, shedding a pool of warm light on the sidewalk under the green canopy. Several cars rolled smoothly westward down the street. A man came out of an apartment house across the way, leading a big boxer that began to nose the curb. Nolly went into the lobby and rode up in the automatic elevator to the eighth floor. Light buttered the hallway from indirect lamps concealed behind the dingy wall mouldings.

There were no more detectives here. The place seemed quiet and deserted. His nerves tightened along his arms and shoulders as he turned the key in the lock and stepped into the dark foyer.

"Susan?" he called softly.

HER perfume was like a mist in the blackness, a ghostly wraith reaching out to remind him and mock him of years gone by. There came a sudden sharp bark and a scampering of claws on the hardwood floor, and a bundle of frantic joy leaped at him, pawed him, whining and wagging her feathery tail and covering his hand with a wet, welcoming tongue.

He grinned into the darkness and closed the hall door.

"Hi, Loopy Lu," he whispered.

The cocker spaniel stood on her hind legs and pranced all around him, long ears flying. He snapped on the foyer light.

"Down," he said.

She dropped happily to his heels. He listened. There was no sound from inside the dark apartment. Loopy Lu whined and abruptly leaned against Nolly's leg. There was nothing but dimness waiting beyond the foyer. No one was at home.

"Susan?" he called again.

He didn't know whether he felt relieved or not. Light fled ahead of him from the foyer and stretched his shadow into the living room. The windows were open and the curtains bellied gently inward, breezing the delicate antique chairs and the fireplace and the drum table. Nolly stood still and looked around, aware of Loopy Lu trembling as she pressed against him. The cocker's cropped tail was tucked between her legs.

He called Susan's name again, then put his hand in his topcoat pocket and took out the gun. His lips felt dry and parched. His throat ached. He went across the living room and Loopy Lu dashed ahead insanely into the kitchen, and he wondered how long it was since the pup had been fed. He ignored the heap of dirty dishes in the kitchen sink and went to the refrigerator for some ground meat, seared it in a pan over the stove, and mixed it with dry cereal. The cocker's water dish was as dry and empty as her feed bowl. He sat down in a chair and watched the dog go at her food. She was frantic with hunger. But after a few bites she paused and looked at him with questioning eyes and whimpered again.

There was an air of desertion about the apartment, as if it had been empty for many hours. He wondered about the open windows and wondered what had happened to Susan since he had last seen her in the cottage in Queens. It seemed a long time since he'd left her. He wasn't worried about Susan. She was able to take care of herself.

Then he got up and went into the bedroom. Loopy Lu followed him, still whimpering. No one was in the bedroom. The room was very quiet, very feminine, and strangely unfamiliar now, thickly scented with Susan's perfume. The twin beds were made, with smooth green satin counterpanes. Two Parisian dolls sat on Susan's fluffy bolster. Bottles of perfumes and cosmetics winked in cut-glass containers on the dressing table.

He thought of Arlene, waiting for him downstairs, distracting the detective. Loopy Lu whimpered and started back to the living room. No one was in the apartment. No one could be. Nolly went into the bathroom and snapped on the light.

The switch didn't work. He clicked it futilely and then just stood there. Someone was sprawled beside the shower stall, a very still, very small figure, a shadow among the shadows. He couldn't see very clearly who it was, but a chill went up and down his back as he peered at it, and the dog trembled violently and whined against his leg.

He knew who it was, but he didn't want to believe it. He didn't want to go back and turn the bedroom lamp up in this direction. But he had to. He couldn't go across that still little figure on the floor to test the bulb over the wash basin. He couldn't step over it.

He thought, *I ought to be surprised, but I'm not. Somebody was going to kill her, sooner or later.*

He stood there and felt his leg muscles tremble. He thought. *This is crazy. She said she was the one who killed Delia. Why did she say that to me?*

It didn't make sense. For a while, he had half thought Susan was the murderer. It was a crazy thought, and he

knew just how crazy it was as he looked down at her tiny, crumpled form.

He went into the bathroom and turned the bulb over the wash stand and the light came on. He could see her now, at his feet.

Susan was quite dead.

HER blond hair flowed over the green tiled bathroom floor. Her face was turned upward, her face that had been so childish and appealing. She wasn't lovely any more. There was a silken scarf around her neck, and the scarf had throttled her, and her face showed that she had been strangled. It was ugly. Her mouth was open and her tongue looked swollen and purple between her tiny white teeth. She was wearing her mink coat. It lay in rippled flares around her body. She looked tiny and huddled and shrunken inside the mink coat.

Nolly said softly: "I'm sorry, Susan."

He put the gun back in his topcoat pocket. Loopy Lu scrambled frantically away from the bathroom door. He let her lead him back as far as the living room and he stood by the windows, letting the breeze cool his face. He felt sick. He fought against a rising tide of nausea and trembled in the cold wind that blew around him. Cold wind inside him, too. He took a handkerchief and wiped his mouth and looked out through the window at the corner. Arlene's car was still parked there. He thought of Arlene and then he thought of Susan. The wind blew colder inside him.

In the apartment it was very quiet and peaceful.

"You couldn't handle this one, could you, Susan?"

He looked around and saw that the apartment had been thoroughly cleaned since the day before. The ashtrays were empty and glistening. The fireplace had been dusted and the remnants of charred logs removed. It was very tidy. Except for what lay on the bathroom floor.

The telephone began to ring. The sound was shrill and explosive in all that peace and quiet. Nolly turned his body without moving his feet and looked at it. The telephone rang four times and then sub-

sided. He seemed to hear the echoes of it deep in the back of his head for a long time, and then the telephone began to ring again. Loopy Lu whined and pulled toward the hall door. Nolly followed her out of the living room and into the foyer. He was about to reach for the outside door when it opened by itself and Emmett Pillman came in.

XV

NOLLY LOOKED AT HIM WITH blank eyes. Emmett's whole face expressed surprise. His brows lifted and his blue eyes had a queerly stunned look in them. He was wearing his usual disreputable coat and an old hat. His tie looked stringy. He took off his hat and put a hand on his bald head for a moment, then he came in quickly and closed the door behind him.

"Nolly. For God's sake. You look like hell."

"I'm all right," Nolly said.

"What are you doing here?"

"I just came home to look around," Nolly said. "I've been lucky so far—the police haven't caught up to me yet." He looked at the stout, bald man, and wondered about Arlene, and then thought of something else. "What about you, Emmett?"

The stout man's eyes traveled down to Nolly's hand. Nolly was surprised to see that he was holding the gun again. Pillman said: "What's that for?"

Nolly put it away without comment. Emmett looked at the dog, then walked into the living room, examining the furniture with strange eyes. Nolly paused at the fire-place. "What are you doing here, Emmett?"

"Same as you," Pillman said. He smoothed the brim of his battered hat with pudgy fingers. "I wanted to talk to Susan. I heard about the DeWolfe girl being found dead in that place out in Queens and about Susan being there. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I think Susan knows more than she's letting on."

"I didn't know it was in the papers."

"It's not in the papers. That Fiske

fellow let it slip. I came over here because I thought Susan might know something. Maybe something to help you, Nolly. I'm glad the cops aren't here, bothering her."

"They're not here yet," Nolly said.

"Isn't Susan home?"

Nolly said: "Susan is here."

Pillman looked surprised. "Well, what's the matter? Where is she?"

"She's dead," Nolly said.

"Dead?"

"Somebody strangled her," Nolly said.

Emmett's mouth went slack for a moment. His lips were wet. His thick brows went up and then down. His gaze touched Nolly, then the dog. He made a small sound in his throat, and his fat face went flabby. The window curtains made a flapping sound.

"Where?" he asked.

"In the bathroom," Nolly said. "Go and see."

The fat man eyed him, licked his lips, and walked slowly into the hallway. He was gone for several minutes. He looked ill when he came slowly back to where Nolly stood. He looked at the dog and then at the pocket where Nolly had put the gun. Nolly hadn't moved. Emmett smoothed his bald head.

"This is awful," he said. "Susan dead!"

"I didn't do it," Nolly said dully.

Emmett didn't say anything. He waited. Nolly said:

"She was dead when I got here. I haven't been here more than ten minutes. I came here to talk things over with her and get the truth out of her, and at first I thought she wasn't home. Then I looked around and I found her just as you see her. I didn't do it."

"She's only been dead a little while," Pillman said. "I touched her. She's still warm." The fat man looked worried. He chewed his wet lower lip. His eyes were curiously withdrawn as he regarded Nolly. "I guess she was mixed up in it, after all. Otherwise, what was she doing over at Delia's place last night? She didn't know anything about Delia, did she?"

"She knew," Nolly said. "I told her."

"Maybe she found out something," Pillman said. "Maybe she was trying to

help you and found out who the murderer is, and that's why she was killed."

"She wasn't trying to help me," Nolly said. "But she was killed anyway."

Pillman looked uneasy. "Maybe we ought to get out of here."

"Someone was trying to call her on the telephone just now," Nolly said.

"Did you touch it?"

"Touch what?"

"The telephone."

"No," said Nolly. "I don't think so."

"That's good. You're in enough trouble, without being tied into this. If we get out of here now, they won't be able to place you here, Nolly."

BUT the stout man didn't move. He looked around the pastel living room and wet his lips again. He looked old and tired. Nolly had never before noticed the quick little way his eyes moved when he looked around. A thin strand of gray hair on Emmett's scalp stirred with the breeze that came through the windows. Emmett looked at the dainty, peaceful room, then at the archway into the bedroom, then at the dog. He said: "Maybe we ought to look around here, though. Maybe Susan had left a message for you."

Nolly said: "I don't think she did. Even so, it wouldn't be here now."

"I'd sure like to know where that money is, Nolly."

"So would I."

"Forty grand is a lot of money. I work ten years for forty grand. It's a lot of cabbage. I'm close to fifty now, Nolly. Forty thousand dollars, and I could retire."

"Forget it," Nolly said.

Pillman said: "I'd sure like to find it, if it's here."

"It's not here."

"I'm going to look, anyway," Pillman said.

Nolly didn't stop him. Emmett went into the bedroom, and from there into the bath. Nolly watched him go and listened to the slight sounds of movement in there. He didn't want to think about Susan's body at Pillman's feet. He said quietly.

"Sit still, Loopy," and left the dog at the fireplace and went over to a delicate antique secretary that stood against the far wall. Like everything else in the room, it had been dusted and neatly straightened. Except for the wastebasket. There was a scrap of paper from the telephone pad in the wastebasket. He picked it up and smoothed the crumpled ball and saw that a telephone number had been written on it. Cloverfield 4-7447. It didn't mean anything. Then he saw the telephone book folded open on its track like a thick magazine. He picked it up and was about to look at the yellow classified page it was open to, when Emmett Pillman came back into the room.

"What have you found, Nolly?"

"Nothing, I was just looking, too."

Emmett said: "Well, look at this."

He had a receipt form in his hand, folded twice. Nolly opened it and saw that it was a receipt from the Arco Messenger Service for a parcel that was picked up that day at 4:00 p. m. The receipt was made out to Susan Bayless. The telephone number under the company name was Cloverfield 4-7447.

"Where did you find this?" Nolly asked.

"Susan had it. It was in her coat pocket. I had to move her to get at it." Pillman's face was alive with excitement as he looked at Nolly. "I've got a lot of ideas."

"So have I," Nolly said.

"That's not all I found," Pillman said. "Look at this. It was in the bathroom wastebasket."

It was a scrap of wrapping paper with a parcel post label stuck to it. The label was that of the Hommeyer Merchandising Company. Nolly watched Pillman put it in his pocket.

"Listen to this," said the bald man. "We know the murderer didn't beat it out of town, even though Orditch was after him. And when Arlene showed up at the Globe Building, with Chester and Lester outside, he didn't dare take the dough out with him. So he mailed it. He mailed it and he didn't have a chance to recover it. That's why he didn't get out of town; because he didn't have the money."

Nolly said coldly: "You think he mailed it to Susan?"

"Her name is on the address label," Emmett said.

"All right," said Nolly. "So what?"

"So let's suppose that Susan didn't turn the money over to the murderer. And then she doublecrossed him by sending it somewhere this afternoon by this messenger service—and Orditch strangled her for it, or the murderer killed her. Does that make sense?"

"Some of it," Nolly said. "Do you think I'm the murderer?"

"I don't care what you are," Pillman said. "All I want is the money."

HE TOOK a gun from his pocket and pointed it at Nolly. Nolly's weapon was still in his topcoat. The fat man's face was dark and deadly, like the heavy revolver in his pudgy hand. Little lights of avarice pinwheeled in Pillman's eyes. His wet mouth was thick with a loose grin.

"We're going to get that money, Nolly."

"Did you kill Susan?" Nolly asked.

"Don't be a fool. We both know who killed Susan, don't we? And Delia and Henry Wright, too. But what I don't know is where the money is hidden now. That's all I'm interested in now. I don't care what they think about you, Nolly. That's your lookout. The weak go to the wall in this world. I've been thinking about that forty grand ever since it happened, thinking about all the things it could buy me. All I want is the money, and if they think you got it, that's your headache. I'm going to retire and live a life of ease on that money. I've worked hard, and it's coming to me. It's about time I got a break like this."

"I haven't got it," Nolly said.

"But you know where it is."

"No. I don't."

Pillman said patiently: "I'll kill you if I have to, Nolly. I could do it and get away with it. I could say I found you here and you had strangled your wife, and they'd believe me all right. They'd be happy to believe anything about you right now."

"I didn't kill Susan. I haven't got the

money. Use your head, Emmett. You're acting crazy."

Pillman was shivering a little. But the hand that held his big gun was steady. He kept it pointed at Nolly. Nolly backed up a little and felt Loopy Lu press hard against his leg. She was shivering, too. Little whining sounds came from deep in her furred throat. Nolly said:

"I've been thinking. I can prove I'm not the killer. And I can find out who really is."

"I told you, I don't care who did it," Pillman said. "I just want the money. I've been dreaming about that dough. It's a chance of a lifetime for me."

"It doesn't belong to you,"

"It will if I find it first. And you know where it is. You and I are going to get it. You are coming with me, and when I get the money, I don't care about you any more. You can do what you please after that."

There was no point in further argument. Pillman would shoot him if he resisted. Nolly started to put his hand in his pocket, where his gun was, and stopped as Pillman's weapon jerked up.

The fat man grinned and took the gun away from him, swiftly and carefully. Then Pillman backed up to the light switch and snapped it off, standing in the foyer entrance. With the dimness, the scent of perfume in the apartment grew stronger. Light oozed in through the windows, enough to see by. Pillman would shoot him. Pillman wanted the money. He didn't want to ask Emmett if he'd murdered Susan. He didn't want to know the answer now. All he wanted was out. But there was no out. Pillman had the gun, and Pillman would shoot him.

"Let's go," the fat man said.

Nolly didn't move. He was just a little guy, caught in a maze of circumstances too big for him, but there had to be some way out. Something he could do. He couldn't go on as a fugitive much longer. Not with Arlene waiting and praying for him outside.

He couldn't go with Pillman. Pillman was going to kill him. It was just sheer luck that had kept him out the hands of

the police so far. There had to be something he could think of. But there wasn't anything else. He looked at Emmett Pillman, squat and old and dangerous, waiting for him with a gun in his hand, asking him to do the impossible and find that money for him. He couldn't think about it any more. He couldn't think about anything. He was tired. Tired down to his toes. It had been a long day. It had been a long weekend. Too long.

THE telephone on the table began to ring again. It rang shrilly in the gloom, and Nolly turned his head to look at it, then he looked at Emmett Pillman.

"Answer it," Emmett said.

"I don't want anybody to know I'm here," Nolly said.

"I don't care about that. Answer it. It might be important."

"Give me a break, Emmett. We're friends."

"Not if it costs me forty thousand dollars. Answer it."

The telephone was still ringing. Nolly picked it up. Emmett came back into the room and stood close behind him so that he could hear what went on in the receiver. His gun was pressed into Nolly's ribs.

"Arco Messenger Service," said a man's voice. "May I speak to Mrs. Bayless please?"

Pillman's gun urged him to answer. Nolly said: "I'll take the message."

The man said: "Very well. The package was delivered at 8:15. But nobody was there."

"What did you do with it?" Nolly asked.

"We have a signed receipt from John Hanks."

"You had the right address?"

The man's voice was silent, then suspicious. "Who is this?"

"It's all right," said Nolly. "I'm her husband."

"Well, I don't know——"

"What's the matter?"

"She said to report to her only. Sorry, mister."

"Wait a minute,——" Nolly began.

"Sorry," said Arco Service, and the man hung up.

Pillman chuckled into the darkness. He took the telephone from Nolly and cradled it carefully. His gun was withdrawn from Nolly's back. He waited for a bullet to crash into his spine. Pillman didn't need him now. Pillman could shoot him now. He knew where the money was—or he could get it. It was all over.

Pillman said: "I'm going. I'm leaving you here, Nolly."

The wind made the curtains flap behind him. The smooth sound of tires rolling down the street came into the room. Beyond the window the sky was black and moody, shimmering faintly with dim starlight. Nolly shivered. He felt lonely. He looked at Pillman's smile. Pillman was going to shoot him and leave him here to be found with Susan. There wouldn't be any other way. He would die here and stare at the window without seeing it, alone in the cold wind. It would be lonely when he was dead. Lonely and cold.

Pillman said: "Turn around, Nolly. Sit down on the couch over there. You look worried."

"Are you going to kill me, Emmett?"

"When I feel like it," Pillman said.

"Just for the money?"

"For the money?"

"Did you kill Wright and Delia?"

"Shut up."

"And Susan?"

"Go ahead, Nolly. Sit down over there."

"Now?" Nolly asked.

"I got a better idea," Pillman said, and he chuckled. "A much better idea."

Nolly sat down. Pillman took a handkerchief from his pocket and picked up the telephone. Light ran a wet finger on the barrel of the gun he pointed at Nolly. The dog sat down at Nolly's feet and whimpered. Pillman dialed, and the clicks of the telephone were startlingly loud in the stillness.

"Homicide Bureau," Pillman said.

Nolly was silent.

After a moment, Pillman said: "Dead woman at 1414 Champlost Street. Apartment 8-C. It's the Bayless case." He hung up and grinned and said: "That will put 'em on their heels, all right."

"What did you do that for?" Nolly asked.

Pillman said: "Why, it's the law. You've always got to report a crime. Get on your feet, Nolly."

"To hell with you," Nolly said.

"Would you rather have it like that?"

Nolly stood up. Pillman said: "In the kitchen." He preceded the fat man down the hall and into the big kitchen. Pillman put on the light. He was moving faster now, with a quick nervousness that betrayed inner anxiety. The pantry door stood open. Pillman gestured toward it with his gun.

"In there, Nolly. The dog, too."

"What for?"

"Let the cops find you here, Nolly. You won't be in my hair then. By the time they let you talk. I'll have the money. I'll be over the hills and far away."

"You won't get away with it."

"Yes, I will. I have a good start. Into the closet, Nolly, there's no fire-escape there."

Nolly stepped into the big pantry. Loopy Lu hesitated, and he reached down and pulled the cocker in with him. Pillman shut the door. The key clicked in the lock. Underfoot, the ribbon of light was abruptly extinguished. He stood in complete darkness. Through the door, Pillman said:

"So long, Nolly."

XVI

NOLLY GRINNED WITHOUT mirth into the darkness that enveloped him. He reached down and scratched Loopy Lu's long ears, and the dog shivered. He counted softly to himself, up to ten, and listened for the sound of the front door. When it closed sharply, he turned his back on the pantry door, after tentatively testing the lock, and felt in the darkness for the stout shelves behind him. Overhead was complete darkness, but the skylight was up there, and Pillman hadn't known about it. Time pressed, since the telephone call. He clambered upon the lowest shelf, and his head grazed the bottom of the skylight. He reached up with his right arm and lifted. The lid didn't

budge. He got up on the next shelf, balancing precariously in the darkness, and heaved upward with his shoulders. The wooden skylight made a cracking sound and bounced aside, skittering on the graveled roof. Starlight and a velvety night sky expanded above him. He thrust his head out into the wind. The roof was empty. The freedom of the night was open to him. He got his elbows over and began to lift himself up.

From the darkness of the pantry floor came the dog's lonely whimper.

Nolly paused. He couldn't leave the dog here. Time was precious, before the first ominous wail of a police siren sounded, but he couldn't desert the pup. He muttered to himself, climbed laboriously down to the floor, and gathered Loopy Lu under his arm. As if aware of his difficulties, she gave him no trouble as he hoisted her up through the skylight to the roof. She waited patiently while he struggled up after her, his wounded shoulder stiff and awkward, unable to bear its share of his weight.

The dog's tail was wagging as he emerged into the starlight.

"Let's go, Loopy," he said.

The elevator housing in the next apartment building wasn't locked. A man and a girl were leaning against the high cornice, sheltered from the wind, talking together in low murmurs as Nolly and the dog approached. They broke apart and the man muttered something. They moved off without glancing at Nolly. He went on down into the apartment house. Five minutes later he was on the street, around the corner from No. 1414.

Empires can fall in less than five minutes. In less than five seconds, a man can die. There was a prowler car parked in front of the softly lighted lobby entrance as Nolly came around the corner. A uniformed cop was striding across the pavement into the doorway, his face grim. His partner was just getting out of the car on the street side. Geiger was talking to him, angry and defensive.

Arlene's convertible wasn't at the corner any more.

Nolly risked pausing at the corner to make sure. He looked up and down the

street, beyond the prowling car. The second cop slammed the cruiser door and followed his partner into the lobby. Arlene's car wasn't there. It wasn't in sight anywhere.

Loopy Lu nosed the curb. Nolly turned toward her, and Arlene's car came sliding quietly down the side street. Nolly snapped his fingers and the dog left the corner and trotted after him, out of sight of the cops. Arlene stopped the car and held the door open.

"I was worried," she said. "I saw Pillman come out, but not you. Get in."

Loopy Lu scrambled happily into the car. Nolly got in after her and shut the door.

"Let's roll," he said. "Did Pillman see you?"

"No. I didn't know what to do. What are the police doing here, Nolly?"

"Pillman called them."

He watched her maneuver the car expertly across trolley tracks and turn south. The night was cool, the fog was gone. Loopy Lu sat on the leather seat between them and her tongue lolled happily, her ears spread in the wind. Arlene's face was pale, her hands trembling slightly as she held the wheel. She brought the car to a smooth halt as they waited for a red light.

"Nolly, what happened? Why did Emmett call the police?"

"Susan is dead," Nolly said flatly.

He watched her. She was silent. She was sick with silence. He saw her face grow stiff and white and she caught her full red underlip between her teeth. She didn't say anything. He waited for her to speak, but she was silent.

He said impatiently:

"She was dead when I got there, Arlene!"

"All right, Nolly. Please."

"Don't you believe me?"

"Yes, Nolly." She started the car as the light changed. "How much longer is it to go on? How many more people are going to die?"

"No more," he said. "It's finished tonight."

"Tonight?"

"I'm going to finish it," he said.

9:57. An electric clock was outside, with a crack in the glass and black lettering

that read, *Arco Messenger Service*. Under it was a brass statuette of a rather obese Mercury hurrying on winged feet to deliver a parcel. The Broadway office of the company was a dimly lighted hole with yellow painted walls, a scarred wooden railing that divided the clients from an inner sanctum, a small PBX, and an air of leisure that belied the slogan on the window, *Safe, Swift, Private Deliveries. We Deliver Anywhere.*

MISS Pennyfeather was alone in the office. She was getting ready to close up for the night, gathering her bird's-nest hat, her knitting bag, and her reversible topcoat in a heap on her desk. Her face was annoyed as she looked at Nolly and Arlene. Her small black eyes snapped with irritation.

"It was our Mr. Stanley who took care of that particular client. He had complete charge of it."

"Where is Mr. Stanley now?" Nolly asked.

"Gone home, young man. I got stuck with the night shift."

Nolly said: "You understand, this is very important to me, personally. Don't you have some records of your deliveries today that I could check into? I just want to find out where the package went."

"The records are in Mr. Stanley's desk," Miss Pennyfeather said. She sounded happy about it. "The desk is locked."

"Well, could I—"

"Certainly not. Mr. Stanley is the only one who could help you. But it would be against the rules."

"Where is he now?"

"At home. He lives in Coney."

"Does he have a telephone?"

"No," said Miss Pennyfeather. "But I'll give you his address."

She shuffled around in a card index on another desk, put on her hat, her coat, looked at her dark, narrow face in a pocket mirror, and came back with a card. Nolly took it and said: "Thank you. You're very kind."

Miss Pennyfeather unbent a little. "What is it all about, young man?"

"It's a personal matter," Nolly said.

"You know, yours is the second in-

quity about that parcel in the last half hour. There was a telephone call about it, too."

Nolly paused. "What did you tell him?"

"I didn't say it was a man."

"Wasn't it?"

"Well...I didn't tell him no more than I told you, young man. It's against the rules—"

"Yes," Nolly nodded. "Thank you."

He followed Arlene out to the street, Loopy Lu trotted happily to the curb. Arlene's face was pale.

"Was it Pillman?" she asked.

"It must be," Nolly said. "He's got a good start."

A uniformed figure came strolling down the sidewalk and bent down toward Loopy Lu. It was a stout cop with a red face and white hair. He patted the cocker's head and the dog's tail wagged and then the cop straightened and looked at Nolly. Arlene's face was white. She turned abruptly toward the car, and the cop glanced at her, and then said to Nolly:

"Is this your dog?"

"That's right," Nolly said.

"Fine pup. I ought to run you in, young fellow."

Nolly said quietly: "What for?"

"No leash. You've gotta have a leash for a dog."

"I know," Nolly said. He smiled. "It's in the car."

"Sure," said the cop. "Be careful."

"I will, officer. Thank you."

The patrolman went away. Miss Pennyfeather came out of the darkened Arco office and looked at them, and walked in the opposite direction. Nolly took a handkerchief, dried his hands, and got into the car beside Arlene and the pup.

Arlene said in a shaky voice: "I can't stand too much of this darling."

"It's all right," Nolly said. "Let's go to Coney."

10:32. The wind made a batting sound against the car ventilators, and far off a host of crickets sang against the song of the surf. The ocean stretched black and moody to their right, endless and secretive. The street came to a dead end at No. 75. The length of Brooklyn lay behind them, beyond empty fields and dismal marshland.

Beyond the house was the beach and the dim shape of a sand-blown jetty, and the faint white lines of breakers rolling upon the shingle. The air felt wet and cold.

THE woman who came to the door wore a printed silk dress and too much make-up. Over her dress she had buttoned a faded gray sweater. She was thin and blonde and her face had a wasted look. She looked all dressed up with no place to go.

She said: "He ain't home. He's gone out with the boys."

"Are you Mrs. Stanley?"

She said: "What if I am? I suppose you're a cop too."

Nolly said: "Oh, was my partner here already?"

"Here and gone." The blonde woman looked enviously at Arlene and beyond her to the convertible coupe parked in the sandy street. The sound of the surf seemed louder. Occasional flecks of spray flew by in the darkness. Mrs. Stanley said: "I can't help you no more than I helped your partner. I wish to hell Harvey would stay home nights."

"Don't you know where I could find him?"

Her red mouth curled. "Sure, I could take you buggy-ridin' just to see the sights. If you was alone. But you already got a date. So we won't go pub-crawling, big boy. I just can't help you at all. If you find Harvey, slap him in the can, if you got anything on him. I won't miss the son of a sea cook at all."

"Didn't he say anything at all about the package?"

"He mentioned giving one to Joe Lesser. Joe lives over in Jersey—White Lake, I guess it is. As long as he goes home that way, he takes packages with him to deliver. Harvey mentioned that much, before he scrambled out. If he's with another dame, I'll kill him, and I don't care if you hear me say that, copper; I got the right to kill him, the way he leaves me here in this dump—"

"Joe Lesser," Nolly said. "White Lake. Many thanks."

"Nuts to you, copper. Don't forget what I said about Harvey."

THE WHEELS of the convertible made a whining echo as they rolled through the bright white tiled lanes of Holland Tunnel. The occasional guard on the narrow catwalk above the road didn't look at them as they swished by. Arlene was still driving, quietly and expertly. The dog was asleep between them, her brown ears sprawled over her broad feathered paws.

Nolly's face was pale and tired. He ached in every bone. He wished he could quit and just go to sleep. He was weary, through and through, weary until he felt sick inside. His stomach was tied into knots by the need for speed.

They came out on the Jersey side and Arlene turned into the open highway. The air was clearer here. After a mile or two she abandoned the main New York-Philadelphia highway and cut through jumbled city streets toward the hills that rolled westward. She hadn't said anything for a long time. There were faint shadows under her eyes.

She said: "Loopy is a lovely dog. I'm glad you didn't leave her there."

Nolly said nothing.

She said: "I wish we could just keep on driving. Just drive and never stop until we've left this far behind. Where they could never catch up to us."

"Where would that be?" Nolly said.

"Anywhere. Away from all this. We'd be happy then."

Nolly said nothing.

"Do you really love me?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, I love you."

"I don't think you do. If you loved me, you'd stop risking your life and let me drive you away from here."

He said: "I don't like what I'm doing any more than you do."

"I'm so frightened," she said.

"I know," he said.

"Please, Nolly..."

"No," he said. "We've got to finish it. I've got to get there ahead of Pillman. Don't you understand?"

"I understand. But I don't care what Pillman does. He can have the money. I just don't want you to have any more to do with it, darling."

"I'm part of it," he said. "I can't help it."

They were both silent. They were on a two-lane highway now, with smooth concrete thudding under the tires. The city was behind them, and the road curved gently across wide, dark fields under the starry sky. There was a smell of autumn and fruit orchards winding through the dark of the night. Occasionally the road became a leafy tunnel twisting under the interlaced boughs of old trees. Lights twinkled in ephemeral farmhouses as they slid by, racing the wind.

Arlene said:

"I didn't want to ask you, Nolly. How was Susan killed?"

"She was strangled," he said grimly. "With a silk scarf around her neck."

"There's nothing I can say, is there?"

"No," he said gently. "It's all right. Susan was strangled, and Delia was shot, and Mr. Wright was killed by a blow on the head. I've been thinking about it. The way these people were killed is what made it all so hard to figure out."

"Have you figured it out?" she asked quietly.

"Most of it. They were impromptu, unpremeditated murders. which happened on the spur of the moment. Once you start something like that, it gets out of hand, it keeps on going, and there never seems to be an end to it. They're the toughest kind of murders for the police to solve. They can crack the fancy ones, where the murderer tries to get subtle. They're easy. The tough ones are the ones that just happen, and the murdered walks away from it and he's lost without a trace."

"But you know who the murderer is," said Arlene.

"Yes, I know," Nolly said.

"So do I," Arlene said.

11:05. White Lake. A shimmering platter of water a thousand feet above sea level. A paved main street, flanked by clapboard houses and stores of the rural variety. Dim street lights. A scent of pines from the wooded hills that darkened the horizon all around.

The highway became a hard-packed dirt road that skirted the eastern end of the glimmering lake, passed lighted cottage

windows standing under the tall pines, and entered Main Street, passed the motion picture houses and sidewalks, and died in a spray of dirt roads leading out like fingers around the lakeshore. A man on the sidewalk told them where the Lessers lived. It was a big house set far back from the water, a tumbledown old house near a brick mill that stood in grim ruins. The veranda floor creaked as Nolly stepped up to knock on the front door. There were lights inside. The air felt cold and dry, good in his lungs. He took a deep breath of it, and then a gray-haired old man in a stained vest and shaggy trousers opened the door and peered at him and grunted. The grunt carried an ample weight of raw whiskey.

"Yah?"

"I'm looking for Joe Lesser," Nolly said.

"What for?"

"It's business," Nolly said. "It's important."

"You wanta drink?"

"No thanks," Nolly said. "Just Joe."

The old man grunted again. "He's out with Helen. Gone to the pictures. Be back in half an hour."

"But I—"

"Come back then."

The door slammed, and Nolly stood alone on the porch. He returned to the car and Arlene drove down Main Street, back to the motion picture house. The cashier was a dark-haired girl of sixteen. She was going over the night's receipts with the manager when Nolly asked about Joe. The girl said:

"I'll point him out to you when the picture lets out. He's in there with Helen. Guess they're smoochin' in the back row."

"It's rather urgent," Nolly said. "Every minute counts."

The manager said: "I'll get him for you, son."

JOE Lesser looked indignant when he came out of the theatre. He was a gangling youth of nineteen, with an unhealthy, pimply complexion. There was bright lipstick on his cheek. His pale eyes looked appreciatively at Arlene and lost some of their truculence.

"Sure, I took a package here for Arco.

What's the matter? Was it the wrong address? I only done what I was told."

"Do you remember the address?" Nolly asked.

Joe frowned. "One of them houses on the north shore of the lake. I don't recall exactly. Anyhow, I give the package to old man Hanks. He signed for it. He's got it now?"

"Who is Hanks?"

The theatre manager said: "He's the local postmaster. Runs the general store at the other end of the street."

"He said he'd deliver it in the morning," Joe Lesser added.

"Where can I find Hanks now?"

"Where I told you. In his store. He's prob'ly playin' chess there now. He plays chess 'til late every night."

"Did anybody else come here before me, asking about the package?"

"Nobody, mister. If they's any complaint—"

"No complaint," Nolly said. He went back to the car, where Arlene and the dog waited.

The Chessmen were home-made, carved on a jig-saw out of quarter-inch plywood, and painted red and black, with a white trim. John Hanks moved a pawn shaped like a coiled rattlesnake and chuckled. "Be with you in a minute, mister."

There was a smell of dried vegetables, potatoes and freshly ground coffee beans in the narrow little store. An oil lamp shone steadily, hanging from a chain in the beamed ceiling. Beyond the screen doorway the bullfrogs thumped, crickets sang, and the waters of the lake giggled. Nolly's legs were trembling slightly. He looked at Hanks' chess partner, a fat bearded man in a red flannel shirt. The man wore a deputy sheriff's star on his shirt. Nolly looked back to Hanks again.

"The package," he said. "Do you still have it?"

"What package?"

"The one Joe Lesser left with you."

"Oh, that one. Nope."

"No, what?"

"No, I don't have it, young feller. Go away. You're interruptin' my game."

The fat bearded man took off his sheriff's star and blew on it and began

polishing it, eyeing Nolly. Nolly persisted with Hanks.

"What did you do with it?"

"I delivered it, of course."

"Joe said nobody was home there."

"Cassius seen a light in the place a little later. So I took it up."

"Which house did you say it was?"

"I didn't say. But it don't make any difference. It's the last one at the end of the left fork if you folley this road."

"Who lives there?"

"You ought to know. Go on up and find out."

"Fine," Nolly said.

The deputy sheriff stopped shining his badge and turned his attention back to the chess game.

11:40 . . . Arlene said: "Well, we beat him to it."

"You mean Pillman?" Nolly asked.

"Of course."

"I don't think so," Nolly said. "I think he's here."

"But how could he be?"

"I don't know. He knew Hanks' name, from the telephone call at Susan's. I just think he got here first. I wish I had a gun."

"What happened to the one you had?"

"Pillman took it from me."

Arlene said: "Nolly, I'm frightened."

"So am I," Nolly said.

"What are you going to do without a gun?"

"Do without one," Nolly said.

Loopy Lu yawned and shook herself and sat up, smelling the pine trees.

WATER tinkled somewhere, from a spring that trickled over dark rocks and splashed into the lake. There was no moon. The water shimmered like a wet plate in the starlight. It was good to see the stars, he thought, so many of them, that were never visible in the city. It must be good to live in the country and breathe fresh air that smelled of pine instead of traffic exhaust.

Nolly reached over and snapped off the headlights.

"Stop here," he said.

They were at the end of the road. A jumble of granite overgrown with brush

and twisted trees blocked the way, and a flight of white-painted stairs angled upward to a ledge overlooking the lake. Arlene parked the car on a stretch of grass that shouldered the road. In the silence, the bullfrogs and crickets took up their symphony, and a night bird sang an accompaniment in the dense foliage overhead. There was a smell of wood smoke somewhere, mingling with the pungency of the pines. Above, on top of the bluff, a window shone softly yellow in the wing of a long, low lodge of log and stucco.

Nolly said quietly: "End of the line."

"Yes," Arlene said.

"Some shack," Nolly said.

"Yes," Arlene whispered.

"I think you'd better stay here for a few minutes."

"I'd rather go with you, Nolly."

"Stay here."

He didn't look back at her as he slid from the car and walked on velvety turf toward the angular stairway clinging to the face of granite ledge. He heard Loopy Lu whimper, but the dog was held in check by the girl and didn't follow. His footsteps were light on the wooden treads as he mounted. There was enough starlight to see by. He went up slowly, measuring his steps to control the sudden pressure of excitement that boiled along his nerves.

He was scared. He wished he had a gun. He knew what he would find at the top of the stairs, and he wanted to go back to the car and the girl who waited for him and tell her to drive away, with him, anywhere. Arlene knew the truth, too. Remembering the calm distance in her eyes, he realized that no matter what happened, he would be the loser. He didn't want to go into this quiet sedate house under the pines.

The night bird chirruped overhead. The waters of the lake sang a quiet, liquid song. The air felt cold. From the top of the stairs a crushed gravel walk led toward the house that stood quietly waiting, with its shining windows. He didn't walk on the gravel. His feet made no sound as he crossed the soft strip of lawn toward the veranda.

There was a road up here, after all. He

could see the end of it at the far end of the lodge, and a car was parked there, squat and metallic in the darkness. Nolly swerved from the veranda and crossed through deep pools of shadow under the trees. He felt the car's radiator, and it was warm under his hand. The doors were locked. He looked back toward the head of the stairs, but Arlene hadn't followed him. He looked toward the house and went up on the porch, moving quietly, breathing with quick shallow breaths. The door had an old-fashioned iron lever handle that operated a simple latch. He put the weight of his thumb on the latch and the door opened softly inward and he stepped inside.

"I guess I'm a little late," he said aloud.

It was a big room, running the width of the house, with an enormous brick fireplace opposite the doorway and twin flights of polished oak stairs on either side, winging up to a little gallery and bedrooms beyond. Over the fireplace were two long-barreled hunting rifles, a powder horn, and the head of an enormous moose. There was a thick, dark red rug over the central part of the floor, and other rugs were scattered at the wings. A baby grand stood in one corner, and a lamp shone quietly over the polished keys. The flames in the fireplace flickered and danced and glinted off the comfortable, massive furniture, on a huge library table, deep barrel chairs, a coffee table holding two bottles, a soda siphon, and three tumblers.

There were three men in the room.

Emmett Pillman sat in one of the deep chairs, his bald head bowed between his hands, his stout body oddly deflated. Valentine Douglas stood with his back to the fire, his big body tense, dressed in a red flannel shirt and hunting boots, his fiery hair catching glints of the flames behind him. His broad, homely face was turned toward Ken Wimbaugh, dark and elegant at the library table.

There was a gun on the table close to Ken Wimbaugh's hand. But he wasn't holding the gun. He was methodically counting money from a stack of currency on the table before him.

The shock of seeing Ken with the money scattered confusion through Nolly's mind.

The thought came to him that he had been wrong after all.

The three men looked up and stared at Nolly as he paused in the doorway.

XVII

KEN WIMBAUGH MOVED HIS right hand a little, putting down the money he was counting. His forefinger touched the carved grip of his gun on the table; but he didn't pick it up. He looked at Nolly's tall figure in the doorway and smiled. It was just a smile.

He said: "What the hell. Emmett said the cops took you."

Nolly glanced at the stout man in the barrel chair. Emmett Pillman stared with blank eyes. There was a mottled bruise on his jaw, and a little dribble of caked blood on his lips. He looked as if someone had worked with devastating effect on his face. It was all out of shape.

Nolly said: "I got away before the cops came."

"Come in and sit down," Ken said, "Shut the door."

"Are you running things?" Nolly asked.

"Don't talk like that," Ken said. "We're all friends here."

Nolly said: "Sure. We're all friends." He looked at Ken Wimbaugh's hand, resting casually on the gun. Too casually. There was blood smeared on Ken's knuckles. He looked at Emmett. "Sure, we're all good pals."

Val Douglas looked at Nolly with strange eyes.

"How did you get here, Nolly?"

"The same way Emmett did. He had a head start, that's all, and he remembered you had a place here."

Ken said: "Me, too. I wanted to see Val. He mentioned this shack lots of times as his weekend hideout."

"Quite a shack," Nolly said.

Val Douglas didn't say anything. He shrugged his heavy shoulders and put his hands behind him, spreading thick fingers out to the fire at his back. His fingers were trembling. He stood with his booted legs apart, like a red-haired Goliath, his homely face impassive.

Emmett Pillman croaked suddenly:

"For God's sake—let me have a drink, Ken."

"No," Ken said. "First you tell us your little tale."

"I already told you what I know, Ken. You beat hell out of me already. Ain't it enough?"

"You said Nolly was taken by the cops. You said he killed Susan."

"That's right."

"I didn't," Nolly said. "He's lying."

He came all the way into the room and paused at the end of the table opposite Ken Wimbaugh. A clock on a wall shelf beside the fireplace chimed very softly. Mid-night. It had been a long day. He put his hands flat on the table and looked down at them. He was surprised to see that they were calm and quiet. He didn't feel calm and quiet. He felt sick.

He nodded toward the money stacked in front of Ken.

"Is that it?"

Ken nodded. "Forty thousand bucks." He looked dapper and alert again, and he had shaved since that afternoon; his face was smoothly handsome. He looked at Nolly without expression. Nolly's hands felt sticky. He thought of Delia; the living Delia, and then the dead Delia. Ken's dark face smiled quietly. "How did the money get here, Nolly? How come it shows up here and you after it?"

"Susan sent it here," Nolly said.

"Susan?"

"That's the way it figures. Emmett must have told you."

"Emmett told us lots of things. Why should Susan have sent the money here?"

"I don't know," Nolly said. "Ask Val."

The big man stirred a little. He still kept his hands behind him towards the fire. His voice rumbled.

"It doesn't make sense to me," he said.

Ken said: "Where did she get the money in the first place?"

Nolly said: "I don't know. I guess the murderer sent it to her."

"That's right. That's what happened,"

Ken said, and his voice tightened with anger. "I've been thinking a lot, Nolly. You've ripped the guts out of us, getting us to help you. Telling us you were innocent. Yet the money was sent to Susan,

and Susan sent it here, and you show up right after it. I think its time to stop horsing around, Nolly. I'm a little smarter than you think. You fixed this thing so it had to be one of us, you or me or Val or Emmett, who killed Wright and took this money. But I think there's only you, Nolly. You and Susan. I came here tonight to get the truth from Val; but now you're here, and I can get it from you, and I want it."

"I've told you the truth," Nolly said.

"Not all of it. I want to know why."

"Why?"

"Why you killed Delia. I can figure you killing Wright—he surprised you, and you had to. And I can figure you taking the money and sending it to Susan, and then getting rid of Susan because of the way she treated you."

"You're crazy," Nolly said.

Ken said patiently: "We've been talking it over; trying to figure it out. We're trying to help you, Nolly."

"It doesn't sound that way to me."

"I wanted to kill you," Ken said quietly.

"But Val says you'll have your own troubles with the cops. Val is worried about Arlene, because he thinks she loves you and he doesn't want her to be hurt worse than necessary. He wants you to leave her alone if we let you get away."

"Get away?" Nolly repeated.

"Don't play dumb, Nolly. Maybe you really think you're innocent. But I've gone over this in my mind, and I know I didn't kill anybody, and I've talked it over with Emmett and Val. Emmett just went a little screwy tonight over the money, that's all. But none of us did it. It stands to reason. You did it, but you were drunk and didn't know it, and you honestly forgot all about it. Call it a shock. You wiped Wright's murder out of your mind and you really believe you haven't done anything wrong since then."

A DARK, forbidding fear came into Nolly's mind like mud from the bottom of a well. Ken was wrong. It wasn't that way at all. He would know it, if he'd really killed Wright. No matter what tricks his mind played on him, he would know if he was a murderer.

He said:

"But I didn't kill Susan or Delia."

"Don't lie to us now," Ken snapped.

"I'm not lying."

Ken said: "You're a fool, Nolly. We're giving you a chance."

"I have been a fool," Nolly said. "I'm not any more."

A spark flew out from the fire with a loud crack and hit the copper screen. Val Douglas didn't move. His big face was turned a little aside, toward the doorway, as if he was watching something out there that he couldn't really see. He didn't seem to be listening to Ken. A squirrel scampered over the veranda floor with a patter of quick, agile paws, and Val turned his head slowly back to Nolly.

"Let's hear it, Nolly," he said. "Tell it all." His burly voice was soft and quiet now. His eyes looked thoughtful. "You haven't seen Arlene tonight, have you?"

"Yes, I saw her," Nolly said.

"She told me she's in love with you."

"She told me, too," Nolly said.

"She's my kid sister," Val said heavily. "You know what you're doing?"

"I can't help it," Nolly said. "I love her, too."

Val Douglas looked at Ken, then at Emmett Pillman. He moved his feet a little and nodded.

"Go ahead, Nolly. Tell us what's on your mind. Ken wanted to kill you, but we've had enough of that. I stopped him for Arlene's sake."

"You didn't have to," Nolly said. "I can take care of myself. And Arlene, too."

"That's a promise?"

"A promise," Nolly nodded.

"All right. Go ahead."

"I'll have to go back to the beginning," Nolly said. "That's Friday night when we went out drinking, and one of us wound up as a murderer. It had to be one of us, because somebody used my name and signature to borrow money from Orditch—with Susan's help. It wasn't me. Orditch will verify that. On the other hand, whoever had been borrowing from Orditch had to repay him, and fast. Orditch wanted his money. And this good friend of mine said he'd get it from the office safe. That's why Chester and Lester were there, wait-

ing outside. They were waiting for the man with the money. They knew him as Nolly Bayless, and that's why they snatched me away from the cops."

He took a deep breath. "Whoever used my name with Orditch called me down to the office from a phone in the neighborhood, and tailed me downtown to be sure I was going there. Earlier, he'd gotten the combination to the safe out of me, while I was drunk, but that wasn't enough. Once I was in the building, he slugged me. That's the way I see it, and I have things lined up straight now for the first time, the way they should be. The way they really are. The night Wright was killed, this same man was there, opening the safe. Then Wright interfered. That wasn't part of the plan. But Wright was leaving town and his client, Mr. Lomax of Detroit, had postponed his plane flight and Wright dropped into the office to leave instructions taking care of him. He surprised my friend at the safe and he was killed, there and then, in panic. Murder wasn't supposed to be part of the scheme. It was supposed to be a case of me taking the rap for robbery, that's all, and the cops holding me long enough to confuse the case for Orditch—long enough for the guy to get out of town and away. That's why the cops were tipped off, once I got there and was knocked out."

No one moved in the big room. They were all listening.

NOLLY SAID: "Just one more thing about that. I had a dream, after I was knocked down those steps. First I dreamed about Susan screaming something at me, then Arlene. I think part of that dream was true. I think Susan was there, with my friend, with one of you three, helping to rob that safe."

Nobody said anything.

"Murder wasn't in the guy's calculations," Nolly went on. "It made him panicky. He mailed the money to Susan, dropping it in one of the Hommeyer carts in the hall, so he wouldn't be caught with it, by either the cops or Orditch. It was the fall guy, and I guess I didn't give him much trouble, at that. I went down those steps and out like a light, and then

the murderer slipped out to call the cops, so they'd find me there. That way Otto Orditch wouldn't know what to make of it all. The plan went haywire when Chester grabbed me. That was one big hitch for the murderer. He was more afraid of Orditch than he was of the cops. The cops had me pinned for the fall guy, so they weren't a problem. But Orditch knew he'd been double-crossed, and every minute I was in his hands increased the danger of Orditch getting on the trail of the right man. The murderer had to get me away from him fast."

Ken said: "I see what you're driving at."

"Sure you do," Nolly said. "You got me away from Orditch."

Ken said: "You're wrong, you know."

"It made me feel good," Nolly said. "It assured me that I hadn't killed Mr. Wright. I figured it was you, because you and Delia got me out of Orditch's hands, and maybe you two were playing it together against Orditch. You almost made me think I did it, before that. That's a tough spot for a guy like me to be in—with the cops after me, and all. I was pretty confused for a while, and I figured you still wanted the cops to get me and that when you called Pillman and told him we were coming over, you also called the police to come and get me at Pillman's"

"Maybe Emmett called the cops," Ken said. His voice sounded queer and far away. "But you're still wrong."

Nolly persisted. "But it pointed to you. You always lived high, wide and handsome. You were tied up with Delia, and through Delia to Orditch."

Ken said: "I've had enough of this, Nolly."

"But you didn't do it," Nolly said. "I know you didn't."

Pillman said heavily: "Make up your mind, Nolly."

Val Douglas didn't say anything.

Nolly said: "After Delia was killed, I knew Ken didn't do it. As soon as I could, I looked into Ken's apartment, and he was loaded down with debts. He wouldn't have had any debts if he'd been borrowing from Orditch. His smart front was just that—a front. He didn't have any money. And

he wouldn't have killed Delia, because he was in love with her and they were to be married. That's hardly proof, but there isn't much tangible proof in this case, anyway. No collar-buttons or cigarette stubs or things you read about. There are just the four of us and what we know about each other, and that's all."

"Then why was Delia killed?" Pillman asked.

"I think she wormed from Orditch the name of the man who had borrowed the money, and she wanted to tell me. If she was working with Ken, she wouldn't have tried to reach me. Ken was hiding out, away from his place, so she tried to tell me and got Susan instead. Susan always comes back into this. Susan told the murderer that Delia wanted to see me, and it was easy to figure out that Delia had the answer by then. So they waited until just before I arrived, to implicate me, and then killed Delia. Susan said she did it; she told me that when I found her there, but I don't believe it. She liked to torment me. She liked to torment any man she thought was in love with her."

Ken said: "Then you're satisfied that I didn't do it?"

"That's right," Nolly said.

"You alibied Emmett yourself for Friday night. If you're okay, then so is Emmett. The two of you said you put me in a cab when we broke up."

Pillman said: "And Ken and I were together a good hour after that."

NOLLY nodded. He looked at the fat man's battered face. "What you did tonight is another thing, Emmett—going crazy over that money. But I guess Ken took care of that. I don't want to think about it."

Silence crept into the room, an unhappy silence that was far from empty and far from still. There were thoughts in it that were almost tangible. Outside, on the veranda, there came the sound of a foot-fall and the scrambling of a dog's paws. The door opened and Arlene stepped in. Her face was pale.

"I couldn't stand it," she whispered. "It was so quiet in here. I want to know what's going on."

She crossed the threshold quietly and looked at the four men standing there and then she walked over to Nolly. The dog didn't come with her. The cocker looked a little unnatural, posing rigidly in the doorway. A deep, rusty growl started low in her throat. It grew louder. She pointed toward the fireplace and trembled, not moving. She growled again. She was looking at Val Douglas.

Val said:

"That leaves me, Nolly."

"That's right. The dog knows. You killed Wright and Delia. And the dog saw you kill Susan."

Val said: "You can't prove anything, of course. You're just stating suppositions."

"There isn't much material proof," Nolly said. "Except that we all know you kept out of sight for most of it—out of Orditch's sight, anyway. And you have this place. It's hardly the tumbledown shack you led us to believe it was. You might have a hard time explaining how you came to own this place, though. But there is one way we can prove it. It has to be you, and Susan. But we can go to Orditch. The police ought to have him by now. We can go to Orditch and see if he recognizes you as the man who signed my name to those IOU's."

Arlene's hand was cold as she slipped her fingers in Nolly's. She looked at her brother. Val seemed undisturbed, a big, bulky silhouette against the flames of the fireplace behind him. Ken's breath made a whistling sound, and Emmett was staring open-mouthed. Arlene made a little noise in her throat before she spoke.

"Val, is this your place?"

The big man looked at her.

"Is it, Val?"

"Yes, it's mine," he said quietly. "What did you come here for, Arlene?"

"I came with Nolly. We were following the money. As soon as it led to Jersey, I knew where we would end. I tried to get Nolly to keep on going, but he came here. I've never been here before, Val; you know that. It's an expensive sort of place."

The big man said: "I didn't know Susan sent the money here."

"But Nolly knew," Arlene whispered. "He knew from the start."

"I hoped you would never know," Val said.

Ken Wimbaugh's hand moved a little on the library table; moved a little and then paused as Val took his hands from behind him. He held a target pistol in his hand, a .22 that was none the less dangerous in that narrow room and close quarters. He pointed the gun at Ken.

"Don't pick it up, Ken. I don't want to use this. I'm sick with killing."

Nolly said: "You killed Henry Wright."

"Yes, I did it."

"And Delia and Susan?"

"You'll find it all written out," Val said.

"I wrote a confession. I didn't want to kill any of them."

"It was Susan?" Nolly asked.

VAL SAID: "I don't know what to say about it, Nolly. I couldn't help myself. I'd never met a girl like her. She drove me out of my mind, every time I saw her. I hated you for a long time, after I met her and fell in love with her. I thought of lots of crazy things to do, to get rid of you. I asked Susan to divorce you, but she wouldn't. She made a sap out of me in lots of ways. All she wanted was to have me around and feel her power over me."

"I know," Nolly said. "That's the way she was."

"It got pretty expensive, and Susan suggested I borrow the money from Orditch. It was her idea to use your name. She said it would be perfectly safe, because she could cover up if Orditch made inquiries. It was all right until Orditch suddenly decided he wanted immediate repayment, and then Susan suggested the safe in the office. I planned getting you drunk, and I followed you and Ken and Emmett to Emmett's place. That was after I sent Arlene home. But at the office, Mr. Wright showed up—and you figured out the rest. It happened the way you said it did, except that I didn't intend to kill Mr. Wright. I didn't think I had hit him that hard. I guess I went a little crazy."

"I didn't know what to do about you, Nolly. I didn't want you to take the rap

for something I'd done. Taking Susan from you was bad enough; I didn't want to do any more. But when Delia called you and spoke to Susan, Susan said we'd have to get rid of her. Susan said she was an accessory to Wright's murder and she'd be convicted with me if I didn't get rid of Delia. I don't know what happened; I lost my head, Nolly. I did everything she asked me to. And I killed Delia."

He paused and looked at Ken Wimbaugh's tense figure. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to kill her. I just went to talk to her, but Susan came along and pretended to be hysterical. She said Delia would talk and that it would be my fault if we were caught. She made me feel as if I was sending her to the chair."

Nolly said: "Wait a minute, Val. Susan is dead. You don't have to take the rap for her."

"What difference does it make? Susan pulled the gun and I tried to take it away from her. The first thing I knew, Delia had been shot."

The dog was trembling against Nolly's leg, still growling. Nolly had never seen an enraged cocker before. He bent down and touched the dog's head and she subsided a little. He looked at Arlene. Her face was chalky. It was quiet in the room, except for the crackling of the fire. Val held the target pistol casually in his big, gnarled hand. His face was tortured.

Nolly said quietly: "And Susan?"

"She was the only one I wanted to kill. I went to her this evening because I couldn't stand it any more. Arlene had told me how she felt about you, and I couldn't see living with myself after committing two murders and letting you be condemned for them, and wreck Arlene's life as well. I went to Susan and asked her to give me the money. I told her I wanted to give myself up to the police and put a finish to it."

Nolly said: "And she laughed at you."

"Yes. She giggled. She told me I was a fool and that she didn't love me and that she wasn't going to let me ruin everything. Seeing her like that, I just—" Val paused, looked at the gun in his hand. His face worked. "She said she'd kill me

before she'd let me confess. And she tried. She refused to tell me anything about the money, and when she came at me with a knife, I had to restrain her, and once I put my hands on her I knew how wrong the whole thing was, from the very start, and I seemed to see her as she really was. And suddenly I wasn't in love with her any more and the only thing to do was to kill her."

"I didn't know she had already sent the money out here to me. I suppose when I told her I was going to give myself up, she was frantic, for fear I'd implicate her and she'd lose the money. I don't know. I still can't figure it all out, how I lost my mind the way I did, how I did the things she asked me to do. She was evil, Nolly. I'm glad I killed her. I'm glad it's finished now."

Silence flowed back into the big room. The fire made a soft crackling sound, and the squirrel outside came scampering back over the veranda.

Val's broad, homely face twisted in a crooked smile. He lifted his gun.

"Don't try to stop me," he said quietly.

NOBODY moved as the big man turned from the fireplace and crossed to the door. Nolly felt Arlene's hand sharply withdrawn from his own. She didn't watch her brother's departure. The big man closed the outside door softly and his footsteps sounded for a moment on the veranda. Emmett Pillman sighed heavily and looked at Ken. Wimbaugh looked down at the gun in his hand and shrugged.

A car motor started outside. Arlene made a little moaning sound and turned to the doorway. Nolly followed after a moment. The car motor roared, came around from the back of the house, and then the sedan Nolly had seen before he entered swung with a smooth rush over the lawn. It gathered speed and seemed to hurl itself with suicidal fury at the edge of the bluff overhanging the lake. For just an instant it shot high through the air, turning over in space, engine racing—and then vanished from sight.

Nolly's arms tightened around Arlene's shuddering body. In a moment it was as

if the car had never been there at all, except for the deep tire marks visible even in the starlight. The night bird had stopped singing. The lake chuckled a different tune.

The door opened behind them and Emmett Pillman said:

"It's deep. A hundred feet deep. He was telling us about it before you came in. He must have had it in mind."

"Arlene..." Nolly said.

Her face was cold and wet in the starlight. Her eyes were the eyes of a stranger as she suddenly drew away from him, out of his arms.

"Ken is calling the police," Emmett said.

Nolly said savagely: "Shut up, damn you! Shut up!"

He watched Arlene as she walked away from him.

DAWN made the big window gray, touching the outside world with ghostly fingers. He didn't realize there were bars over the window until then. The light crept into the room and a detective sitting in a hard wooden chair over in a corner yawned, took a cigarette, and scratched a wooden match into flame on his thumbnail. The gooseneck lamp over Lieutenant Fiske's desk began to look faded. Nolly waited.

Footsteps sounded outside the corridor, and a man's shadow passed the pebbled glass door of the office. In reverse lettering, in peeling black paint, were the words, *Homicide Bureau*, and under that in smaller letters tucked in a corner, was Lieutenant Fiske's name. The lieutenant sat with horn-rimmed glasses perched on his thin nose, reading the typewritten statement the police stenographer had finally assembled. The homicide man looked tired. He no longer looked dangerous. He looked like an ordinary man with smooth gray hair and calm, pearl-gray eyes. Nolly wondered why he had inspired such fear in him before.

Fiske said finally: "We would have picked you up, you know. Sooner or later. We almost tagged you a couple of times. Technically, I could throw you in the can for obstructing justice."

The detective in the corner said: "All set, Lieutenant?"

Fiske nodded, looking at Nolly: "Sign the statement down here on the bottom. All copies."

Nolly signed with the pen Fiske gave him. When he finished endorsing the last carbon copy, he remained standing there, hat in hand. Fiske leaned back and yawned.

"This ties up with Orditch's statement. We got him, thanks to your tip, you know." Fiske paused and looked at Nolly curiously. "You're free to go now. Just keep in touch with us, that's all. We'll need your testimony. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk to the reporters."

"All right," Nolly said.

He put on his hat and left Fiske's office and walked down the hall that smelled of stale cigar smoke and washroom disinfectant. The street doors shimmered faintly with the new day. He pushed them open and walked outside, and nobody stopped him. The street was empty, wet and shining with dew. Overhead, the last stars were fading in a blue October sky. The wind felt fresh and wet, blowing in from the harbor.

HE put his hands in his pockets and walked slowly up the sidewalk toward the subway station. He had no particular place to go. He had nothing in particular to do. There didn't seem to be anything left in this empty world except memories. Too many memories.

He reached the street corner and paused. Behind him, he heard the sudden excited barking of a dog and then the scampering of paws and a cold, wet muzzle was pushed eagerly into his hands and long brown ears flapped happily as the cocker spaniel leaped around him.

"Hello, Loopy Lu," Nolly said.

He looked back down the street, and Arlene's car was there, and Arlene was sitting in it, waiting for him, and the door to the car was open. She looked good. She looked wonderful.

Nolly turned and the dog raced back to the car. He followed with quickening footsteps.

SELLER *of* SOULS



By
J. F. HUTTON



SELLER OF SOULS

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I DROVE UP AND PARKED IN the slot labeled "Paulson" and got a sneaking little thrill. It was an effective demonstration of Ray Menke's methods. Nice surroundings, and people who were supposed to respond to them.

Menke Enterprises, Inc., occupied considerable acreage on the south side of Valley Boulevard, near Alhambra. On either side of the Administration Building was a graveled parking lot and then an industrial plant. The one on the left was Chemtol, the one on the right Instrumex. All three were of balanced modern design, with wisps of well-kept landscaping.

Menke's office, in the lobby of the center building, took up the width of the structure. I removed my hat and nodded to Miss Watkins. She flipped the intercom, announced me, and indicated a chair—seemingly all in one movement.

I didn't mind waiting. I liked to watch Miss Watkins in operation. She was tall and cool and barely civil. She had a mind like a flash-bulb and was always ready, always right, and about four jumps ahead of you. She probably earned five hundred a month and—since she was working for Menke—got it.

Abruptly she made a sound at me, and got to the door before I did. As a result, I went through frowning. I don't like anybody to open doors for me.

Menke was on his feet, smiling. He wasn't big but he was well put together. He looked about thirty-six—a well-scrubbed, closely-trimmed blond. His nose was too bumpy, his upper lip too short, his cheeks too flat to make him good looking. But, in his presence, your analysis never got that far. His personality put its hands on your shoulders and you were lost.

"Sit down, Paulson." He always asked me to sit. I don't think he liked to have to look up at me.

Menke had caught me just at the right time. I had made one false start after getting out of the army. This time I planned to be pretty choosy about the job I took.

Sam Heller, my old boss, had been after me. Sam was a good guy and he'd given me plenty of breaks in the past. I hated to turn him down. But I didn't want to go back to credit investigation.

Then Miss Watkins telephoned me. I went to see Menke just out of curiosity.

He impressed me. So did his layout. I sat by his desk that first day and answered some pretty personal questions because of the way he impressed me.

"There's no use beating around the bush," he said. "If you don't like bluntness, then you're not what I'm looking for. I need a man for a particular kind of work. I have been told that you are a good man and that you are now available."

"How," I asked, "did you learn all that?"

"Nothing surprising. The U. S. Employment Service, where you had registered. Your University Placement Bureau, where you had called. Your fraternity alumni association. Sam Heller, your old boss. A sergeant named Sprig McKenzie, who spent some time with you in Europe. A friend of yours, Hank Blewett, who works for me here."

"Hank Blewett! Is he here?" I'd gone to high school with Hank. He was one of my old gang. Just the sound of his name brought memories flooding back.

Menke nodded. "Engineering design. He's been here almost four years. Your friend McKenzie is now in San Diego. I found him a better job down there than I could offer him."

I sat, bewildered. I had an uneasy feeling of a great deal going on behind my back.

"Now," Menke said, "I'll tell you what

I have in mind. You tell me if it fits you." He waved an arm. "Obviously, I have many people working for me. Each, in his way, is a specialist. And he's good, or he wouldn't be here.

"What I'm after now is an all-purpose man. Someone flexible because of a very lack of specialization. He'll do things that fall into no one category, things I want specially handled. He must be a man who can think on his feet, who has a wide range of general experience, who can take orders, who can keep his mouth shut."

He stopped and looked at me speculatively.

"Go on," I said.

"At times this job I'm talking about will call for no more than running errands. At others, for difficult and tactful handling of vital negotiations. At still others, for a little quiet investigation."

He shrugged. "Plenty of the work will be boring. A lot of it will be tough and exacting. A little of it may be exciting, and a little more of it may even be dangerous." He smiled, suddenly and broadly. That fellow's smile, would have sold a lot of toothpaste. "It all adds up to being my Man Friday."

Menke stopped smiling and went on, "That's the general outline. Now let's talk about you. You have a background of credit investigation. You went three years to college. You had a good dose of the war. You don't look like you'd be easy to push around." He cocked his head. "How's the shoulder?"

"Not as good as new," I said, "but not in my way."

"Good. Are your feelings easily hurt?"

I had no answer to that. I blinked at him.

"I mean this: I am the sole boss of Menke Enterprises. I keep a tight control on my affairs. Necessarily, decisions have to be made quickly. I don't always have time to explain. If you take this job, you'll find yourself getting stepped on or treated summarily."

"That would be no novelty to me," I said, "but thanks for pointing it out."

"Good. I will pay you three-fifty a month to start. Later, if I think you're worth it, I'll pay you five hundred. That's

all there is in it, for the present. But I can assure you it will be interesting."

I struggled a little. I said to Menke, "Three-fifty's a lot of dough. Especially for an unknown quantity."

He regarded me soberly. "I looked you up. I have looked you over. I'm making the offer."

I took it.

NOW he picked up an employment application form. "A man named S. Zensler. Eighteen-ninety-two Sequoia, in Highland Park. Apartment number one." "Right."

"I want him for Instrumex. He's a fabulous precision instrument man, unemployed at present. A month or so ago we approached him about a job. But he's a prima donna. Very choosy, very touchy. He had a little stake and wasn't interested in working yet." The boss slid the application blank over to me. "A half-hour ago he called us and said he wanted to talk to someone."

We smiled a little at one another.

Menke went on, "Telling him to go to hell would be an expensive luxury. We can use him. So go talk to him. Treat him easy. And come back with that application filled out."

"Right," I said, and put the form in my pocket.

I had lunch and then drove over to Highland Park. That day, the seventeenth of April, was a fine, large, bright day, so full of Spring you could feel it tremble. I had to battle an inclination to turn the car the other way, toward the country, and just drive till the gas gave out.

Zensler's apartment house had the air of a huge, blowsy old woman squatting unconcernedly on the curb. A broken screen dangled from a second story window. Generations of fingerprints had darkened the front door and the casing.

I found S. Zensler in a rickety apartment that smelled like the lower half of a rabbit hutch. He was a small man with a long, thin shiny nose that he kept pointed at the floor. He started saying "No" the minute he saw me.

I introduced myself and explained that I'd come in answer to his call. He shook

his head. He looked like that call had been an impulse he now regretted.

I told him what it meant to work for Ray Menke. I gave him an enthusiastic picture of Instrumex—the hours, the pay, the facilities.

"No," he said.

"But you telephoned us. Does this mean that you've changed your mind again?"

He nodded.

I tried not to show how much I was losing patience with him. "You're making a mistake, Mr. Zensler. This is a good proposition. At least come take a look at it."

He lifted his upper lip. I couldn't tell whether he meant it for a smile or a sneer. So I kept on being polite, and he kept on shaking his uncombed head.

"Well," I said finally, "thanks for listening. But we need a man. Do you know somebody who might be interested?"

He showed his teeth again and made a snuffling sound. Then his little eyes veered up at me. "Abner Solex," he said, and started pushing on the door.

I let him shut it and went back out to the coupe. He hadn't hurt my feelings; I wouldn't have hired him for day labor. But if Menke had a line on him he was a good man. To go back without hiring him would mean I had failed in the assignment. Menke was always polite but he had a way of letting you know he didn't tolerate failure.

At least I had another possibility. Abner Solex. The name stirred in my memory. Frowning, I tried to pin it down. Finally I started the coupe and drove slowly till I came to a grocery store, where I went in and looked him up in their telephone directory. I found he was located on Huntington Drive.

I cut down Monterey Road and went along the car tracks toward South Pasadena till I reached the address. The minute I did so I remembered who Abner Solex was. Recognition jumped me back about fifteen years and set me down hard.

AND though it was still a fine April day I found myself in the middle of summer. I was a kid again, feeling the

hot sun on my bare head, hearing the tar-bubbles snap under the wheels of my bike. I was hurrying toward Abner's curiosity-shop, with hard-earned money in my pocket.

Was that the time I gave him a dollar and a half for a South American Papilio? I got my beautiful butterfly home and turned it over and discovered it was not one insect but four, and poorly patched at that. Six lawns I mowed for that butterfly, and for the lesson Abner taught me with it.

One wing of his building had a roof that was fake Chinese. The other wing was covered with Mission tile. A pink Moorish tower rose in the middle. Around the shop was a half-acre of cactus and monkey-trees and bleached bones and wagon wheels and dwarf fishermen and other bric-a-brac.

It caught your eye, even in Southern California.

I shook my head and got out of the coupe. Walking through the weird scrub, I wondered just what Abner Solex had to do with precision instruments. On the face of it, any connection seemed grotesquely improbable. It didn't seem particularly important, at the time. Though I remembered him as a mean, suspicious man, forever worrying about the kids snatching his shoddy trinkets, I found myself suddenly eager to see the old pirate again.

I pushed the heavy door open and heard the gong. I stood getting used to the dusk, waiting, while the atmosphere of the shop closed around me. The lure of that musty, cluttered place reached across the years and tugged at me.

Cases and shelves filled with pottery, stuffed animals, butterflies, dusty albums, shields and spears, skeletal cats, bell-shaped jars of vari-colored sand, strings of cowrie shells, dried starfish, trays of semi-precious stones, third-rate oil paintings, armadillo skins made into baskets, bright Indian blankets, cheap bow-and-arrow sets, tortoise shells . . .

I said, "Hey!"

The echoes of my voice rustled away into dead silence. I recalled that Abner's office was in the back. However, since he hadn't responded to the gong or my call,

he was most likely puttering around outside.

I started down the dusky aisle. After about four steps my foot crunched some brittle object. I sidestepped and crushed another. Then I moved my right foot in a circle, exploring. Little round things rolled away from my shoe. They didn't roll on wood.

Hastily I backed up two steps and lit a match. The flare-up showed me a litter of shells and other junk, and a large splash of sand. On the near edge of the sand were my footprints and the shells I had crushed. At the far end was a round, glittering knob, that I gradually realized was the head of a body.

I turned and hurried between the display cases toward the door. I yanked it open and the glare of daylight revealed a wall switch. When I clicked it three sixty-watt globes came on. They didn't make much of a dent in the gloom that had been part of Abner's stock-in-trade.

I went back to the body. It was Abner Solex, if you looked close. I didn't touch him. He was lying on his stomach. The top of his bald head was broken in. The blood, dark now, had run down all around so that only a part of his hairy fringe showed white. He had moved his head after falling, because from ear to ear his face was coated with bloody sand.

The display case was lying on its side. The contents of the shelves were spilled everywhere, along with the shards of the broken sand jar. The mess was stippled with obsidian arrow-heads, sand-dollars, dried star-fish, and an incongruous splattering of blood.

Abner's hands had raked back and forth. From the prints it looked like he had fumbled with two of the star-fish. Now they made kind of a pattern, the four blood-flecked humps on the sand, with shells scattered among them.

I straightened. I had no desire to step again on Abner's little private beach, so I went around and took the next aisle to the rear of the shop. His office was the same as I remembered it. His old-style telephone stood on the roll top desk. I dialed "0" and told the girl to give me the police.

THERE was a girl on the police switchboard, too. "Abner Solex has been killed at his place on Huntington Drive," I said. "I just walked in and found him." A man took over the call and I heard her in the background paging a cruise car over their short-wave. The man who came on asked me the details and who I was. "Stick around and don't touch anything," he said.

I hung up the receiver and hustled down the aisle to the front of the shop. I stood on the doorstep and began filling my pipe. I spilled a lot of tobacco.

The cops wasted no time. Their car squealed to a stop and they hopped out and pounded up the walk. They looked solemn and husky and business-like, and their attitude was not exactly friendly. I pushed the door and then followed them in. The taller one knelt and reached out carefully and felt deep into Abner's neck. Then he looked at me.

"Shoot," he said.

I told him about walking in, and calling "Hey!", and going toward the back, and finding Abner. I showed him my footprints in the sand and the shells I had broken.

Another cop and a man in a blue suit came up the walk. The cop at the door put his finger to his cap. The one beside me said, "Over here, Inspector."

While the new cop bent to look at the body, the Inspector stood near me, taking things in. I liked his looks. He was stocky, with a nice pair of shoulders. His suit had been tailor-made. He had a smooth, rather homely face and calm gray eyes.

Finally he held out his hand. "I'm Inspector Bradley."

"My name's Don Paulson," I told him. "I work for Ray Menke, over on Valley Boulevard."

He nodded and looked at me, waiting. "How much of it did you want?"

"All of it."

So I told him about Zensler and precision instruments. I told him what led me to come to Solex's place. I described my finding the body. It felt like a recitation, but he had asked for it.

When I was through he said, "Thanks,"

and stood pulling his lip. Suddenly he smiled. "Worked for Menke long?"

"Six weeks."

His smile faded.

I sighed and pulled my wallet out. He looked my cards all over and handed them back. "Okay, Paulson. Give Johnson there your home address and then you can take off. We'll get in touch with you later."

I was surprised. I had figured I was in for at least a trip to the station, and fingerprinting. This seemed to be letting me off too easy, and I guess my expression showed it.

Bradley smiled again. "That's right. You can go. Thanks for acting promptly and keeping your head. You'll hear from us if we want you."

I drove slowly back to the office. Bradley had my home address and Zensler's address. He had my story, word for word, taken by one of the cops in shorthand. He undoubtedly had the license number of my coupe. He could check my previous job and my Army record. That other cop, back at Solex's telephone, had probably already verified a few things. No wonder he could let me go.

I didn't feel particularly sorry for old Abner. He had got it in a hurry and he'd had a long life. The thing that bothered me was why Zensler had sent me there in the first place,

II

I BELONG TO THE LEAVE-YOUR-boss-strictly-alone school. But circumstances alter cases.

Miss Watkins gave me a "You again?" look, spoke briefly to Menke, and motioned me on in.

I said to him, "I think this is something—"

"I agree, if you mean Solex."

I gaped at him. He looked back at me

a moment, then chuckled. "The police called us."

"Hell!"

"Let's hear your side of it, Paulson."

I told him. When I was through he looked down at his hands, spread flat on his desk. They were strong hands and he looked at them a long time, thoughtfully. I noticed how clean his scalp was and the way his hair almost glistened.

"Zensler," he murmured with no inflection at all.

I leaned forward. "How about me taking—"

A quick shake of his head cut me off. "Leave it alone. We know your presence at the shop was pure coincidence. So does Bradley, at this point. But the minute you step out of line, the minute you crop up in the case again, he'll pin you down. Tight."

I nodded.

"And we wouldn't want that. We've got a business to run." Then, as kind of an afterthought, he added, "You wouldn't find it pleasant, either."

I nodded again. Of course he was right.

"Very well. Leave your report, as usual. And come back in about three-thirty."

I went down the hall to Weiss, who was a sort of general stenographer, and dictated my story to her. I thanked her and went on three more doors, the last of which was mine. It wasn't exactly my office, but it was a place to park me. There was a desk, a chair, and a local off the switchboard. There was an Incoming tray and an Outgoing tray, both empty. In the middle drawer of the desk was a pad and pencil.

I took out the pencil and pad and on the top form wrote down the date, "Interviewed Zensler"; under "Result" I wrote "Negative." I thought a moment and then under the "Remarks" space I added, "Discovered murder" and my initials. That seemed to cover it.

From my window I had a view of the Sierra Madre mountains.

I puffed at my pipe and eyed the mountains and thought about Zensler. It was all right for Menke to say, "Leave it alone." His interest in the situation

was secondary. But Zensler had sent me right into murder. "Don Paulson" was the first name in that policeman's notebook.

I answered my telephone. "Thirty-three," Miss Watkins said.

Menke was waiting for me. "Robert Branson. Forty-nine Kipling, East L. A."

I nodded.

"Tell him I say no. Completely, finally and irrevocably."

I nodded again, and there was an interval of silence, while Menke stared into space. Then his clear blue eyes switched around to mine. "Robert Branson is working for someone who is out to make trouble for me. I think I know who it is, but I'm not sure. At any rate, Branson has been trying to blackmail me. It's a bluff, and I want to squash it."

"This Branson," I said. "Does he squash easy?"

"I don't know. I've never seen him. All I want you to do is deliver the message. Telephone me when you've done it."

"Fair enough," I said, and started for the door, just as though I called on black-mailers every day.

"Paulson."

I turned.

"Watch your step."

I grinned to myself, in the hall. It was nice to know I could wring a little concern out of him.

A breeze, fresh with Spring, hit me as I went out to the coupe. I inhaled a good deal of it. I got into the car, checked my road map, then headed down Atlantic.

THE road went up over the hills and I didn't hurry. I watched the meadowlark along the fences. I saw a few horned larks and a shrike. I caught a glimpse of a Western Kingbird and wished I could stop a while.

I hadn't got to the point where I carried a field manual in the company coupe. But if there were going to be any more country trips I would. One thing growing up hadn't killed was my interest in birds. I wondered if Menke knew about it.

I came down off the hills and cut over and before long I found Kipling. I began to tighten up inside and I didn't like it

but there was nothing I could do about it. Kipling was a short street with no sidewalks and wooden jerry-built houses that were black-brown with age. A scattering of kids cleared out of the way and stared at me as I pulled up before number forty-nine.

The front yard was lumpy and bare, with a broken Taylor-tot laying on the path. I went carefully up the front steps and felt the porch creak under my weight. A pair of feet inside hit the floor as I raised my hand to knock.

The door came open and through the rusty screen I saw a man looking at me.

"Robert Branson?"

He nodded.

"I'm from Ray Menke."

His manner changed. "Come on in." He had an odd, soft, husky voice. He switched on a light. "Sit down," he said.

The overstuffed sofa sagged with age. There was a partly-filled root beer bottle on its side between the cushions. There was a used diaper on one arm. I looked at that diaper and felt the tenseness seep out of me.

"No thanks," I said. "I won't be long."

Branson looked up at me. He had a broad, not very clean face and almost shaggy black hair. His dirty hands were trembling. Whatever he was selling, he sure needed the dough.

A swinging door to an inner room scraped open. A thin female came half-way through and stopped. She had untidy blond hair gathered together on top. She wore an unironed print dress. She stared at me with the complete, unselfconscious absorption of a child.

"Well?" Branson asked in that odd voice of his.

I gave it to him. "Menke says no. Absolutely, finally and competely no."

He kept on looking at me. His hands stopped trembling. From the woman by the door came a low whine.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know the reason. But I do know he means it."

I heard Branson's words, coming faster and faster, till he was panting. "I'll kill 'im! I'll kill 'im! I'll kill 'im!"

I glanced at the woman. Her eyes had shifted from me to her husband. If ever

an expression said "I told you so," hers did.

Branson's hands were doubled now. His body began to sway. His voice took on a hideous, guttural quality. "I'll kill the lousy heel! I'll kill the lousy, sneaking bum!"

Neither of them paid the slightest attention to me. I took a step toward the door.

"Well, goodbye," I said. Don't tell me how it sounded. I had to say something.

Branson was on his knees now, beating the sofa with his fists. "Kill 'im! Kill 'im!"

I shut the door and went down the steps. I hurried out to the coupe and on the way I tripped over the broken Taylor-tot.

I HAD tasted better bourbon. I gave the bartender a dirty look and went back to the telephone booth across the room. When I reached Miss Watkins I said. "Operative Paulson reporting. I'd like a word with—"

"At home," she said sweetly. "Madeline 2-0433."

"Thanks. And you?"

"Just leaving. Goodbye."

I dialed Menke's residence number. While I listened to the ring I wondered what his home was like. If his offices and plants were any criterion, it would be something for an All-Year Club folder. He was a man who kept his personal life strictly away from his place of work. I knew only that he was married, that he lived in the foot-hills near Pasadena.

A man's voice flowed out at me—so unctuous and expressionless it might have been part of the dial tone. "Mr. Paulson calling Mr. Menke," I said.

"Thank you."

A moment later I heard an extension being lifted. "Menke."

"Your message has been delivered. You'd better pull down your shades tonight."

"Let's have it."

He said nothing when I had finished. But I could almost hear him thinking.

"What'll I do now?" I asked.

"Have another drink, then go on home."

"Ah—" I said. "Okay."

I stopped in Alhambra for dinner and looked over an evening paper. They had

made the most of Solex's eccentric place of business, but I read nothing I didn't already know. I was gratified to find I got a mention—"an employee of Menke Enterprises, Inc."

I went back to my original problem and chewed on it a while. I couldn't get Zensler out of my mind. The man's actions didn't make sense. There was something very wrong with that whole picture.

I took my time driving home and it was full twilight when I eased the coupe into the garage. Mrs. MacComber gave me her usual serene nod as I passed the living-room on my way to the stairs. I had considered myself lucky to find this place. It was later that I discovered I'd been lucky to make the grade as a tenant.

It was a large, old, stately house on a rise that overlooked the valley below South Pasadena. It had been built carefully by men who enjoyed their work, some sixty years ago. The inside panelling had been done with hardwoods imported from the Philippines. Woods with names like *ipil*, *yacal*, *apitong*, *tindalo*, *lauan*.

It's no credit to me that I can remember those names. My landlady was a strange and wonderful woman.

I opened the door to my high-ceilinged front room and reached for the light switch. Then I hesitated.

I needed to talk to someone. Brooding here in my room would accomplish nothing. I had to forget the thing as much as I could and put my faith in Bradley. From what I had seen of him, it would be in good hands.

I went into the hall and knocked on the door of the next room. No answer. I tried the one beyond. No answer there either. So at least two of my fellow roomers were out. I walked a few steps farther and heard a radio playing down at the end of the hall. Jensen was in.

I shrugged; Jensen would be no help to me. He would do all the talking, and it would be about himself.

I walked slowly downstairs and found my landlady in her chair in the sun room, where she customarily spent her evenings. Mrs. MacComber came right to the point. "Mr. Paulson, are you in trouble?"

"Me?" I said. "Me, trouble?"

"Inspector Bradley asked me about you today."

"I met Inspector Bradley when Mr. Hitchcock—ah, left my home."

That Hitchcock must have been quite a boy. Every time Mrs. MacComber needed a bad example, she referred to him. I looked at her thin, almost harsh old face under the fine white hair, and knew that it was no use trying to evade the issue. So I sat down and gave her the highlights of the situation.

She looked musingly out the window. "So that is why the house is watched."

"Huh?"

"There is a man lounging across the street, by that *Cocos plumosa*."

I took a careful look. There was indeed a man beside the tall palm. It gave me a jolt. I turned back to Mrs. MacComber and made a weak attempt at humor. "Don't worry. *Otus asio* will be along to scare him away."

She gave me a sharp glance. Then, abruptly, she chuckled. "I stand rebuked, Mr. Paulson. The only *Otus* I can recall was the giant of Greek mythology who imprisoned Ares in a bronze vase. But I fancy you're talking about an animal or a bird."

"Screech owl."

She nodded. We sat in silence, till she said, "If there is any way I can help, please let me know."

I THANKED HER, said goodnight, and went up to my room. I got into my bathrobe, then put out the light and went onto the balcony.

The man was no longer beside the palm tree. He was probably in one of the dark patches of shadow, or behind some of the foliage that obscured my view. Was he Bradley's man? Was he Zensler's?

There didn't seem to be much that I could do about it, one way or another. I stretched and breathed a while. I still felt restless. And now I felt uncomfortable besides. I knew I was not yet over my probationary period in this house. Mrs. MacComber was always so self-contained you couldn't tell just what she was thinking. She was the kind of person you wanted to think well of you, and the kind

of person whose roomers were not under police scrutiny.

I looked up at the stars, swinging remote and cool. Idly, I ran over the few constellations I could recognize. I found the Pleiades. Ursa Major rode almost straight above. My old friend Orion had swung out of sight in the southwest. The other stars, innumerable, grouped themselves into patterns—into little triangles and lopsided squares.

I knew their names, but I didn't know which was which. Wonderful, stirring names they had: Cancer and Hydra and Libra and Corvus, the crow. Cygnus, the swan. Leo and Scor—

I nearly fell off the balcony.

Stars and starfish.

Patterns of stars, all over the sky. A pattern of starfish, left as a clue!

It was wild. It was impossible. But I couldn't kill it. It pounded at me, tugged and hauled at me, as I began to search that skyful of dancing stars. My teeth chattered, my neck went numb and my eyes burned, but I stayed on the balcony. Somewhere, among those numberless, twinkling points of light, was a diamond-shaped pattern I had seen before. I *knew* it.

I was as sure as I could ever be that Abner Solex's dying hands had arranged a message on the blood-flecked sand, had moved those dried starfish till they formed a clue that pointed to his murderer.

III

MRS. MACCOMBER'S HOUSE, so well stocked otherwise, didn't have a single helpful book on the stars. I made sure of that long before breakfast. Then I was left to sweat out the time till the Public Library opened.

I headed for Valley Boulevard first, with the idea of dropping in at the office

long enough to get credit for having been seen there. I should have known better.

"Meyer will be with you in ten minutes," Miss Watkins said crisply.

"Meyer?" The name was a blank to me.

"You haven't forgotten Mr. Menke's plan for our coordinator to give you some background of the business?"

I had. I gave Miss Watkins a sheepish grin. She didn't return it. She adjusted her glasses over her fine brown eyes and went back to the morning mail.

"Okay," I said resignedly. "Meyer it is." The stars would just have to wait.

Meyer showed up right on the dot—a small, neat man with a crew trim on what was left of his hair. He looked at me without noticeable enthusiasm. "I have been asked to give you a cogent picture of the scope and activities of Menke Enterprises, Incorporated."

"That's right."

I'd had the idea that Instrumex and Chemtol were the mainstays of the business, Meyer changed that in a hurry, when he got to showing me what made up the "Enterprises."

Apartment houses. Motor courts. Drive-ins. Orange groves. Laundries. Truck gardens. Drug stores. Hardware stores. A lumber mill. Filling stations and garages. Bakeries. Frozen foods. Tool manufacturing. Material handling equipment. A foundry. A plastic moulding firm. A chain of radio repair shops. A couple of printing presses and weekly newspapers.

None of them was a colossus. They were all medium-sized enterprises, all healthy, adding up to a cross-section of Southern California. They did a lot of business among themselves, naturally, and they all had access to the ability of specialists at the Menke headquarters. To think of the combined yearly take made you dizzy.

At this point, Meyer gave what was almost a paternal smile. "What do you think of it?"

"It reminds me of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation."

He took me seriously. "Oh, no. We are large, but not in that class."

Of course, I said to myself. This isn't very much at all. We're just small local

operators. Any resemblance to something big is due to my own perspective.

"Tell me," I said, "what was Menke's background? Did he inherit money?"

Meyer stared at me. He looked shocked.

"Just curiosity. He didn't build all this just out of the war, did he?"

"No."

"Did he start with a small business himself and pyramid?"

Slowly, Meyer shook his head. I'd have sworn he'd never given the matter a thought.

"Well," I said, "it's hard to believe he just burst full-blown onto the scene, with unlimited capital at hand. Things don't work that way."

Meyer wouldn't answer me. He turned away pointedly and used his pencil to indicate a door across the room. I think if I had taken that man's pencil away he'd have been unable to talk.

"Let's see some of the other aspects," he muttered.

Well, I thought, at least I had given him something to wonder about. To say nothing of myself.

The offices we entered were not so severe. Meyer was evidently alone in his fetish of plainness. We passed into areas of black glass and stainless steel and Philippine mahogany, of fluorescent lights and ingeniously-designed working tables and business machines I'd never known existed. I found myself a little surprised that some of them didn't offer to shake hands with me.

There was one that, so help me, was called the "Happiness Machine". It was in the personnel department, and its job was to tabulate a series of indices on the various factors going into the emotional makeup on a particular job at a particular time. The final index purported to show whether or not the individual was at the "Happiness" level with his job. Meyer explained it was in use only for the more routine jobs where the factors could easily be evaluated—a bit of information that I received thankfully.

I WAS next introduced to the research and experimental divisions. As we entered the room devoted to engineering

design I saw Hank Blewett and grinned at his puzzled expression. To him I must have looked like a visiting stockholder being given the works. He reared back from his drafting-table and, awkward as ever, knocked his slide rule to the floor.

I stepped over and picked it up for him. "I'm democratic," I said. "I speak to all the working stiff's."

"What goes on, Don?"

"Just a conducted tour. I don't know what it's for, myself."

Hank scratched his short, sandy hair with a big forefinger and adjusted his glasses. He was still the earnest, clumsy-seeming guy he had been in school. He was married and had two children. He had graduated from Cal-Tech and held several pretty good jobs. Steady was the word for Hank, and he was a welcome sight in a world of big shots. A lot of people thought he was dull—and maybe he was, to someone not fed up with brightness.

This was the first time I'd had a look at Hank's work. His table was loaded with drawings. Complex tri-dimensional representations of curved surfaces, insets and cross-sections.

"There are no such things," I said, but there was respect behind my flippancy. It was easy to underestimate Hank. Somehow, people were always doing just that. But, under his homely exterior, Hank Blewett was no fool.

Hank waved a hand and smiled deprecatingly. "Turbo-jet engine designs. Might come to something, might not."

"Well," I said, "be a good boy. My escorts are getting restless."

"Don't forget the fights tonight. I'll pick you up about seven-thirty."

What with murder, blackmail and police questioning, I'd almost forgotten our date. I patted his broad back. "Right, Hank. See you then."

HE nodded and I returned to Meyer and Darwin. Solemnly, they started off. We visited the tax and real estate and insurance sections, the results room, the accounting wing, and so on.

It scared me.

Finally, with a heavy cordiality he no

doubt thought appropriate under the circumstances, Meyer shook hands and excused himself. Slowly, a little dizzily, I found my way back to Menke's offices.

To Miss Watkins, I said, "What's next?"

"I have nothing scheduled, Mr. Paulson. Mr. Menke will be tied up in conference all morning."

"Thanks. I—" And I stopped abruptly. On one of the golden leather divans sat a young woman. She wore a powder-blue suit and a white blouse. She had brown-blond wavy hair and she was beautifully tanned. She was not very large and her face would have kept Keats' pen busy for a month.

But right now, she looked annoyed. Her hands were clenched over her purse, punishing it. On her, irritation was like a halo. I gave Watkins a pleading look and moved my jaws a little.

Sharply, the young woman spoke. "Did I hear you say Mr. Menke would be tied up in conference all morning?"

With an air of distant politeness, Watkins nodded. There was no outward indication but I suddenly knew that two sets of claws were half unsheathed.

"Will you please find out if he'll see me? I've been here half an hour already."

What had Menke done to this girl? She sounded ready to chew off his ears.

Watkins nodded again and buzzed on her intercom. "Miss Nancy Heath is still waiting to see you." Then she listened, without expression, to the reply.

Miss Heath pressed her lips together and pushed herself back on the divan. She looked like a person who was getting the run-around and knew it and didn't like it. "Well?"

"I'm sorry," Watkins said with impersonal courtesy, "but Mr. Menke says he will be tied up indefinitely."

Nancy Heath bounced to her feet. For a moment I thought she was contemplating breaking down the door. Watkins regarded her calmly, sardonically, and I got no attention from either of them. At that point, I didn't want any.

"You tell Mister Menke," Nancy Heath said stormily, "that I've gone to the Dolphin Cafe. Then we'll see whether or not

he'll talk to me!" And she turned and steamed out fast . . . and furious.

I looked at Watkins. "Somebody's going to be sorry."

Watkins was tapping her pencil thoughtfully.

"Come on" I said. "What's the beautiful girl so angry about? Why won't the boss see her? What's the Dolphin Cafe?"

Watkins shook her head. She looked genuinely puzzled. "I don't get it," she said slowly. "I don't get it at all."

THE CLOCK in the hall showed thirty. I looked at it blankly for a few seconds. Then, with a sweeping rush, the memory of Abner Solex came back to me, and the starfish and the stars, and all the rest of it. I started to move, and I didn't stop till I was seated at the reference table in the Public Library.

It was there, as I knew it would be. I hadn't been able to find it in that star-filled sky, but on the astronomical chart my finger suddenly trembled. There was Abner's pattern!

Avidly I read the description: "Delphinus or the Dolphin. Popularly called Job's Coffin. A small rhomb of stars located nearly west of Pegasus . . ." Well, I wasn't interested in the location, just now, or the magnitude. I had learned all the library could tell me. My hunch had been right.

I left the books open on the table and walked outside. It would be an understatement to say that I felt tight and excited. At last I had something to go on—something even Inspector Bradley didn't know. The sensible thing, of course was to run to Bradley and tell him my theory. No level-headed person would have thought of doing otherwise.

I'd be the first to agree that I'm a level-headed person. But somehow I couldn't see myself looking at Bradley's calm, intelligent face and telling such a story. Not yet.

I hedged, finally, on the basis that there would be plenty of time to tell him later when I had some facts to bolster the thing up.

"Okay," I said to myself, "here goes." It didn't take long to find one of my

old standbys—a public telephone—and look up the listings involving the word "Dolphin". I found four:

Dolphin Cafe—4435 Waterman Hntg Pk
Dolphin Dry Cleaners—8811 Los Feliz Blvd
[Hlywd]
Dolphin Novelties—toys—394 S Spring L A
Dolphin Cocktail Lounge The—477 W 89th L A

I put a nickel in the phone and called Sam Heller. Trying my best to sound matter-of-fact, I asked for whatever data he had on the four. Without a word he left the line, and came back in a few minutes with an earful. That's the kind of a guy Sam is.

Perhaps it was unnecessary, since Nancy Heath had already given me the Dolphin Cafe. But Sam Heller himself had taught me it didn't pay to assume too much. "Jumping to contusions," he called it when I used to work for him.

The dry cleaners, the cocktail lounge, and the toy wholesalers came out with a clean slate. Small businesses, solvent, operated by the owners. The Dolphin Cafe, on the other hand, was an unknown. Not for long, I thought.

"That fix you up?" Sam asked.

I thanked him and told him that someday I'd tell him the story. Then I got back in the coupe. I sat there quite a while, trying to beat down the rising surges of excitement. I finally decided to drive down and have lunch at the Dolphin Cafe.

I almost missed the Dolphin Cafe sign, it was so faded and crooked. It hung over a solid door set into a cement wall. I coasted down half a block and walked back. I flexed a few muscles and took a deep breath and passed into a cloud of stale beer and smoke. I had to stop and blink a moment, to let my eyes get accustomed to the gloom. Then the place came into focus.

It was big and square, with a bar across the back and tables along the sides. Three men stopped a card game to look me over. They took their time about it. There was a slump-shouldered fellow at one end of the bar. who looked like a solitary drinker beginning the long day. My glance shifted farther, to the surly-looking bar-

tender and the woman he was talking to. I recognized her without difficulty.

Nancy Heath was sitting on a stool, both elbows on the counter, deep in conversation. Her voice was low and husky. She wasn't mincing words, from her manner.

I moved slowly forward and took a seat. They gave me brief, incurious glances, no more. Apparently Nancy Heath had no recollection of me. I breathed easier. I waited a few moments, looking at those lovely tanned legs.

"No, damn you!" the bartender said loudly, and suddenly.

THE three cardplayers turned. But if the outburst bothered Miss Heath, she didn't show it. She continued to talk in a low, persuasive voice.

The bartender made an angry motion with his hand. "Who the hell do you think you are? You little chippy, comin' . . ." his voice died away into muttering.

Maybe Miss Heath had never been told she shouldn't listen to that kind of back-talk. It was high time somebody reminded her. Good old Paulson, snapping down his visor and picking up his lance . . .

"Buddy," I said, "take that back."

The bartender blinked. Miss Heath turned. I think that was the first time she really saw me. Her face looked taut and confused.

"Take it back," I said. I slid off my stool and moved closer. "Apology. Ever hear the word?"

"I'll be a son of a —" the bartender breathed.

"Come on, bud," I growled. "Hustle it up or I'll come over that counter after you."

A hand came down on my shoulder. A powerful, persuasive hand, more accustomed to lifting hods, maybe, or punch-presses. A slow voice said, "We better help you outside. Something's went to your head."

I suddenly became very busy. No one could say that I didn't try. I gave the closest one my elbow, deep in the belly. I got one foot up to the others, and I hooked that bartender's heavy head and banged it

on the bartop. It made a tremendous clunk, which was the last clear impression I had.

It must have been a good fracas. I forgot that I had a bum shoulder; I forgot everything except the business at hand. I know I bruised them—they were so close I couldn't miss. I had a fleeting impression of Miss Heath in the background, looking sardonically pleased. Then I caught a heavy punch to the side of the head and I was in trouble, going down. I was being hit so often and so solidly that I didn't really think I would ever get up.

THERE was a small white mouse on my back. His sharp little claws dug in as he scrambled around. Those claws hurt, the way they stuck in. I got to thinking about their not being clean, and that worried me, because it would be a lot of trouble putting iodine in all those tiny punctures.

I writhed, trying to get away from those needle-sharp claws. The mouse must have sensed what I was doing, because all of a sudden he stopped. He stayed in one place. He hung by three feet and with the other paw, very gently, he began to pat.

For a while, that patting was soothing. It was a respite. But the pats began to grow stronger. Soon they were uncomfortably hard. I couldn't seem to move so as to get away from them. They grew harder and harder, till it seemed the mouse was whaling my back with a gigantic fist, with a crushing, slamming weight that was too much to bear, that was intolerable—

I woke up abruptly. It was much too hot and bright, and the way I was lying made my bum shoulder throb sickeningly. I rolled to my right elbow, so that my left arm and shoulder stopped giving me all that hell. I moved my legs and took a deep, careful breath. Everything seemed to be working.

I found that I was sitting behind a billboard. I got up and waded through the weeds toward the coupe. I saw it not thirty feet away. With great dignity I levered myself behind the wheel and drove till I found a clean, airy lunch-room. A wash and a brush-off made me fairly presentable, but I ached in plenty of places.

I was disgusted. My one objective was to forget that I had ever heard of the Dolphin Cafe. I ate three sandwiches and drank a malted milk and my state of mind improved. As I reached for my check I saw a morning paper in the next booth. I snagged it and opened it with the intention of seeing what they had to say about the killing of Abner Solex. Even if Bradley had not stirred from his office he must have made more progress than I.

My attention was caught by a box on the front page:

Robert Branson, 42, of 49 Kipling St., East L. A., was killed by a hit-and-run driver shortly after seven-thirty last evening on Third St. Branson was unemployed and leaves a wife and child. Police are looking . . .

The Dolphin Cafe went out of my mind completely. I headed for the nearest telephone. When Miss Watkins answered I said, "I've been playing hooky."

"You haven't been missed. Busy day." There was a curious little pause, so noticeable that I opened my mouth to ask what was on her mind. But she suddenly said, "Goodby," and hung up.

When I reached it. Kipling Street looked worse than it had the day before, if that was possible. The kids were still there, clustered in front of number 49 and staring at it in fascinated awe. They moved aside for me silently, respectfully.

A long time after my knock, I sensed a slight movement within the house. Then I saw Mrs. Branson looking through the screen at me. "Yes," she said lifelessly. "I was here yesterday."

I watched her face as her mind went back the long, long way to yesterday afternoon. She opened the door. I went inside. The room hadn't changed. Mrs. Branson did not speak; she stood waiting for me to go on. It wasn't the most comfortable situation I'd ever been in.

"I was very sorry to hear about what happened to your husband."

She made a small, aimless gesture. "He'd been talkin' up a storm for a long time."

"Mrs. Branson," I said earnestly, "I don't know what's behind all this. Yester-

day I came here on an errand for Ray Menke. But I'm here today on my own account. Your husband's death ties into something that involves me, too."

She gave me a suspicious look. "Twouldn't help him."

"No. But if I can find the answer it might help you. And your child."

The idea sank in. Some animation appeared in that pale, tired face. "You reely think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

She brooded at me. Something was still bothering her. Finally it came out. "What's all this to you?"

"I'm just trying to get myself out of trouble."

That was a reason she could appreciate. I watched her face, so I wouldn't have to look at the room her husband left her. At last she said, "But I don't know who killed him."

"The paper said it was an accidnt."

She gave me a pitying look. Then she sighed. "Bob never told me much. He was full of ideas that never came to nothin'. I done the work and took care of the kid." Her lips trembled. "I was too t'ard to listen to his talk."

"Who was he talking to lately?" I asked hurriedly.

"I don't know."

"You must have heard something—some name or nickname."

Stubbornly, she shook her head. "Saw a fellow the other day. Sittin' in a car out front. Blond fellow."

"Would you know him again?"

She shrugged.

I took a good grip on my patience. "Did you ever hear of the Dolphin Cafe?"

Again she shook her head.

"Did you ever hear the word Dolphin mentioned at all?" Shots in the dark, these were.

Mrs. Branson's pale eyes regarded me steadily. The self-pity faded from her face. "Never heard nothin' like that. Only the rabbit."

"The *what*?"

"The rabbit. Somethin' about a rabbit, out East."

She didn't know whether it was a club or a road or a ranch or anything else. I

kept after her till two spots of color came into her cheeks, but that was all she would admit—something about a rabbit, out East in the foothills.

I gave up. I thanked her, and apologized for bothering her at a time like this. "If you need any money——" I began.

She shook her head. "Thanks, Mister, but I——"

A child started to cry in the back room—a high, whiny, unpleasant sound. Her flat voice was decisive. "I got to go to the kid."

"About the money," I said. "Did you——"

But she had gone through the swinging door, leaving me alone in the living room.

THERE were no calls for me at home. Mrs. MacComber's hall table held a clean white pad and a freshly sharpened pencil. I went upstairs to my room and undressed. There was no doubt about my having been in a fight. Some of my body was pink and all too much of it tended toward browns and blues. While the tub was running I massaged some of the worst spots. Then I took a large hooker of bourbon from a fifth that had been waiting for just such a contingency.

I slid blissfully into the hot water. As soon as I got settled I wanted another drink. But I was too comfortable to get out. Besides, I wanted to keep a clear head. I had some thinking to do. For a start, who had killed Robert Branson, and why?"

Also I had work to do, come evening. It was a typical Paulson project. Looking for a rabbit, out East.

IV

I DROVE OUT FOOTHILL BOULEVARD in the evening coolness, thinking mostly of the surly bartender and a young lady by the name of Nancy Heath.

7—Two Complete Detective Books—March

Tonight the pattern was cold purposefulness. Tonight I would do all the things I should have done at the Dolphin Cafe.

But for that place, at least, I'd had a street address. This time I was really on a wild goose chase. Foothill Boulevard was no more than a likely starting point. But I didn't do much with my evenings anyway. It was good to have a change from my usual mild pursuits.

I cruised along, alert for anything that looked like "rabbit." As I passed through Azusa, still looking, the hopelessness of my project began to creep up on me. The street lights dropped behind me and the night seemed big and dark and lonesome.

A few miles later I came to a roadside cafe, a bright and untidy glare of light. I pulled over to it and stopped, got out and went in to the counter. A high-breasted, hard-faced girl in a red candy stripe dress came down to me.

"Coffee," I said with as much charm as I could scrape up.

She gave me a wary glance. "That all?"

"That is all."

She brought the coffee and set it down without looking at me. I watched her hips moving away and indulged in an automatic and purely masculine bit of speculation. The coffee was too hot and she hadn't given me any water. I let it wait while I filled my pipe. Then I said, "Hey," and tipped back my head.

She sauntered down to me.

"I'm looking for a place out here somewhere. All I know is that the name has something to do with a rabbit."

She gave me a hard look, apparently decided I was not crazy, and said, "What kind of a place?"

"I don't know. Maybe a bar or a restaurant. Maybe a gambling joint."

The girl picked a piece of cigarette paper off her lip and looked at it critically. "You better talk to somebody else. I never heard of a place like that."

I made a quick decision. I leaned forward earnestly. "Look, I'm in a jam. I'm trying to find the place because I think it will help me to get out of trouble."

I reached her full attention. Her pose dropped away; she looked like a good kid when her face was relaxed. Her brow wrinkled in thought. "There's a new place, out past Glendora. Up toward the hills, a swanky place, with a red neon sign. But there's nothing about a rabbit."

"It's worth a try." I stood up. "Thanks a lot."

"I hope it works." She picked up my dime absently. It was obvious that she wanted to know more about it.

I said, "I'll stop by on my way back."

She gave me a bright smile and nodded. "Goodbye now."

Sure enough, some way past Glendora I saw the red flare of a neon sign in the foothills, at a place where they bulge close to the highway. As I slowed the coupe, the sign flicked out behind some trees. I made a U-turn and eased back looking for a side street. I found one shortly, a narrow cement road with deep storm drains on either side, between huge eucalyptus trees. After half a mile the double line of trees abruptly ended and I could read the sign, with the dark bulk of the foothills looming dimly behind it.

El Conejo Pobre.

I sat there with my foot on the brake and grinned. The Poor Rabbit. It did a lot to revive my faith in my own hunches.

TURNING into the driveway, I saw that *El Conejo Pobre* was quite a layout. It snuggled into the foothills like it had grown there. It looked small from the front, off the end of the road, with a large parking area rimmed by a low wall. This was clearly not one of those places that depend on the flattering effect of dusk to make it appealing. This would have looked like a million dollars at ten in the morning.

I switched my car lights to dim and eased into a parking space. My coupe had good company. There were a few other cars, all looking like they had just come out of slip covers. I got out and snugged my coat and checked my tie. I still had some sore spots, but the bath and rest had done wonders.

I followed the flagstones past the thick foliage of the patio to the front of the building. There was a Mexican-style porch, with adobe and tile that had been handled by experts. Slivers of light leaked out from big, heavily-draped windows. Just the atmosphere gave the place an air of subtle excitement.

I put a hand to the door—

"Yes?"

The voice came from the shadows near me. It had hauled that word up from rock bottom and then slid it carefully out in front of me. My eyes made their adjustment a little before my mind did. They showed me a dark bulk highlighted by cuffs and a collar, every bit as large as I and wider, standing on the porch just out of line with the door.

And while I took this in my mind stirred, prodded my vocal cords into action. "Why," I said, "I'm Don Paulson."

That did it. I'll never know why. Perhaps it was the authority with which I spoke, combined with just the right trace of irritation at being questioned. I heard about eight cubic feet of air being let out gently. Then, without a word, the man extended one big arm and pushed the door for me.

I got a general impression of luxury—beams and dark upholstery and tile and soft light. The room was three times as large as looked possible from the outside. It sank in gentle tiers to an oblong in the center which glowed from indirect lighting. Chairs and divans were scattered along the tiers, with low wooden tables. Opposite me, as I stood at the entrance, was a long, subdued bar that ran around to the left.

Nothing garish. Nothing bright. Nothing out of keeping, nothing out of taste. You could sit on the top level and be in the dusk, if that was the way you wanted it. Or you could be down close to the floor and take in the music and entertainment.

A tiny Mexican girl approached, twitched my hat from my hand, flashed her teeth and eyes at me, and disappeared. I moved to the left, circling toward the bar.

There weren't more than a dozen peo-

ple in sight. None of them paid any attention to me. I saw a middle-aged man in a dinner jacket go into an alcove on the right hand side, hurrying a little.

"Ah," I said. Later on, I would try that door myself.

I reached the bar and sat down. A man was ready, waiting for me. He was blank-faced, immaculate, Johnny-on-the-spot.

"Bourbon and water," I told him.

MY DRINK CAME. I laid a dollar bill on the counter and got nothing back. I took a mouthful and let it down slowly. It was a steal at a dollar a drink.

I leaned back on my stool. Debauchery was a privilege in a place like this. A week of it would have degenerated me. I sipped through the rest of my drink, enjoying the atmosphere, soaking up just being there. Mrs. Branson, I thought, had done all right by me, even though her husband must have had to use the service entrance.

I ordered another drink. The last, I promised myself. I could feel the first one prowling around inside me. I didn't want anything to spoil the time I was having. I had waited long enough for surroundings like this. I wanted to be able to soak them up, roll them around on my tongue a little. The fact that I had business to attend to only sharpened the feeling.

Someone took a stool next to mine. With a whole bar full of empties, it was the stool next to mine. I turned and saw that it was a woman and that she was looking at me. With no embarrassment or affectation, she was taking me in. I did the same to her, and didn't mind it a bit.

She had pleasant brown eyes and the sort of white-blond hair you see on youngsters. She wore a small, expensive looking brown felt beanie and her skin was smooth and fresh.

"I haven't seen you before?" Her voice was clear and low. I didn't detect any overtones. She was simply stating a fact, for what it was worth.

"I haven't been here before."

"Do you like it?"

"Well," I said, "I almost wish something would go wrong."

She smiled. She picked up the drink the bartender had brought her. It looked like a Daiquiri. He didn't wait for payment.

"It's real," she said.

I had taken in a few more details about her, and they were not of a type to discourage anybody. Over them she wore a brown sport suit deftly highlighted by white. This job had been handled by experts, too.

"What brought you here?" she asked.

I gave her a calculating look. "A hunch."

She nodded agreeably. With her glass, she indicated the alcove where the man in the dinner jacket had gone.

"Not that kind of a hunch," I said. "That's over my head."

"What brought you here?" I asked.

"Boredom."

I liked the way she said it. In fact, I liked a lot about this girl. No coquetry; things were on a direct, even plane. If there were any more I wanted to know, I felt sure all I had to do was ask, and I'd get a straightforward answer. The trouble was, I still had business to attend to.

"Do you know this place pretty well?"

She took her time, answering. "I know it fairly well, from this end. As a patron. And the other end——" She shrugged and looked at me over the rim of her glass. "I don't know and don't care."

That was good enough for me. "Did you ever hear the name Robert Branson?"

She shook her head.

"If I excuse myself, may I return later and see you some more?"

"Well," she said musingly, "you're pretty big, and you're not exactly handsome." She smiled. "It's nice to meet someone with no ulterior motives. I'll leave it up to you."

Lady, I thought, you know not whereof you speak. I nodded and slid off the stool. Somehow I'd have to get over this tendency of mine to want my cake and eat it too. I'd tried it once before today,

and the result had not benefitted me appreciably.

Like a man with great stakes on his mind, I headed for the gambling alcove. It was no disappointment. The place was built on different levels with the dice tables lowest. On the top level, surrounded by walnut as dark and rich-grained as any trust-office's, were the cashiers.

The place hadn't begun to warm up. A few men were shooting dice. A woman was playing roulette. An old duffer was having a lot of fun with chuck-a-luck. The black-jack dealer was idly playing with a deck of cards—idly, like a whip-snake.

I WANDERED around, looking. I had a twenty dollar bill in my pocket but no desire to take it out. After a bit, one of the men on the upper tier stepped down and neatly and inconspicuously intercepted me.

"Find anything to interest you, sir?"

He was a well-groomed individual, over his muscles. I gave him a cheerful smile. "To be frank," I said, "I'd like to speak to your boss."

I thought he had looked me over carefully before. "Why?"

"I'll be glad to tell *him*."

"This way, then."

I followed him to the top again, past the other boys. They didn't miss much. My escort led me through a door in the rear into a short hall. At the end of this hall was a polished door, on which he knocked lightly.

"Come in!" It was a booming, jovial voice.

We went in. "This gentleman," my escort said, "wanted to see you." He left, closing the door behind him.

The boss was on his feet. He was very dark, very heavy, with a good head of iron-gray hair. His black eyes showed nothing but interest and good nature. "My name is Patroni."

"How do you do," I said. "My name is Paulson."

"Sit down!" His big paw indicated a chair. "Drink? Cigar?"

I shook my head.

He sobered a little; his eyes tightened. "You wanted to see me."

"About a man named Robert Branson."

His eyebrows went up slightly. "Branson. I heard he was killed last night."

"That's right. I don't think it was an accident."

"Neither do I." Patroni said seriously. Then his solemnity slowly dissolved into a sort of subterranean mirth that erupted over his body in quivering waves. Very little sound came out. "No, siree, neither do I." The laughter died away. He spread his hands. "But how can we prove it?"

"Look," I said, "I'm not so interested in Branson as I am in something else. Branson was just incidental."

"Ah?" Patroni took a cigar out of his case. "Can I ask you just what is your capacity?"

"None," I said shortly. "I work for Ray Menke but in this deal I'm on my own."

"Not good enough."

I eyed him. "Okay. I've been tapped for a different murder, and I'm only trying to improve my position."

He looked black at me with no change in expression. "Then what are you doing on the loose?"

"I don't know. They either don't have enough on me yet or they figure they can get me when they want me. But I don't like the way the thing is building up."

"I don't blame you. Patroni sighed. "Those things can be tough. You've got a hard job ahead of you."

"Maybe."

He lighted his cigar and squinted at me through the smoke. "What brought you out here?"

"Branson had dealings with this place." I didn't think it necessary to add that I judged him the kind of man who would undermine himself by gambling.

The heavy head nodded. "So he did. And now he's gone." Again a trace of that silent, shaking laughter.

"I don't think it's so funny. The poor dope had a right to live."

Patroni pushed his thick lips out. "Let's get to the point, Mr. Paulson."

You've connected Branson and this place. All right. I knew Branson. He was punchy, but he came in handy. He did a few odd jobs for me. So what?" He still didn't seem inclined to get rough. He spoke with a sort of petulant positiveness.

"Branson was working for somebody yesterday. He was too excitable and either was dangerous that way or he pulled a boot of some kind and got himself killed."

PATRONI said, slowly, "I don't like what you imply. You imply that he might have been working for me, and that I might have been responsible for his death." He shook his head. "That's not very kind."

He gave me a long look, then he smiled. It was a broad, infectious smile. "All right, beat it out of me."

I glared at him. I'd have needed a micrometer to measure how far this interview was getting me.

"Your main trouble," Patroni went on, after a moment "is that you don't know anything." He began to laugh again, if you could call it laughter. "And you aren't learning anything here."

I stood up. "All right. But I will learn something, and when I do, perhaps I'll see you again."

Patroni began to shake, waving his arms in simulated helplessness. Then he gave a couple of gulps, controlled himself. His voice dropped, came out shockingly cool, even and quiet. "Do that, and you might die yourself."

It wasn't so much a threat as a plain statement of fact, made without rancor. His eyebrows went up again. "Go out to the bar. Have a few drinks for yourself. Have a little fun and forget this thing that is bothering you. You'll be better off."

"Okay." I turned at the door. "I'll see you again, Mr. Patroni."

"It's your funeral," he said.

So I left him, shaking again with that soundless inner laughter. The boys on the upper deck gave me discreet looks as I went out. I didn't linger in the gaming room. I was too angry at the way I had

handled Patroni. Or, rather, at the way he had handled me.

I went back to the bar. The woman in brown was not there. The circumstances fitted the mood I was in. Curtly, I ordered another drink.

Two bourbons later, my steam had worn off and my head was working again. At least, I consoled myself, I had a line on two places. I had the Dolphin Cafe and *El Pobre Conejo*. I had Patroni and Nancy Heath. I had Zensler, the dirty little rat, and I had my theory about old Abner's message. I had starting points.

I realized that she was back, next to me again.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey yourself." Her eyes were amused and friendly. "How did you make out?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't have to, at the mention of that interview.

She laughed. "Patroni," she said.

A woman came out and began to sing, and I concentrated on forgetting Patroni. I succeeded so well that I didn't realize I was holding the girl's hand till the song was ended and I tried to turn back to the bar.

"Hey," I said again.

She leaned a little closer and looked me straight in the eye. "I think so too."

THE night air was so cool and fresh it made us a little dizzy. We walked through the parking area. The lights in the valley below had dwindled but the stars seemed to have multiplied. It was like peeking up from the edge of a cloud.

She stopped, close to me, her body against mine. I didn't hold her. For a long minute we stood there, close to one another. The breeze wandered down the hill and pushed her hair around. She took the beanie off.

"Large night." Her voice was a little shaky.

I nodded. I didn't feel like speaking. Maybe it was that beautiful grog. Or maybe it was just the night, the foothills and the freshness and silence, and the crowding memories of other nights—nights are so poignant with youth and un-

realized desire that the very thought of them made you ache.

"I'll lead in my car," she whispered.

"Wait a minute. What's your name, in case you get away from me?"

"Lenore."

"Mine's Don."

"I don't care. I'm not going to call you anything."

I helped her into a Buick coupe that looked like a custom job. Then I went over and crawled into the lower priced field. I turned the windwing so the air blew against my face and drove, without thinking very much, down the road after her.

We went east on Foothill Boulevard for a way, then turned into a canyon road, narrow but well kept up. The air grew cooler and it got darker as we wound our way into a crease in the hills. Trees obscured the stars. Finally she turned sharply off into a parking area. Following, I saw that she had stopped, and that my headlights were picking out a well-built rustic cabin.

She was waiting for me on the steps. This time I reached for her, pulled the softness of her against me as hard as I could. She wasn't backing away. Her parted lips were moist; she was breathing as rapidly as I was.

Finally she pushed me away. "Count ten," she whispered. "We've got a cabin to open."

I pouted a little, but I let go of her. She went briskly in and flipped the light in a large knotty-pine living room "Over there is the kitchen. Find yourself a drink. I'll be with you in a minute."

I went to the kitchen but I didn't look for a drink. I didn't need one. I took a couple of mouthfuls of cold, cold water from the tap, and let them slide down slowly. I unlatched the wide window over the sink and leaned close to the screen, hearing the rustle of the creek below. I filled my lungs with the clean pungent chaparral aroma of oak and greasewood and sage and dry grass.

Somewhere, out there, a dusky poor-will was calling. I felt sorry for him in his loneliness, but there was nothing I could do for him.

V

A FURIOUS HAMMERING awoke me. I lunged out of bed, startled. There was a scramble outside the window, the hurried flap of wings. I caught a glimpse of black white and red, and relaxed. Just a California woodpecker having fun on the eaves of the cabin.

The cabin. I lay back and listened to the chuckle of the creek and the sound of other birds outside the window. I watched an earnest spider on the wall, knowing I was in a strange place but too comfortable to care much. Then, with a rush, awareness came to me. I bounced from bed, sending the spider scuttling.

The custom-built Buick was gone; I was alone. With what might be banally but accurately described as mixed feelings, I washed and dressed. The woodpecker came back for another enthusiastic workout under the eaves. I found a quart of tomato juice in the kitchen and drank most of it while I straightened up the bed and latched the windows. I wanted to get out of the cabin now, get away from it fast.

I fixed the snap lock on the door and went out to the coupe. The sun, slanting through bay and sycamore trees, felt warm against my neck. Insects hummed in the clear spots and I heard the crisp snap of a flycatcher's beak. A morning like this was an invitation.

I put my coat, tie and hat in the car, rolled up my sleeves and turned up my cuffs. There was nothing here now to come between me and my interest in birds. The very least I could do was take a short walk down the creek.

Keeping my eyes open, I picked my way downstream. The water splashed and gargled and the gnats kept me company. I stopped for a few minutes to watch an ash-throated flycatcher gathering material for a nest. As I turned away from him a bolt of Cerulean blue shot across my vision. I forgot the ash-throat—a lazuli bunting was a real thrill.

I hurried downstream after that sparrow-like bullet of azure and rust. Time and again I came up to him as he stopped to bustle in the branches of willows and maples. But each time he zoomed away—I never did get a satisfactory chance to study him. There was only that tantalizing, incredible blueness pulling me on.

I went much farther than I had intended to. Watching where I put my feet but not too conscious of the background, I came on a small, meadow-like clearing. Then I pulled up sharply. I had stumbled onto a camp of itinerant Mexicans, who were just getting up. This much I realized hazily.

The thing that took the rest of my attention, that froze me where I stood, was the sight of the girl. She was stretching, full in view, in a clear shaft of sunlight.

She was barefooted, in nothing but slacks. She couldn't have been out of her teens. She had the most beautiful breasts I had ever seen or dreamed of. For a full minute she posed there, unselfconscious and lovely, while I gaped.

Lazily, the girl pulled a plaid shirt up over her nude bosom and tucked it into the jeans. The humming in my head subsided; I became aware of the others present. There were two middle-aged men and a woman who sat fixing something in a pan.

My conscience prodded me. I gave a start and crackled the brush where I was standing, and they all looked up. The girl gave me a friendly smile. The others examined me carefully. Apparently, they concluded I was not there to chase them away, and they nodded. I stepped over.

"Buenos días," I said.

They all smiled. I had not learned to speak Spanish in school.

"Soy estudiando los pájaros," I explained.

They nodded politely. If I wanted to go studying birds that was quite properly my affair, worthy of their interest and respect.

"Y ustedes?" I asked.

They shrugged. One of the men, dark and cheerful with two front teeth missing, said they were up from Imperial Valley, and that they were on their way to Bald-

win Park where a friend of theirs was going to find them work.

"Ya ha tomado el desayuno?" the woman asked. If she wanted to invite me to breakfast, that was fine with me. I was hungry.

We ate beans and cold tortillas and fruit, washed down with cool stream water. We talked about various things—of birds and crops and the state of the world. When I finally rose to go I was sorry, and I think they were too.

I said, "Good luck in Baldwin Park."

They thanked me. Gravely, they said that if I was ever down that way, they would be happy to see me again. Their friend's name was Banco Delfin and he would direct me.

I took a last quick look at the plaid shirt and its demure occupant, and started up the canyon. The sun was getting high. I had had breakfast. It was time I came back to earth.

I needed a shave and my teeth felt sticky and there were grass-seeds in my socks. I didn't want to be late to the office. I had a feeling Menke might call me in for a little talk.

I slammed the door of the coupe. If I hurried, I had just enough time.

MISS WATKINS gave me an unsympathetic look. "Heavy night," she stated.

"Not at all," I replied, injured. I felt spry. I felt spruce. The bruises on my face were hardly noticeable. "Clear head, steady hand. Ready to plunge into work. Ah—any calls?"

She gave me a speculative look. "Were you expecting any?"

My right coat pocket began to tingle. I had a note in there which said, in Mrs. MacComber's genteel backhand, "Please call Inspector Bradley at your earliest convenience."

Miss Watkins slid a piece of paper toward me. I stared at it.

"Yes," said Watkins levelly. "Miss Nancy Heath. The young lady you saw waiting here yesterday."

I walked slowly down to my room. I called the Police Department and got myself connected with Inspector Bradley.

"Inquest on Abner Solex," he said, "at eleven this morning. You check in down here at the station."

"Okay."

There was a pause. "I wasn't able to reach you last night." He kept it non-committal, no implication either way.

"I'm sorry I was out." I hope I achieved the same effect.

His voice turned crisp, unfriendly. "Under the circumstances, Paulson, I'd appreciate it if you'd leave word where you can be reached. We're not investigating a case of purse-snatching."

"Yes, sir." He didn't have to elaborate. He was in a position to fix things so I would always be available.

After I hung up, I sat for a moment thinking about Miss Heath. What was she up to now? Was remorse setting in?

I pushed the idea of calling her aside. The hell with her, I thought irritably. If she has anything to discuss she knows where she can find me.

I buzzed Miss Watkins. "I've just had my hearty breakfast," I told her. There was a moment's wait, a click, and then she said, "Come along."

She avoided my eyes as I passed her on the way into Menke's private office. I considered it a bad sign and braced myself, I found him talking into the intercom, apparently on a conference circuit. He glanced at me and nodded toward a chair.

Soon he clicked his key down and rose to meet me.

I saw that his eyes were as friendly, his smile as genuine as ever.

"Sorry I was so busy yesterday, Paulson. Sit down." He began to pace the room.

"First of all, you've got the inquest at eleven. You know how I want that handled."

How many ways did he think there were? To find out, I asked, "How?"

"Straight. What happened, just as you told me. No opinions, no speculations, no inferences, even in the tone of your voice. Nothing about the little private investigation you have been conducting."

I sat motionless for a moment. Then I said, "Dammit, I——"

"Hold on," he broke in cheerfully. "I

know what you're going to say. But we don't want to talk about it here. Come out to my place tomorrow night for dinner."

I blinked at the sheer unexpectedness of the invitation. After getting used to it I said, "Sure. Be glad to."

"It's Rancho Imperio. Miss Watkins can tell you how to get there. At seven."

"Be glad to." I repeated.

MENKE began to pace again. His blue eyes roamed the room. Having disposed of one little problem, his mind was back on business. "Now I've got a tough assignment for you." He turned on his smile. "But it's always tough to tell somebody something he doesn't want to hear, isn't it?"

I nodded. There was plenty of precedent for a statement like that.

"This man," Menke went on, "is Amos Ramsey. He owns a super gas station and auto laundry right at the entrance of the new Ramona Freeway. He——" Menke stopped, gave a funny little smile. "I forgot for a moment. You never heard of the Ramona Freeway."

I shook my head.

"Neither have many others. It's a new project. Don't mention it to anyone."

"Okay."

"This man Ramsey, though he doesn't know it, is sitting on a very strategic spot."

At this point, it didn't take any great perception to get the picture.

"You can offer him thirty thousand dollars, plus five hundred a month if he wants to stay on as manager. I want him to stay on. You can use my name."

"And if he bucks it?"

"We hold an option on property across the street. We'll duplicate his establishment and cut his business to pieces. We'll do it if we have to, because we can still make a fair return in the long run. But it would be costly, a waste. He has a nice plant. He has an excellent business built up. Why spoil it?"

Why, indeed? I thought. Aloud, I said, "When do I put the squeeze on Amos Ramsey?"

"You'll have to work that out your-

self. You will remember I told you this was a tough assignment. The toughness lies in Ramsey himself. He is rugged and touchy. He is intolerant of big business. If you put that proposition up to him cold he'd roar like a bull and try to pick you up and throw you off his property." Menke smiled at me. "He might be able to do it, too. So you'll need to use technique. I'll be very much interested in how you handle him."

I crossed my legs, picked a clover-burr off my trouser-cuff, and studied it a while. Then I said, "Okay." I could take a hint. It was my job.

He came over and put a hand briefly on my shoulder. "Good man. See you tomorrow night at seven. You can tell me about the inquest then."

"You'll already know."

He grinned briefly and went back to his desk. I left in a whirl of thoughts. Few men in the world could have involved me in a bloodthirsty deal like that, then patted me on the shoulder grinned at me, and almost made me like it.

I stopped beside Miss Watkins a moment. "That guy," I muttered.

She gave me a brief glance. "I know."

Remembering Bradley, I said, "You'd better give me your home telephone number. I'm no longer a free agent. I've got to leave word where I am, night and day."

She considered me a moment, trying to determine if I was serious. Then she gave it up; her expression changed. She said, "Take me to lunch today."

I stared at her.

"Quick," she said. "Ask me."

"It'll be late, on account of the inquest."

"I'll be here. Thank you for the invitation."

BACK in my own office, I looked out at the Sierra Madre mountains and wondered how much longer I could take this pushing around. I chewed on my pipe a while, and then my telephone rang.

"Paulson," I said.

"What the devil happened to you last night?"

"Migod!" I had forgotten all about Hank and our date for the fights. If

Mrs. MacComber hadn't been out shopping this morning, I'd have been reminded sooner.

"Hank," I said contritely, "I'm sorry. I got involved, and I never even had a chance to call home and leave a message for you."

"It's okay," he said slowly. "I waited a while and then went on with one of your fellow roomers. Lewis." He didn't ask how I got involved.

"I'm glad of that," I said. "Lewis is a good joe. Tell me, did Graven take that boy from Texas?"

"Yeah, finally. But I'll bet he never wants to see a left hand again."

"I'm sorry I missed it. And I was damned thoughtless not to let you know I couldn't make it."

"That's all right. You can pay for my seat next time."

"A deal. I'll do even more than that. I'll buy you a cup of coffee right now."

"Well . . . I guess I can break away."

"Meet you in the cafeteria, then?"

"Right."

I went downstairs and across to the cafeteria. I took my coffee to a table and a couple of minutes later Hank showed up. I told him my only excuse for last night was that I had murder on my mind.

Hank set down his cup. "Murder?"

"Didn't you read about that old boy on Huntington Drive?"

"Sure, but . . ." He stared at me. "That's right. Somebody from Menke's discovered it. You?"

I nodded.

"No kidding?" He forgot about coffee. "What was it like?"

I told him.

"But how did you happen to go there?"

I explained. Before I was through he began to nod excitedly. "Zensler," he said. "That sounds just like him. Screwed little guy. But you should see his work."

"You mean you're acquainted with him?"

"Well, somewhat. I knew him at the Apex Tool Works. The first job I had after I left school. Mr. Menke was right. Zensler was worth going after."

"I'd like going after him now. It would

make my position much more comfortable."

The implications grew on Hank. "Are the police after you?"

"I don't know. But they're sure as hell keeping an eye on me. Zensler has disappeared completely. I don't like it."

"I don't blame you." Hank's face puckered anxiously. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not that I know of. My conscience is perfectly clear. but thanks just the same."

We fell to discussing Menke Enterprises. It didn't appear that Hank was too happy in his present job. I felt just a little sorry for him. He was the kind of guy who couldn't shave without missing a few spots. His collars always looked wilted and his shoes run down. He had a family to support, and I wondered if he was being paid quite as much as I was.

A waitress, passing, lost control of a cup and saucer. At the crash, Hank jumped a foot and spilled the remains of his coffee. He looked at me wryly. "Loud noises always do that to me."

Slowly, I smiled back at him. "Don't you remember the paper bags at noon time?"

Only a fellow like Hank would have grinned at the memory. At school we had tortured him, once we learned his failing, by hiding in the shrubbery and popping air-filled bags when he came along. It had been a standard lunch-time entertainment.

He changed the subject. "Maybe it's the scenery in your department that appeals to me. That secretary of Mr. Menke's is a honey, and yesterday I saw a girl come downstairs who ought to be in the movies."

"Small, neat, beautiful tan? Dressed in blue and white?"

"That's the one. She looked mad as anything, but she sure was cute."

I grinned to myself. "Yeah, she was peeved, all right. But she doesn't work for us. Her name is Nancy Heath and she was trying to see Menke. He gave her a regal brush-off."

"Hm," Hank said.

"And another thing. What are you doing, being interested in scenery?"

He shook his head and sighed. He lit a cigaret, puffed on it a moment. "That reminds me. We've talked several times about your coming out to the house for dinner, but never did anything about it. Can you make it tonight?"

I had no other engagement. The more I thought about Hank's proposal, the better it sounded. It sounded comfortable and homey and uncomplicated. I was in a receptive mood for something like that.

"Will such late notice be all right with your wife?"

"Sure. I'll call her—she's been wanting to meet you." Hank got up. "It's settled then. 1131 El Cerrito, San Gabriel."

I made a note of the address, assured him I wouldn't forget this time, and we parted.

THE INQUEST on Abner Solex was a solemn affair but it didn't lead to much. I told my story, just as it had happened. Various others gave evidence. The medical testimony was not startling; he had been struck three times by a heavy object, with great force. Inspector Bradley told his version in a straightforward manner. No one, apparently, had reasonable cause to think that a felony had been committed by Don Paulson. The conclusion was murder, the agent unknown.

When the coroner had finished I gave Bradley an inquiring look. He wanted to talk to me, all right. Grimly he came over and took my arm. "A few questions, Paulson."

The first one was: "What were you doing at Robert Branson's house the afternoon of the seventeenth?"

It didn't take me long to answer. I simply thought of what Ray Menke would have done under the circumstances. I said, "I was there on an assignment from my boss."

"What was it?"

"To tell Branson the answer was 'No.' I wasn't told why."

Bradley thought about it. "Okay," he said finally. "Now tell me why you went back there again the very next day, the

eighteenth, after Branson was killed."

I could have asked how the hell he knew these things, but there seemed no percentage in it. I answered him, speaking slowly, because I was trying to think very clearly. "I went there on my own hook. Because I didn't think Branson's death was an accident. I don't know what I expected to learn."

I should have opened up right then. I should have told him my theory about the dried starfish and the constellation named Delphinus, about Nancy and the Dolphin Cafe. I didn't but Lord knows I should have.

Instead, I waited for him to reply.

"What had the matter of Branson's death not being an accident to do with anything you might be involved in?" he asked.

I took a deep breath. "Now, look. The boss sent me to see Zensler. You know what that led me into. Next he sent me to see Branson. The man nearly had hysterics when I told him Menke's answer. Then that night he was killed. It was too damned coincidental."

"I don't know what it had to do with me. What did Solex have to do with me? I just feel that I'm being pushed into a hole. I don't like it. I'm trying to help myself out." I added bitterly, "With a spectacular lack of success."

Bradley was silent, thinking it over. I couldn't read a thing from his expression. At last he said, gently, "Are you getting any ideas about your boss?"

"I don't know. I can't see what it would get him to push me around. He's a big operator. He's got too much at stake to mess around in anything like this. Branson and Paulson and Solex—they're little people. The kind he eats for breakfast."

Bradley said, "Hm." He chewed his lip for a while, then gave me a pat on the arm. "All right, Paulson. Just remember this: I'm a professional in things of this kind. I am not your enemy. I'm only trying to find out the truth, in the interest of social justice. I want to feel that you're working with me. I want to feel that anything you learn will be turned over to me."

"It's a deal," I said earnestly.

Bradley smiled slightly. "Then later, perhaps, I can expect you to tell me the rest of it?"

VI

I WALKED INTO MENKE'S office and said, "Where's the boss?"

Miss Watkins was already out of her chair, half way to the coatroom. The top of her desk would have made a whistle look scabrous. She stopped and looked back at me. "Why?"

"Something to tell him. Something he'd better know."

She came back, flipped a pad and pencil out. "Write it here and fold it and put it in the slot at the side of the top panel on the inside of his door."

"I scribbled: *Bradley wanted to know why I was at Branson's. I told him. D. P.*

I folded the note and went into Menke's office, put the note where she said and came out again.

Watkins was ready, in a tailored jacket and an ant-hill hat. On her it looked interesting.

"Good thing," I said, brightly "I'm not insectivorous."

She gave me a suspicious glance. She had put her glasses away and with them some ninety percent of her efficiency. Frederick C. Taylor might have been disappointed at the result but a lot of men would have been eager to marry it.

"Skip it, Miss Watkins. I've been wanting to lunch with you for six weeks and three days. We're late as it is."

"It doesn't matter. It's Saturday. Or had you forgotten?"

I had forgotten.

We stopped at a place called the Saucepan which specialized in roasts and gravies. That sounded pretty heavy for

the middle of the day, till they demonstrated it was all a matter of quantity.

As we waited to be served I noticed the ornament on Miss Watkins' lapel, a striking, golden object with vivid green eyes. What was it? She smiled a little as I leaned closer to examine it.

"What do you know? A griffon. Wings, beak, lion's body, and all." It had character—a wonderful air of jaunty disarray. Tenniel did nothing better in Alice in Wonderland. "That's a museum piece, young lady."

Watkins' face softened. "I think a great deal of that. A friend made it for me."

"Someone at the plant."

"Oh, no."

I didn't like the way she spoke of this friend. Unwisely, I said, "Someone you think a lot of?"

"Yes. He sent it to me two months before he was killed."

I did what I should have done before. I shut my big mouth.

We received our food and ate for a while, then I reopened the conversation. "If I'm going to pay for your luncheon I have to know your first name."

She gave an impatient shrug, regarded me for a moment, and said, "Oh, all right, it's Helen."

"That's better. Now, Helen, what's eating you?"

She played a somber game with the silverware. "What did he tell you this morning?"

"He seemed to know everything I'd been doing. He invited me to dinner tomorrow. And he gave me a dirty job to do."

"What job?"

"Just a routine affair. Beating a man to his knees, robbing him, and expecting him to be grateful. Menke told me to use my own judgment about how I approached him. The name of the victim is Amos Ramsey."

An expression of disgust covered her face.

"Why? What's the matter?"

She tightened her lips. Finally, she said, "Ramsey doesn't like short men. Once he told Menke so. This is just

Menke's latest attempt to cut him down. We don't need that property."

This was an earful. I gave it a good going-over, then I said, "I must revise my opinion of Menke. I would have bet against his doing a thing like that. Not from a moral standpoint, but because it was a wasteful and emotional thing to do."

"Well, now you know."

THE waitress brought our coffee. I stirred mine, thinking that, in a way, it was a relief to know that Menke was so human. But from now on it would make a difference in my eagerness to rush out and do his bidding.

Helen said, in a voice that was a bit too sharp and dictatorial, "Now, I want to know what you are up to."

"In my small way," I said shortly, "I'm trying to solve the murder of Abner Sollex."

She was wearing cerise lipstick. I hadn't noticed it, till the rest of her face became so pale it jumped out at me.

"Migod!" I said shortly. "What's the matter?"

"Don't do that. For the love of Heaven, don't." From someone else, it would have been melodramatic. From her . . . it scared me.

"But why should I stop? I'm right in the middle of it. Who else, may I ask, it going to look out for me?"

"You don't know what I'm talking about. You don't have to know. Just stay away from the whole thing!" There was no mistaking Helen's sincerity, the naked appeal in her eyes.

Unfortunately, it was the wrong day to approach me like that. Bitterly, I said, "Everybody comes to the party but Paulson. Let him get into trouble. Let him get stepped on. We'll have fun watching him struggle. Together, we'll keep him from learning anything. That'll sharpen the fun. And for heaven's sake, don't anybody remind him he's a grown man."

I snorted. "If you want me to stop what I'm doing you'll have to tell me why."

Her face twisted. "I can't."

I put the biggest part of a hard roll in

my mouth and clamped down on it angrily. I said, through the wad, "Okay, then I keep right on."

Abruptly, Helen Watkins got up. Still chewing, I turned over the check, left enough to cover it, and hurried outside after her. She was already in the coupe. Without a word I got in beside her and started the motor. I drove clear out to San Gabriel Boulevard and neither of us broke the silence.

Finally Helen snapped her purse, got a cigaret, and puffed it as though she hated it. The odor of the smoke made me ease to the side of the road to pack my pipe. I didn't pack it. I discovered that I had lost my tobacco pouch. I tried to remember when I had last used it, and couldn't.

I put my empty pipe away and said, "Listen to me, Helen Watkins. I like my job. The surroundings are top grade. The assignments have been fun. Including Solex, they've had stimulating variety. I've been treated fine. I'm well enough paid for what I do. Right now, all things considered, it's a very good deal. I don't like anything that might spoil it."

She said nothing. I went on, "I'm not trying to crash a tiddlywinks game. Two men have been killed. I'm sure Inspector Bradley considers me a suspect. Before I'm through I may have to prove I'm not."

Helen sighed. "Of course. But if I tell you what I know, I will involve myself."

I thought about it. Then I said the only thing I could, "All right. I'll have to leave that up to you. In the meantime, I trust you. You may be out to cross me up, but until that actually happens I'll string along."

Her hand reached over and squeezed mine hard.

"I won't promise to leave this other thing alone. But I'll try to keep you posted, if I can."

She nodded. I started the coupe and turned around. "Can you tell me anything about Nancy Heath?"

Helen looked away quickly. After a moment she made a helpless gesture.

"What was she doing there at the office?"

"I'm not sure. I think I know but I'm just not sure."

"Was Menke avoiding her?"

Helen chewed thoughtfully on her thumb. "I guess so."

"Well, shall I telephone her?"

"Why not?"

We drove to downtown Alhambra, where she wanted to do some shopping. She lived in an apartment house close by, and before she left I got her telephone number. Just as we said goodbye I asked her if she had ever heard anything connected with the word Dolphin. And on that score, at least, I was satisfied. She had not.

I LEFT the coupe at the gas station and walked the two blocks to Mrs. MacComber's. The car needed attention, the way I had pushed it the last few days. As a mater of fact, I needed a little attention myself.

I was half undressed, there in my room, before I discovered something was wrong. I'm not too methodical, but like most men I know where I put things and I can tell when they've been moved. I did a little checking—the bureau, the closet, the bathroom. No doubt about it. My room had been searched.

I slipped my shirt back on and went tearing downstairs. I found Mrs. MacComber in her little greenhouse, extracting a pot-bound fern.

"Who's been in my room?"

She stared at me. Then her small brows came down. "Someone stole into my house!"

She was outraged. She wanted to call the police, the sheriff's office, the City Hall. An old woman couldn't even work in her garden in peace . . . I had difficulty in talking her out of it and getting away from her.

What did it matter? I had nothing to hide, and damned little to swipec.

I took a shower and put on my old brown tweed suit. I got out my bottle and poured an indecent draught. Cutting it slightly with water, I carried it downstairs to the telephone. I set the glass on the little table and dialed Nancy Heath's number.

Her telephone rang four times before she answered.

"This is Don Paulson."

"Yes. I wanted to talk to you. I wanted to"—pause—"apologize."

I thought it over. Her voice fitted the way she looked: sweet, sure and a hundred and fifty percent feminine. I prodded myself to remember how she had looked sitting in the Dolphin Cafe, watching me catching my lumps. It wasn't too difficult.

"Look," I said, "I appreciate the camouflage. But you're calling me because you want something. What is it?"

One thing about her, she knew when to give up. She said easily, "All right. I want something. And I don't expect it for nothing. Are you in the market for information?"

"Depends," I said. "I'm willing to listen. When and where?"

"About four thirty. 832 Crestview, San Marino, Apartment 6."

"Right," I said and hung up. I winked at the telephone and took another healthy swallow of my drink. "What do you know," I said, "I think I'm beginning to get somewhere!"

Then I realized that Mrs. MacComber was standing beside me. "Alcohol," she said dryly, "is apt to have that effect on people."

REFRESHED, the coupe hummed along, I was humming along pretty well myself. I was in a hurry, too, because of my four-thirty appointment with Nancy Heath. But I didn't plan on staying in Huntington Park long.

Somewhere between Mrs. MacComber's last disapproving glance and the station where I had left the car, the idea had hit me. It still seemed good, possibly because there were no women involved. It could well bring me more bruises. But I should get something in return—something I needed before I went to confront Miss Nancy Heath.

I parked the coupe not far from the signboard I had got to know yesterday. I headed for the Dolphin Cafe, stopped in front of the door long enough to tighten my belt and pull down my hat, and stepped inside.

There was a full house. No one paid any attention to me as I walked past the card tables to the bar. I found a vacant space. There were two men on duty, busy boys. Neither was the man I was after. I waited till one of them paused before me.

"Where's the other bartender?"

"Steve? He don't come on till six. He's probably home."

"Where's that?"

He pointed. "Block down. Block over. Up above a hardware store."

I found the place just as he had described it. I went up the littered stairs and down a sour-smelling hall. No wonder Steve was a man with a grudge, crawling out to face the world from a warren like this.

Since there were no cards or names on the doors, I picked one at random and knocked on it. A wave of cheap perfume and sweat rolled over me. A thin faced blond stuck her head out. She smiled, showing bad teeth. "Hello, honey."

"Not today," I said. "Which door is Steve's?"

"Last one on this side. But what's—"

"Business," I said, and went on.

I gave Steve's door a medium-sized rap. There was heavy movement within, then silence.

I rapped again. "Come on, Steve," I said in an ordinary voice. "I haven't got all day."

I heard his feet coming over. As his heavy hand hit the door-knob I braced myself. The minute the tongue of the lock left its seat I heaved. The door slammed him back and away. Before he could get set I was inside and on top of him. I put one foot behind him and jerked his neck under my right arm.

My school wrestling coach, who was inclined to be fancy, had called that hold a "Chancery back heel". Where I first learned it, in an alley, it had no name. Steve hit the floor with a jar that must have emptied shelves in the hardware store below. I followed him down with my knee, twisted around, and hit him in the neck. Then I got an armlock on him and leaned. I kept it up till he was whining and slobbering.

I eased a little. "This is for yesterday. Don't you wish there were three more of me to make it a good job?"

"Okay," he gasped. "So now you made it up. Lay off now. Lemme get up."

He was a hell of a looking sight. One side of his face was still puffed from that slamming against the bar. He hadn't shaved or even combed his hair. His cloudy eyes were bloodshot.

"What d'ya want?" he was repeating. "I ain't got any money here."

I let go of his arm and sat back. I doubled my fist and he ducked. He was the way I wanted him.

I said, "What were you and that girl talking about yesterday?"

He was a big guy to be sniffing. "I never saw her before. Little chippy—"

"Ah-ah!"

"Ahr," he said quickly, "she come snootin' in there and wanted to know about my workin' for a guy named Menke. She wouldn't believe I never heard of him."

"Did you?"

"So help me, I never. I told her that fifty times." His voice took on a whiny tone. "I oughta know who I worked for, Jack."

"How long ago was this supposed to be?"

"She said about ten years."

"Who *did* you work for ten years ago?"

The cloudy eyes shifted. The thick lips puffed out a phrase, "I don't remember."

I snagged his arm again. I stopped the pressure only when I thought he would scream.

"Greathouse," he moaned. "Man named Dad Greathouse."

"What did he do?"

"Doctor."

"What did you do?"

"Drove his car."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know."

My hands reached.

"*I don't know!*" he yelled.

"Simmer down. Why did you leave him?"

"Got fired."

"What happened to him?"

"I think he retired. Heard once he

was in Azusa. That's all I know. Now go ahead and break my arm!"

I heaved myself off his thick body. I stood, watching, as he got his good hand on the edge of the bed and worked himself up to one knee. The arm I had punished hung limp. He rolled his head, panting.

"Did you tell that girl about Greathouse?"

"No," he said sullenly. "Why should I tell her anything?"

That was good enough for me. I walked out.

EIGHT-thirty-two Crestview, San Marino, was quite a contrast. It was a square, solidly-built apartment house, with Doric columns and a massive front door. There were camellias and azaleas and rhododendrons along the front, and blue spruce on the lawn. There was no Bermuda grass in that lawn, either.

I pressed the button beside Nancy Heath's name and announced myself. The buzzer admitted me to a lobby that lived up to my first impression of the place. Apartment 6 was on the second floor. I walked up.

"You're a little late," she said.

I stepped in, keeping hold of my hat. It was a lush, modern room. The color scheme I can best describe as a blend of chocolate malt and ivory, with touches of ultramarine. My shoes felt big and dirty as they sank into the rug.

On the wall facing me was a nude done in a harsh, jolting red. It yammered at you in that room. Maybe it was supposed to.

I tried to reconcile living in a place like this with talking back to a bartender in a dive like the Dolphin Cafe. Then I realized Nancy Heath had spoken.

"Sorry," I said. "That picture took my breath away."

"Will you have a drink?"

"No, thanks."

"Let me take your hat, then. Please sit down."

I watched across the room. She was dressed in what I think is known as a tennis outfit: short, pleated skirt and a short-sleeved blouse. All clean white,

the skirt stopping some four or five inches above her knees.

I sat uneasily on a wide-angled, armless couch that was at least twelve feet long. Nancy Heath returned from adjusting the Venetian blinds and dropped on it a few feet away. She smiled, more to herself than me, and said, "I expect you're thinking of this as a truce."

I mumbled something she could take any way she liked. I had become faintly aware of an odd, musky odor. I had bumped into it somewhere before. The association was not pleasant. Had it been some kind of perfume?

She gave me a direct look. "You came along yesterday just in time to spoil something important. You spoiled it completely and I was furious. I think I enjoyed seeing you beaten up."

"Well," I said, "didn't I aim a punch or two at you?"

"Still feel that way?"

I grinned a little. "Not exactly. Or let's say, I have to remind myself of it."

She smiled back at me and wriggled on the couch. There was nothing personal in that wriggle. I'm sure it was just an instinctive, unselfconscious movement. The trouble was, it appealed to some instincts of mine.

"What took you down to that place?" she asked.

I took out my pipe and checked the grain of the bowl pretty carefully. "I don't know how we're going to work it out, but this thing has to be tit for tat."

She bounced suddenly to her feet. "Don't you want a drink?"

"No thanks. But you go ahead."

I WATCHED her go and revised my opinion of short pleated skirts. As she clinked ice in the kitchenette, I examined the room more carefully. I saw a royal-blue telephone; I leaned over and made a note of the number. I let a few unauthorized thoughts slide around in my head. They didn't meet the resistance they should have.

She came back with her drink. We sat still for a moment, then she leaned forward, holding her glass in both slender hands. Her voice was husky, the way it

had sounded in the Dolphin Cafe yesterday.

"I'll begin. After all, I took the initiative." Her eyes narrowed. "You work for Mister Ray Menke. What do you think of him?"

"That's a loaded question."

"Not for me. I hate him!"

I kept on watching her. The clean lines of her face were blurred with feeling.

"I'd do anything to get him. I'd lie, bribe, cheat, steal—anything!" Her voice wasn't raised but the quality of it made the back of my neck prickle.

"He won't ever see me. He won't let me get near him."

She was talking to herself. More than to me. The drink was forgotten in her hands; it nearly spilled. I kept very still. I didn't want to stop her. I hoped she would go on for an hour.

"He's so damned shrewd. If I could only get one tiny bit of evidence, I *know* I could break him. I know it!"

The shrill tones died away. After a long wait, I said, "Why?"

She jerked her gaze up from the rug. "That's not part of our agreement. It has nothing to do with yesterday."

"All right," I murmured.

"I went to that miserable hole to talk to the bartender. Someone told me he used to work for Menke. He started off by denying it, but I think I could have made him admit it if you hadn't butted in."

It makes sense, I told myself wonderingly. Damned if she hasn't made sense out of it. Or am I looking too hard for an excuse for the way she acted?

"He swore up and down he'd never worked for Menke." She raised her chin pugnaciously. "But I'm going to wear him down. I'm going back."

I shook my head.

She studied me; her face started to tighten. It was surprising how quickly that wiped out her attractiveness.

"Because," I said, "he never did work for Menke."

"How do you know?"

"Less than an hour ago I was sitting on top of him. I twisted his arm half out of its socket. To stop it, he would

have implicated his own mother." I gave Nancy Heath a long, steady look. "Believe me, Steve never worked for Menke."

She was silent. After a bit she realized she was still holding the drink and raised it to her lips. Again I became aware of that musky, irritating scent.

"Now," she said, "what were you doing there?"

I leveled with her as far as finding the Solex corpse. "I called the cops, but that didn't keep me out of a sweet mess. I'm still in it. If the police didn't happen to like my honest, open face I'd be talking to you through a grating now.

"So there it was. Menke made it clear that I was all on my own. I got the bright idea of solving the murder myself. I sneaked back to Abner's place and looked over his books. I found that one of his customers was listed as the Dolphin Cafe, in Huntington Park. Not knowing what to expect, I went down there. I was certainly surprised to see you again."

I gave her a half-hearted smile. "That's it. I messed up your deal; you messed up mine. If it makes you feel any better," I added, "Menke does not approve of my independent investigation."

She finished her glass with a sudden gulp and went out to get a refill. Her lovely brow was wrinkled in thought. If she had given me an earful, apparently I had done the same for her.

Coming back, she asked, "Where do we go from here?"

I shrugged. "I'll keep plodding along my lonely road. At least, I can forget about the Dolphin Cafe. I couldn't connect the place with Solex in any way that helped."

"Why did that instrument man send you to Solex in the first place?"

"That might be the answer to everything. I feel about that guy a little the way you feel about Menke."

She was looking at me so intently I felt uncomfortable. "You work for Menke. You seem to have some kind of special position with him. Maybe I shouldn't have trusted you."

I tried my best to look honest and trustworthy.

"It doesn't really matter," she went on reflectively. "He already knows how I feel about him. What I'm getting at is—will you hep me?"

That was a big question, a regular giant of a question. I took plenty of time to consider it. The possibilities kept unfolding. They seemed numberless, and they were all in her favor.

"If it's money," she said.

I shook my head. "I'm thinking of skin." I forced a grin. "Mine. Let me get used to the idea. Let me practice sitting on a stool."

She ignored that last crack. She slid off her end of the couch and came close to me. She leaned over. I tried not to look at her, thinking wildly of tanned legs and pleated skirts and senous red paintings. They had all played hell with my resistance.

She didn't do much. She just kissed me, with hot little lips and a sort of fierce intensity that damn near dissolved me. In a kind of haze, I saw her moving away. She pointed toward the door.

"Get out of here," she said. "Get out of here quick!"

I got.

I sat in the coupe and examined the steering wheel as if I'd never seen it before. My right hand got partway to the ignition switch and then dropped again. That musky odor, that had bothered me. Memory brought it flooding back, from another apartment, like a rabbit hutch.

Zensler,

VII

EL CERRITO STREET, San Gabriel was in a new tract. It was lined with small, standardized homes that had the look of a war housing project. Some had been taken care of, others were well on their way to junk. Hank's was about average.

Two little girls were buzzing around on the front lawn. They stopped still and stared at me as I approached.

"Are you the company?" the older one asked.

I nodded. "I'm Mr. Paulson. Is your daddy home?"

They shook their heads. They regarded me speculatively. Then, as one, they said, "Will you swing us?"

I looked around. "Sure. Where's the swing?"

"Like this," the little one said, taking my hands and pulling my arms out straight. "Round and round."

"First," I said, "we'd better tell your mother I'm here. If she looked out and saw a strange man swinging you, she might not like it."

"You go, Cherie," the little one said. She looked up at me, tumble-haired, puppylike. "Now we can start."

"What's your name?" I asked to stall a little.

"Frances. Do you work for Daddy?"

"No. But I expect he'd be a good man to work for."

She thought about it. "He's pretty fussy."

I heard my name, and turned to meet Hank's wife Jean. She was a tall girl, fair-skinned and buxom.

"Please come in, Mr. Paulson. Henry's late, but he should be here any minute." She picked Frances up, disregarding the squawks. We went inside, where she took my hat and got me into a chair. She had a nervous smile but I could see she was a housekeeper at heart. Her glance automatically roamed the room to see that everything was in place.

"I told the girls I would swing them."

"They know better. It's time for their baths. Will you excuse me a moment?"

I gave Frances a stern frown. "You knew better."

She crawled into my lap and showed me a long scratch on her wrist. She said proudly, "The rosebush thorned me!"

Cherie came up. "Come in our room. We can play till Daddy comes home."

Jean came back at that moment and said, "If you'd like to, go ahead. I have a few things to do in the kitchen."

The girls sat me in a chair their size and started bringing me things to look at, both talking at once. Comic books, dolls, games, puzzles, tin cans, toy animals dressed in scraps of cloth. It was about the most concentrated dose of hospitality I'd ever received.

"Do you like beer?" Frances asked me.

"I drink it for breakfast."

Four little eyes went wide. Two small faces screwed up. "Instead of fruit juice?"

"Yep."

"Prob'ly," Frances said, "'cause it has bitamines."

Cherie pointed to a shelf unit on the wall. "See what we made."

Clay figures of animals, cockeyed, misshapen, leering little characters. I enjoyed them all. The other shelves were full of odds and ends—a glass-blown ship, some vanilla pods, fancy dried leaves, bell-shaped jars of colored sand, piggy banks.

Just then Hank stuck his big, grinning head in. "Sorry I'm late, Don."

Like a shot, the girls were off me and standing together, looking a little guilty and apprehensive. Frances' eyes were wide and intent. I followed her gaze. There was a blue feather on the side of Hank's coat, down on the skirt. I picked the fluffy bit off.

There was a moment's silence in the room, enough for me to realize that Hank was probably an exacting father. The girls were obviously awaiting his next move.

"Let me change my clothes," Hank said. "Be with you in a minute."

I PUT the feather in an inside pocket, to satisfy Frances. The girls tried to interest me in a game of jacks, but before we got really started Jean came in and a big to-do ensued about cleaning up the room and getting into their baths. Hank rescued me by beckoning from the door.

"Sit down," he said, pointing to an overstuffed chair in the living-room. "I fixed you a highball—guess you won't mind starting with that instead of beer."

"Nice little girls," I said taking a swallow of my drink. Then I coughed, backed off, and took a look at it. It was the color of old mahogany.

"What's the matter?" Hank asked anxiously. "Did I get it a little strong?"

Did he get it a little strong? It could have been used for etching copper. Nevertheless, being a considerate guest, I began to work on it. His looked about the same strength, yet he drank it without seeming to notice.

"I needed one tonight," he said. "I've had a tiring week." He glanced toward the door and lowered his voice apologetically. I don't very often have a chance for a drink like this."

I felt sorry for him. But he had asked for it, hadn't he? A nice family, a house on a little side street, not quite enough money to cover everything.

"I suppose," he said wistfully, "you get around quite a bit, being a bachelor."

I took another swallow of my drink and after my throat loosened up, said, "Not a great deal. Not nearly as much as I'd like to."

"Ready for another drink?"

I gasped at him. His glass was empty. He gestured. "Come on, dinner'll be ready in a minute."

The poor guy, I thought. I closed my eyes and threw down the rest of my drink and let him take the glass. The girls came rocketing out, soft and wriggly and sweet-smelling. They were slated for a quick bowl of mush in the kitchen and then to bed so the grown-ups could have a quiet dinner.

"Next time," they said, "you'll have to swing us. Remember, you promised."

"Run along," I said, "before I bump your heads together."

Hank came back with another drink. It went down a bit easier than the other, probably because my throat was somewhat anesthetized. He took half of his in one swallow, sighed, and smiled at me. "I feel better."

He had changed into slacks, worn slippers and an unpressed mole-skin jacket. He didn't look sharp but I envied him his comfort.

"I've felt worse, myself," I admitted, squinting at my glass.

"That job of yours intrigues me, Don. Does it ever turn up anything exciting?"

I was busy rinsing my mouth at the

time. When I could, I asked, "What do you mean, exciting? Doesn't murder stir your interest?"

"Yes"—he gestured—"of course. But I mean the regular job. Big stuff. Big deals, and so on. What kind of assignments do you get?"

Hank might have been an engineer from a solid school like Cal-Tech, but I saw he wasn't free from that nagging little worry so many guys have about the other fellow's job. Maybe his own wasn't as good as it appeared. Maybe it was irksome to work for the Engineering Department. Maybe his supervisor should have taken him down and had him read by the Happiness Machine.

I told him about some of my assignments. I just got warmed up when Jean announced dinner was ready, and we sat down to roast pork with mashed potatoes and gravy. "You'll pardon me," I said, "if I splatter you a little. I've sat in many a restaurant and stood in many a chow line waiting for something like this."

HANK beamed at me while I worked my way through two helpings. Jean deprecated the food, as housewives will. Finally I sat back and smiled weakly at them. "Now let's see you keep me awake."

"Coffee royal?"

"Hank," I said, "you're trying to sink me." But I nodded.

"We've got lots of absorption now," he said happily as he went for the bottle.

Jean seemed pleasant, but businesslike. I got the impression, without anything definite to attribute it to, that Hank was a man who kept her pretty well in line. There was a certain grimness about her face in repose . . .

I sipped the coffee and tipped my chair back inelegantly and smiled at them both. I was a contented man.

We got to talking about the years since school. Hank had gone with the Apex Tool Works after graduating from Cal-Tech. He'd had a couple of technical, high-priority engineering jobs during the war, the last of which was for Ray Menke. He said it was the best job he'd ever had, but the way he said it sounded like he could think of better ones.

"You'll probably never be happy," I said, "till you have your own business. You can call it Blewett Associates."

Hank grinned. "Say that again, Don. I like the sound of it."

"He certainly works hard enough," Jean said. "We're lucky to see him at all."

"Research and experimental work is that way," Hank said patiently. Apparently he'd had to explain that particular point before. "Besides," he added, "you never know what'll come of it."

"How's that?"

"Oh," Jean answered, "he means something like his first invention. The one that never came to anything. The casting—"

"Jean!" Hank's voice was suddenly harsh. "We don't talk about that!" His face was red. He looked angry.

Somewhat sulkily, Jean said, "Sorry."

There was an awkward pause. For a moment the outward calm happiness of the household was badly strained. Jean's jaw was set. Hank did his best to patch the situation up.

"Now," he said with forced eagerness, "let's hear what's happened to you since the old days."

Hank had heard a good deal of it before but they both listened closely as I brought myself up to date. Their attention was flattering. The saga didn't add up to much. I'd worked at credit investigation, made a few side trips, done some involuntary servitude, come back, and ended up with Menke. I've always said that I couldn't be sure my life would be a long one, but that I *could* make sure it was a wide one. In retrospect, it seemed to have plenty of length and damned little width.

Soon, with one thing and another, we were very buddy-buddy. Jean wanted to call a girl they knew to come over and play cards.

"I'm sorry," I said quickly. "I've got an appointment at nine-thirty. Business, that came up late this afternoon."

Jean started to clear the dishes as Hank and I moved out to the living-room. He looked at me soberly.

"How are things going?"

"Nothing very new. I'm just going

along keeping my eyes open." I told him about the inquest. I still couldn't quite get around to mentioning my Dolphin theory, though I knew Hank a lot better than I would probably ever know Inspector Bradley.

Hank shook his head. "It's a funny business. Especially Menke's sending you out to see Zensler."

I was filling my pipe from my new tobacco pouch. I finished packing it, lit it, and took a big drag. "I've done a lot of wondering about that myself."

When Jean returned a little later we were talking about Menke. Hank had asked me what he was really like and if I got to see him much. It made me realize that to most people in his organization Menke was just a distantly-glimpsed, almost legendary figure.

I thought a moment, and then I said slowly, "I don't know what my opinion really is. Menke's smart. You find yourself doubting that he's ever been wrong about anything. He sees behind and above and beyond you all at once. I thought that I had seen shrewd operators when I worked for Sam Heller, but I never saw one like Menke. His mind is on fire."

"What's he like personally?"

"Likeable. But when the occasion calls for it he can be as cold and smooth as a glacier—and as irresistible. Most of the time he talks to you the way you want to be talked to. He seems to have an instinctive feeling for people. You can go in to him feeling huffy and keyed up and he can turn you off without an answer, load you up with a dirty job, and send you out tickled to death. I know, because it happened to me."

"I guess," Hank said slowly, "he's quite a guy."

"Maybe," Jean said quietly, "you ought to build a temple to him."

THAT brought us down to earth, and improved my opinion of her. Hank reached for the decanter but I held him off "Nix. I want to be able to see the car when I leave. Save it till the next time I come."

"I'll see that he does," Jean said firmly.

"I wonder," Hank mused a little later, "what that secretary of his is like? She's a pretty snappy looking girl."

"She's snappy all over. She's darned near as smart as Menke, and a lot prettier. I'd settle down with her any day."

"Get a date with her. We'll go dinner-dancing."

Jean gasped. "You're a witness," she said to me. "Eight years, and he comes out with that."

Hank grinned and shuffled his feet. "Just an idea. Now I suppose I'm stuck with it."

"You're darned right you are," Jean said. "What with overtime, I'm lucky to see you two nights a week as it is." Her words were light, and so, in a way, was her tone. But I felt the tension, the undercurrent.

I was suddenly restless. I couldn't stand that small living-room any more. It had been a calm, comfortable evening and Lord knows I needed a rest and a home-cooked meal. But the talk of Menke and the mention of Helen had brought my problems knocking again. The sand was beginning to run. I wanted to be out and doing.

I stood up. "My hat."

They protested. They said, "It's not yet nine. Do you really have to go?"

"I really have to go. I've enjoyed it more than I can say. Tell the girls good-bye for me. If I get that date we'll go dancing and if I don't we'll go somewhere else. Is that a deal?"

It was a deal.

The night felt good. I opened the car windows and drove to the nearest drug store with a phone booth.

When Helen Watkins answered I said, "Just checking in. Any calls? Any dope?"

"Nothing. What have you been doing?"

"I had dinner with Hank Blewett and wife. Old school friend. Very respectable. Works for us. Engineering design."

"Oh." Obviously, she didn't know Hank.

I said, "I've learned a little."

I heard her breathing, over the line.

"Helen, how can I get you to talk?

Can I get you drunk? Can I make love to you? Can I infuriate you? What does it take?"

"Time," she said. There was another pause. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to a club called *El Conejo Pobre*. It's run by a man named Patroni. Know him?"

"Yes." Her voice was dead.

"Any reason I shouldn't go there?"

"No-o. He doesn't think much of Menke. You won't get anywhere with him."

"I know. But I'm going to try again."

Abruptly, almost harshly, she said, "I want to talk to you!"

"Wait for me, Helen. I've got to go out there. I've got to ask Patroni one question."

"I'll wait," she said, and hung up.

Next I called home. Mrs. MacComber answered.

"Don Paulson. Have I had any calls?"

"Yes, Mr. Paulson. Inspector Bradley, who said he was just checking up."

"Oh. Thank you, Mrs. MacComber. I don't expect to be late. But if I should —"

"The night light will be on, Mr. Paulson," she said tartly.

I hauled out some more change and called the Police Department. I asked for Bradley.

"Not here," the sergeant said.

"This is Don Paulson. He wanted me to keep him posted as to where he might reach me."

"I'll take it."

I told the sergeant where I was going. He grunted.

"What if I want to reach Bradley later?"

"You call us," the man said decisively. "We can get hold of him."

TIME to think. That's what I needed now. I had to get things sorted out. Too many of them were pulling too many ways. I was beginning to hop. I was becoming a grasshopper.

First Helen Watkins, the iron woman, railroaded me to lunch. Then she went to pieces at the thought of my investigation. Nancy Heath said she hated Menke. She

tried to make a deal with me and then kissed me. S. Zensler had been in her apartment. A bartender named Steve once drove for a man named Greathouse, who was a doctor. Nancy Heath didn't know that but she tried to pump me about Steve.

A long time ago Abner Solex, dying, had moved some dried starfish. Delphinus, the Dolphin, a small rhomb of stars . . .

Chewing these things over, I reached Azusa. I pulled over suddenly and parked. What would I have done without drugstores and public telephone directories?

I found an R. M. Greathouse listed on Pepper Street. I went to the counter for change and called the listed number, wondering what the devil I would say to the man. But I was spared the decision; the number did not answer.

AFTER that, I drove out to Pepper Street and took a look at the house. It was a typical early California bungalow with a solid look about it and wide-sweeping eaves. There were no lights. It was a comfortable home in a nice little community. It would have looked just right on an insurance company retirement ad.

I turned around and went on through town and headed out Foothill Boulevard. Greathouse didn't have any perceptible connection with Dolphins or stars, but Nancy Heath would have been glad to know about him. Seeing him would probably be interesting but a waste of time.

I passed the roadside cafe where the girl had first directed me to *El Conejo Pobre*. A cup of coffee probably wouldn't have hurt me but I decided against it. Another hour of Hank's hospitality and I would have been clawing the ceiling.

I knew where to turn this time. The approach seemed much shorter. Finding a parking space was difficult; business here was good on Saturday night. I went up to the door, bracing myself. But the shadowy guard said nothing, just reached out his big arm and pushed the door for me. They trained their help well in this place.

A crowd only improved the luxurious interior. The air was still fresh, the acoustics perfect. The music, the laughing and chattering was gathered in by the walls and drapery, leaving only a pleasant, muted murmur.

I found an empty stool at the bar and ordered my usual drink. Drinking it, I did some looking around. She wasn't at the bar. She wasn't at any of the tables where it was light enough to make out faces. She wasn't in the group that was dancing on the little floor.

I got the bartender's attention. "I was here last night, remember?"

He nodded.

"I was talking to a very attractive blond."

He nodded again. He remembered her all right.

"Has she been in tonight?"

He looked at me apologetically. He spread his hands. "Sir, I see so many . . . we've been so busy tonight . . ." He started away, looked back over his shoulder. "If I see her . . ."

"Thanks, heel," I muttered. Maybe he hadn't seen her. Or maybe he had, with some other guy.

He was doing me a favor. The smart thing to do was forget her. I had done pretty well at that till I came back to this place. I finished my drink and set the glass back on the bar with decision. No more dawdling. I was here for a purpose.

I headed for the door that led to the inner rooms. Just as I reached it I found myself neatly blocked. The man looked familiar: tuxedo, muscles, no color, no expression.

"Excuse me," I said.

"These are private rooms. Sorry."

I frowned at him. "I was in there last night. No trouble then."

He shrugged. "Not tonight."

We both moved to let a tubby fellow and two girls, all fairly high, pass through. I followed them with my eyes.

"All right," he said. "It's you. You alone. You especially. Nix."

"I want to see Patroni. I want to ask him one question."

"No."

"Ask him to come out here. You can sit on my hands while I talk to him."

He stayed patient, polite. He looked like he could keep it up forever.

I gave up. I said, "Okay."

"See you to the door, sir?"

"You can see me in hell."

I DROVE on out Foothill, looking for the road Lenore had turned on. I made one false try, then found it, opposite a white stone house in an orange grove. I wound my way into the hills, swerved off, and saw the rustic cabin in the headlights. There was no other car. There were no lights.

I flicked the car switch hurriedly and stepped out. There was no sound but the subdued rustling of the creek and the far-off yaiitch! of a barn owl. It was a black, bottomless night. I was probably as isolated as a human being can get in Southern California, but I felt naked and guilty.

I got my knife out on the way to the door. Using the blade that I keep for miscellaneous purposes, I felt for the snap-lock and worked it back. If she wasn't in, tough luck. If she came in with another guy . . .

The door yielded, opened wide enough to let me in. I stood in the darkness, holding my breath. There were no snores from the bedroom. There was no sound at all.

I felt for the wall switch and pushed it on. The brightness made me blink. Quickly, I covered the living-room, kitchen, the bathroom and the bedroom I'd been in. There was another room, a large sleeping-porch I had noticed from the outside. No use wasting time on that.

I stepped to the bedroom door and felt along the inside of the frame for the switch. I nudged it. There was a gaudy goatskin rug on the floor, the kind with a long hairy fringe. I couldn't see all of the design, because there was white-blond hair spread over it—the kind you see on youngsters.

I stood there a long time, staring at Lenore. My teeth were aching when I finally relaxed my jaws. She had been shot in the side of the head with a small

gun, perhaps a .32. Her head was cushioned in a congealed pool of blood. Her eyes looked filmy. Her mouth hung open in an ugly and pathetic manner. She couldn't help me with Patroni now.

She was dressed in a brown suit. She still looked good to me. I talked aloud for a while, to whoever had done this to her.

Finally I came back to my senses. I saw a large brown leather purse laying beside her. There was no other evidence of her presence in the room. One look at the bed told me it hadn't been touched since I made it that morning.

I touched Lenore's hand. It was cold. I moved her arm a little; it was stiff. I reached for her purse and opened it. I pawed through the stuff till I came to a wallet. I unsnapped the tab with fingers that trembled. I found what I was after—her drivers' license.

Her full name was Lenore Menke.

VIII

SOMETIME LATER I GOT UP off my knees. I stood there, taking a last long look at Lenore. To leave her there alone seemed a harsh thing to do. I took the counterpane off the bed and covered her, then left the room quickly.

I went directly to the wall phone. I had had my fling. I had carried my naive fumbling on long enough. Perhaps it was already too late to hand the mess over to somebody who could handle it. For Lenore, at least it was too late.

The phone was dead.

I flicked off the living-room light and locked the cabin door. I drove slowly, automatically, down the winding canyon road and turned west on Foothill. I blinked at the oncoming lights and was aware of the glowing dials on my dashboard, and very little else.

I didn't remember passing the entrance to *El Conejo Pobre*, but suddenly a splash of light marked the roadside cafe where I had stopped before. The Lone Tree Inn. I parked the coupe behind a truck and pushed my way into the noisy, smelly warmth. The same girl was behind the counter. She acted as if she had been waiting for me.

I had to try twice to get the word "coffee" out clearly. The girl gave me a half-startled look and then went to get it. I took a deep breath and swiveled around so I could survey the place. Their pay telephone was on the wall a few feet from the jukebox.

The machine was playing some kind of stomp and the blare was terrific. A couple of night riders were hanging over the illuminated list of records. I got up abruptly and went across and yanked the electric cord from its socket. The sudden silence brought all the eyes around to me.

I said, "I've got a call to make. Anybody object?"

The boys in the leather jackets looked like they wanted to. I stared them down. They grumbled and went out, slamming the door. The truckdriver at the counter, after looking me over impassively, gave an agreeable nod and turned back to his pie. The waitress just stared at me, with the steaming cup of coffee aslant in her hand.

I put a nickel in the telephone and eventually got the police department I wanted. "Bradley," I said.

"Not here. What do you want?" It was the same sergeant I had spoken to before.

"This is Don Paulson. I want him. It's urgent."

"Okay, I'll have him call you. What's your number?"

This was an old police custom. But I had nothing to hide. I read him the number on the plate. "Don't come chasing out here without having him call first. It may make a——"

"Thanks," he said sarcastically. "We had a car all warmed up."

I slammed the receiver down and went back to the counter. I said to the wait-

ress, "I'm expecting a call from the police. After that I'll plug the jukebox back on."

Her hand trembled a little as she set the coffee down. "Was it an accident?"

"Yeah. It was an accident. But it didn't involve cars." After a moment I added, "I'm sorry I chased a couple of your customers away. That thing was just too noisy."

"You could bust it up for all I care. It drives me nuts."

The truckdriver wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Aw, Mary, it makes you jiggle. That's the only reason I stop here." He winked at me and went out into the night.

The telephone rang sharply. I spilled some of my coffee, getting off the stool. "Yeah?"

"Bradley."

"This is Paulson. I want to talk to you."

"Talk."

"I meant a long talk. First, though . . . I just bumped into another one."

His voice was gentle. "Another body?"

"That's right."

"Where are you now?"

"The Lone Tree Inn, east of Azusa on Foothill. I'll wait here. Or will you handle anything this far out?"

"I'll be in on it." Bradley paused. "Where's the body?"

I didn't remember having seen the sign, but the image of it was suddenly in my mind. "Fishhook Canyon. In the cabin at the end of the road. I'll have to show you."

"Did you identify it?"

"Yes."

After a moment, he said, sharply, "Well?"

"The driver's license says Lenore Menke."

There was a long silence. Then Bradley's voice came out tight and hard. "Stay there!"

I WENT BACK to my seat at the counter. I can't say that I felt relieved, but I was overwhelmingly glad the thing was done. Now Bradley could have it, stars and all.

I glanced at Mary, the waitress "I'll have to wait here a while. Is that all right?"

She smiled. Then, as though she had to keep up appearances, she added defensively, "As long as you pay for what you order."

I looked at the tired slices of pie in the display shelf and shook my head. Food might have been a sensible idea but I couldn't go those. I started in on my fresh cup of coffee.

I don't know how much time went by until someone slammed the screen door, coming in. Mary looked up and nodded in a friendly manner. I turned to look at a tall, red-headed, long-faced guy.

He gave us a good-natured grin. "This may seem funny but I'd like some grape-fruit."

"Got juice," Mary said.

"Nope. I mean the real thing."

She scratched her head. "There might be some out in the back. I'll go see."

As she went through the swinging door, the man turned to me. He rubbed his little mustache with a long forefinger. He said, "Let's get going."

The words slid over me without registering. I gave him a vague look of goodwill and raised my cup. His sudden movement caught my attention.

I looked full at him, and the import of his words came roaring back to me. There was a .38 in his right hand.

"Right now." His voice was friendly, agreeable.

I stared into his red-brown eyes. I can't describe to you what I saw there. It sank like a stone inside me. It pulled me off my stool, fast.

"Outside," he murmured, "to the sedan."

Like an automaton, I followed his directions. His long steps caught up to me. "Get in front," he ordered.

I reached for the doorhandle.

"Hold it."

It didn't hurt, at first. It was just a great, stunning blow that slammed the strength out of me. Dimly aware of what was going on, I felt him shoving me into the seat. He got in on the other side and reached across me to latch the door. Then

he looked searchingly at my face, nodded, and started the car.

I don't know where he drove. I was traveling a lonely path of my own, over lurching waves of nausea and dizziness. I fought grimly to keep from passing out. My consciousness kept sailing downward into bottomless depths from which I slowly and hopelessly battled my way up again. Finally the sensation stopped, leaving me with a new problem. Pain. But its shooting pulses helped to clear my head.

I stayed the way I was, loose-jointed, head swaying. The red-headed man was doing a good job of looking two places at once—at me and at the road. I couldn't tell where we were going.

I knew I didn't have much time. I could think of only one way out of this. It was a hell of a thing to do, but I did it. I lunged for the steering-wheel and yanked it with all my strength.

Why we didn't turn over I'll never know. There was a hideous screech of tires and then the car began a series of great, sickening jumps. We both hung onto the wheel, doggedly, like drowning men to a life preserver. And then, quite suddenly, with no sound at all that I can remember, the car stopped dead.

I reeled back from the windshield. The red-headed man gave a quiet "oof!" and slumped down. Like a drunken man, moving my lips and placing my limbs with exaggerated care, I got myself out of the car. I swiveled and weaved off into the darkness.

I remember falling down a great many times, and saying numerous things out loud. I remember that my head began to swell, till it seemed as large as the rocks that kept slamming my knees. I couldn't understand it, because by then I had no recollection of the car or the windshield I had banged.

Along about that time I came to a black door. It seemed perfectly natural to find it there, opening obligingly as I approached. Thankfully, I fell through it.

THE roadrunner was very close. I saw the black lashes on his upper eyelid. The bare patch behind his eye

was quite blue in the early morning light. His crest was not raised and his long tail drooped. So he was not excited; just curious.

The pressure of a rock under my back suddenly became unbearable. At my involuntary motion the bird shot up like a spring. His raggedy, dusty body skimmed over a bush. His long legs were pumping before he hit the ground beyond.

I sat with my head in my hands. I wasn't dizzy; I just throbbled all over. In addition, my body was so cold it felt stiff. I was sitting on the bottom of a dry arroyo, covered with dew.

I rocked to my feet from the spot where the night had dumped me. I walked back and forth, back and forth. I was too miserable to think, even to swear. But the movement put warmth into my chilled body and moved my aches from the general to the particular.

The sun looked about an hour up. I saw the Sierra Madre mountains to the north, the gray-dusty framework of a rock-crusher off to my left. I decided I was in the San Gabriel River bed. A river bed that, in Southern California, is a wide expanse of sand, boulders and brush.

WHAT had happened? Had I been out that long from a punch? Maybe I had been drugged. The condition of my mouth would have made good source material for De Quincey. Then memory gave a little twitch. The red-headed man. The car. My decision to grab the steering-wheel.

I wandered farther, found some ruts and followed them, and came out on a broad paved road. I felt sure it was the Arrow Highway. That meant that below me somewhere was Baldwin Park and Azusa was to the northeast. East of Azusa was my car and—undoubtedly—a sheriff's posse. I had seen no sign of the red-headed man's sedan or the rock we had hit.

I began to walk east along the highway. My head kept time to my pulse and my stomach churned emptily. I didn't even turn when I heard a car coming. It slowed and stopped.

"Lift?" asked the young fellow driving the pickup.

I nodded and climbed in beside him.

"Where you headed?" He had a loud, cheerful voice.

"Azusa."

"What do you know!" he bellowed. "That's where I'm going. Lucky thing, huh?"

I nodded shortly. He was probably a nice guy but at the moment I came close to hating him. I was in no condition to be exposed to exuberance.

He talked on. I said nothing. By the time we turned up Azusa Boulevard he had run down and his round face had taken on a hurt expression. After a long silence, during which I recovered some shreds of decency, I said, "I appreciate the lift, fellow. I had a bad night and I feel pretty rocky. Do you know a place to eat?"

"Sure," he said. "Ike's. It's about the only one this early Sunday morning."

He let me out at a small diner, waved away my thanks, and drove off. Ike turned out to be a discouraged-looking old man in a dirty chef's cap. I sat down and gave him a weary look. "Bacon and eggs and potatoes and toast and seven cups of coffee."

He nodded, sighed, and turned toward his refrigerator. Then he stopped and looked back. His eyes were sad and lifeless. He scratched his mustache with a dirty forefinger. "Mister, you don't look so good."

"I don't feel so good. I got knocked out and left in the open all night."

Ike kept on looking at me. Then he reached for a cup and poured it half-full of steaming coffee. He gave me a glance, then abruptly reached down behind his counter. He came up with a pint bottle. He unscrewed the cap and poised the bottle over my cup. "Say when."

I didn't say, "When" til it had reached the rim. Ike put away his pint, sniffed, and went glumly back to his refrigerator.

"Ike," I thought, "you're in that golden book. Right next to Abou ben Adhem."

He didn't watch me eat. He wandered listlessly up and down his counter, looking at nothing, doing nothing. Finally I

leaned back and groped in my side pocket for my pipe.

Ike looked at me and nodded. I nodded back. I said, "Right. I feel like a million bucks."

"Where you headed?"

"Out Foothill to get my car, if it's still there. Then I'm going to start to make trouble for some people."

"Good luck." Ike rang up my money. "You want to use my can?"

It seemed familiar, being in a lavatory brushing my clothes, washing, combing my hair, trying to erase the marks of violence. I came out with my hat at an angle and my pipe going good. Fortunately, I hadn't been facing the windshield when I cracked us up. I had a beautiful dark lump high on the right side of my head.

Ike was waiting on another customer. Helen Watkins.

HE didn't even appear surprised that we knew one another. He brought me another cup of coffee to nuzzle while Helen ate fruit and toast. After that first look, we sat in silence.

I had plenty to think about. Too much to try to put into words. Maybe that was why I just sat watching Helen eat, deliberately filling my mind with her. Her head was bare. She wore a tailored suit, and her only decoration was the golden griffon with the beady green eyes.

She ate with a sort of businesslike daintiness that fascinated me. It reminded me of what an old friend had once said: before picking a wife, 1) see her in a bathing suit and, 2) watch the way she eats. I had yet to see Helen in a bathing suit.

When she finished she rose quickly. "Your car?"

I spread my hands. She pointed to a light gray coupe and we walked over and got into it.

"When you didn't show," she said, "I was worried. Very foolishly, I went to *El Conejo Pobre*. There was no evidence of you. Before I left, Inspector Bradley came in. He was obviously there on business. I slid out and went home and tried to sleep."

She frowned.

That was a mistake. "Every time I shut my eyes I got to worrying about you. I don't know how many times I thought, 'The hell with Paulson!'"

"You thought perfectly right," I said gloomily.

"So I got up early and drove around out this way. I felt you must be here somewhere. It was silly, I admit. But it gave me something to do. I finally got hungry and headed for a place that was open."

Her face, in the clear morning light, was pale, finely drawn, almost fragile. She showed her lack of sleep. Her eyelids drooped with a kind of tired cynicism. It struck me that I had never seen this girl look happy. She added slowly, "I wish I knew why I went to the trouble of warning you."

To say I was sorry would have been almost insulting. She deserved a full explanation, if I could figure a way to begin. But my connection with last night's trouble had roots I didn't care to publicize.

There was, however, no way around it. She was waiting, her eyes on my face. If I didn't tell her now I'd never get another chance. So I told her why I went to Fishhook Canyon, and what I found there.

I looked into Helen's eyes. "I opened her purse. Her name was Lenore Menke."

The black cloud lightened, just sharing the knowledge. Then, shocked, I realized that Helen was crying. She sat looking past me, the tears rolling down her cheeks. I watched her helplessly.

Finally her chin came up. She said violently, "I told you to stay out of it!" She made a strangled sound and put her face in her hands.

My fingers started toward her shoulder and came slowly back again. This girl whose self-control I thought would never crack. I tried to say something and found that my throat wouldn't cooperate. Seeing her so unhappy was suddenly more than I could bear. As usual, I let my own state of mind come first. As usual, I did something to be sorry for. I lashed out at her.

"Why blame me? How could I have

known who she was? Do you think I danced a jig when I saw her lying there?" Then I asked, more gently, "Was Menke's wife in the habit of acting like that?"

Helen shrugged.

"But I didn't know she was married. Meeting her there was pure accident."

She shrugged again. "Not as much as you think. She saw you at the office one day and asked a hundred questions."

That was a surprise to me. I didn't know Lenore had ever been to the office. Darned few women ever asked questions about me. Harshly, I said, "Okay, so it's done every day. But Menke's my boss, remember?"

NO RESPONSE. In a way, it cheered me. It went a little way to prove that Helen was human and normal enough to be capable of resentment.

"I get it," I said. "It's my bed and I have to lie in it."

Then she spoke. "Don't get dramatic. It has a simple explanation. Mr. Menke wanted an attractive woman he could present as his wife. It was convenient, and it was good business."

"Lenore was a girl who didn't quite make the grade in Hollywood. She did the smart thing—she recognized it. So when Menke came along with his proposition, she accepted gladly. Her obligation was to play the part of a gracious wife. She had to be available when needed and act according to his instructions."

"Not everyone could have done it. As you know, Menke is a very exacting man. But Lenore was clever. Her side of the arrangement brought her a magnificent home, unlimited clothes, and all the associated gravy. Menke went his way and she was free to go hers. Her only restriction was the position she had contracted to maintain."

It was a cold-blooded deal, but it was pure Menke. I remembered Lenore, lying there on the goatskin rug. She had been a good egg; she had not deserved what she got. It was foolish, maybe, to try to make it up to her. But I could try.

Helen added, "She often went to places like that club. She wasn't a tramp but she

had to get away. She was beginning to get fed up with her deal."

"Any special reason why she picked Patroni's?"

My casualness was wasted. Helen's tone showed she recognized I was prying. "Yes, I think there was a reason. Menke didn't like her to go there."

"You mean, because Patroni was mad at him?"

"No." She paused. "Mr. Menke never believed that. He refuses to take Patroni seriously."

I waited. She volunteered no more information. Well, at least I was spared the shock of going to Menke's house and meeting Lenore across the dinner table.

"But Helen, what next? They knew at Patroni's that I went out with her. When Bradley gets through investigating, everybody in L. A. County will know it."

"Oh, Mr. Menke will find out. But I have an idea he won't mind too much. You weren't competing with him."

We sat a moment longer. Helen stirred restlessly. I said, "Well, can we drive east on the highway? I want to see if my car's still there."

As we drove I told her of my call to Bradley, of the red-headed man, and my meeting with the roadrunner in the San Gabriel wash. Helen received the story indifferently. The only thing she said, "You realize how lucky you were?"

"I do." I would never forget that red-headed man's eyes.

The Lone Tree Inn came in view. My coupe was setting there, patient and lonesome. I went over and patted it affectionately, and checked to see if I still had gas and tires. Then I returned to Helen's car and leaned on the window.

"I don't blame you for what you're thinking. I just want you to know I'm not a wilful fool. Dammit, I'm not *trying* to cause more trouble."

She nodded, with that tired air, as though she had seen it all before.

"There's something terrible going on, Helen. I've tried to stop, but I can't. Last night I swore I'd tell Bradley every single thing, and let him do the worrying. Now . . . I don't know."

She looked at me wearily. "I haven't

lost my good opinion of you, Don Paulson. Someday you may know the position I'm in. Then you'll see why I've acted as I have." She rubbed the steering wheel with one gloved hand. "I realize how you feel. Actually, I have no right to try to stop you. But you see, I'm—" She broke off and turned her face away.

I took a deep breath. "What I need most is a long, quiet time. I need to lay every little thing neatly out on a table. Maybe somehow I can tie them together. Up to now, I haven't had time to think." I reached over and stopped her moving hand. "Maybe you'll help me find the pattern."

She pulled her hand away and brooded at me.

"Think it over," I said, "while you get some rest. I'll call you later. I think you will help me."

She gave her head a little, indecisive shake. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to drop in on a man named Dad Greathouse."

Her mouth went slack. Her eyes widened alarmingly. "Oh, Lord," she whispered. Then she began to laugh, in a full-throated, uncontrollable manner that chilled me.

She started her car, jerked it into motion. The scream of tortured gears drowned out that wild and terrible laughter.

IX

I FOUND MY WAY TO THE quiet Azusa side street and parked in front of the well-kept bungalow. A slight, heavily-tanned man was standing in the side garden. I walked up to him.

He was fingering the leaves of a *Bouvardia*. He turned. From the look I re-

ceived, it appeared he had confused me with a slow-moving, snouted, leaf-eating bug. His attention went immediately back to the plant.

"Excuse me," I said winningly, "are you Dad Greathouse?"

He turned again, which indicated he wasn't deaf. His eyes said, "You're wasting your time." His fingers didn't even let go of the leaf they were rubbing.

I looked at the shrub. A full, sturdy growth, it appeared to be two plants with distinct types of foliage. I recognized the phenomenon but evidently he didn't, for he kept fingering the leaves and frowning.

"Unusual plant you have there," I said pleasantly.

His shoulder twitched. There was no other response. I shifted my weight and wondered what to do next. Characteristically, I opened my mouth. "I haven't seen a periclinal graft for a long time."

His alert dark eyes swung around to mine. "What was that?"

"It's a complete periclinal graft. A core of one plant with the skin of another."

His expression told me I was insane. But I had his attention.

I said, "Those ordinary geraniums with the white-edged leaves have it, too. So do some *Pelargoniums*. Roots send out one kind of foliage, shoots the other. It's not common, but it happens."

He rubbed his chin dubiously. But there in front of him was evidence he couldn't refute. "Could be," he murmured.

"You can look it up," I said, "under graft hybrids, or chimaera. You'll find it."

Don't give me too much credit. It's one of those things I picked up along the road somewhere.

The man rubbed his head, the leaves, and his chin some more, then gave me a wry grin. Finally, the ice was broken.

"My father," I explained, "owned a nursery. I learned a lot of odds and ends working for him." That wasn't true, of course, but I hoped it would make him feel better. He obviously took great pride in his garden. "Are you Dad Greathouse?"

HIS EYES stayed on my face a long time. He was completely bald. The skin was wrinkled and I could see the outline of the bony structure of his skull. He might have been a very old man, but for his alertness.

"Why?" he asked.

"I'm in a mess. I'm trying to get the thing straightened out. If I don't I'm afraid I'm going to be stuck with it."

"What kind of mess?"

"Three murders. And all the associated lying and misrepresentation and false scents."

"What's your name?"

I told him. I emphasized that I was not connected with the police.

"Why do you come here asking for Dad Greathouse?"

"I bumped into a man named Steve. He said he used to work for a Greathouse who might be in Azusa. I looked the name up in the phone book. If you are the man he meant, I want to talk to you. If you're not, I'll apologize and get the hell out of here."

He smiled a little, thin smile. He thought it all over. Then he said, "I was just about to have some coffee. Will you join me?"

"Thanks." I followed him to a glassed-in side porch. He unplugged the electric percolator and took another cup and saucer from a small cupboard. It looked as if mid-morning coffee were an institution here.

More and more, I liked the looks of his setup. This kind of retirement could be pretty rewarding. I said as much.

"Yes," he replied. "But it's quiet. You've got to be able to stand the quietness."

"After the last few days I could stand months of quiet."

He poured the coffee. "Maybe you'd better tell me something about that, Mr. Paulson."

I felt dubious, unsatisfied, and I guess it showed in my face.

"All right," he added. "I'm Dad Greathouse. I once had a big lug of a driver named Steve."

"Okay. The other day I was at the Dolphin Cafe in Huntington Park. I

bumped into a girl who was mad at Ray Menke."

None of this information produced any apparent reaction. He asked, "Who is Ray Menke?"

"Owns Menke Enterprises, Incorporated. A very smart operator who has a finger in about twenty per cent of Southern California. I work for him."

"And a girl was mad at him?"

"By the name of Heath. She wouldn't tell me why she was out to get him. She heard that the bartender used to work for Menke and she was trying to pry some information out of him. She didn't get very far. Later, I got tough with him and he told me about you. I'm sure he never worked for Menke."

He took a slow sip of his coffee. "You and this girl?"

"Nothing there." I gestured toward the bruises on my face. "She gave me one or two of these."

"Are you mad at Menke, too?" His tone was sardonic.

It made me realize that I probably sounded like a teen-age girl, with such a recital. But I had to pick and choose. Conscious that I was taking up his time with something that might seem only a fairy story to him, I hurried on.

"No. But it was while working for him that I stumbled onto the first murder. Even though I'm still at large, I still look like the best suspect. I'm convinced the police are just waiting for more evidence before they pull me in. I think that old Solex left——"

"What!" It came out like a champagne cork.

"Yeah. Abner Solex. The first killing."

He was swallowing hard, the wrinkled leathery skin of his throat contracting and expanding. But his face was so bony I couldn't decide if it was honest surprise or something more.

"I didn't mean to spring anything on you. It was in the papers."

He said chopply, "I don't read metropolitan papers." He shook himself, took a big swallow of coffee, and cleared his throat. "You startled me. I used to know old Abner well."

I perked up my ears at that. He pointed. I followed his finger and saw a plaster gnome peering wistfully up at a bird-bath. I had seen many such horrors in Solex's forecourt.

Greathouse went on formally, "I am sorry to hear of his death."

"It wasn't pleasant. I walked in and nearly stepped on his body."

He drank a little more coffee. "Well, young man, I can see your problem. But I don't know how I can help you. My association with Solex was purely casual. I haven't seen him in years."

Ah, yes, I thought, that accounts for your just blowing a fuse.

I said, "Can you think of anything that might connect Menke, Solex, that man Steve and Nancy Heath?"

He shook his bald head. His eyes twinkled. "I've been retired a long time. The life I lead here may seem dull but it suits me fine. I'll admit curiosity about your problem, but I don't see how I can help you."

Put that way, it ended the interview. Just another dead-end along the Dolphin trail. I rose. "Thanks for listening. I'm sorry to have bothered you. But you understand I couldn't have overlooked the lead."

"Of course. And good luck the rest of the way."

I nodded at the table. "Good coffee."

"Come back again. Any morning. We can talk about the—what were they?—the graft hybrids."

NEXT, I headed straight for the police station. My conclusions had not changed greatly since last night, nor since my talk with Helen. Going to see Greathouse might have seemed like backsliding. It wasn't. I was still determined to put the matter into skilled professional hands.

When I asked the desk sergeant for Bradley he gave me a sharp look and reached for his interoffice phone. He talked a moment, then said to me, "Go in that room and wait."

I went through the door he indicated, sat down, and waited. I thought about Greathouse. He was a cold old bird. He knew his way around. He had been

so upset by the news of Solex that he had forgotten to ask about the other two murders. So there was a good chance he knew more than he admitted. However, there was just as good a chance that things were exactly as they seemed. Not having been in a position to test his veracity by choking him, I could only sit and wonder.

Bradley entered, shutting the door as though he planned to stay a while. He said nothing. He stood looking at me, rubbing his chin with a well-kept hand. His grey eyes were unreadable.

I said, "I got here as soon as I could. While I was waiting for you at the Lone Tree Inn, some red-headed guy came along and hi-jacked me. I grabbed his wheel and wrecked the car. It knocked him cold, and I got away before I finally passed out from a bump on the head. I woke up this morning in the San Gabriel Wash."

"You look it." Bradley's tone was unsympathetic. He kept on looking at me. I took a deep breath. "Well, I guess you could say it started the first night I went to *El Conejo Pobre* . . ."

I left out a few things, but I told him most of it. When I finished, he nodded. "We found your car. We found your fingerprints on a quart tomato juice can, there at the cabin, and on other things. I'm not surprised at what happened to you." He shook his head, looked at me quizzically. "Aren't you getting tired of it?"

"Plenty. Lenore's death was the last straw. You can forget about me. I'm strictly a private citizen from now on in. Unless," I added slowly, "I bump into the guy who killed Lenore."

"Do that, and I'll be glad to hear."

I took out my pipe. His eyes followed my tobacco pouch—the new plaid one I had bought as a replacement. I said, "How are you doing on the investigation?"

Bradley gave me a funny look. "Are you kidding?"

I didn't understand him. After all, I was in this thing pretty deeply. Didn't I have a right to know how it was going? Then a sudden uncomfortable thought hit

me. "Do you mean I'm still a suspect?"

"Can you give me one good reason why you shouldn't be?"

I tried to find one. No luck. I mumbled, "Well, the way you acted. I mean, it didn't seem——"

"Look, Paulson. I like you personally. You're a nice guy and it's hard to believe you'd take such a kicking around just to have a convincing alibi. But quite a few men I've liked personally are now in prison.

"Of course you're a suspect! And I can tell you your position is none too good. For instance, just as a sample, you're the only one so far who can be traced to all three murders."

He had said "three." That meant he considered Branson's death no accident. I watched him half-close his eyes and rock on his heels.

"Because I haven't seen fit to detain you, don't be misled. I agree that in some respects you don't seem too likely a suspect. But your alibis all have holes in them. You're still withholding information. I'll keep checking and putting facts together. One of these days they'll pile up high enough."

"Thanks for the kind words." It wasn't meant to be as sarcastic as it sounded. His point was perfectly clear. He had presented it in a way that left me with little to be angry about, however much I disagreed. "That red-headed man," I added. "Want me to go over that description of him again?"

Bradley's eyes were thoughtful. "No need."

That took a moment to sink in. Then I realized that the room we were in had mechanical ears and fingers.

"Yes," Bradley said, with a little tight-lipped smile, "I like you. But you're still hiding something from me. I hope it doesn't get you killed."

The words took the edge off his smile. Last night, I had been ready to tell him everything. Now I was being invited to do it. I thought, a little wildly, of rubber hoses and glaring lights. But I said nothing.

After a long moment, Bradley sighed. "I've got work to do. You'd better check

in at home. Your landlady may not speak to you. I disturbed her several times last night."

"Okay. And . . . thanks."

He had the door half-open. Through it I saw a man I recognized, going down the hall. Patroni, the jovial proprietor of *El Conejo Pobre*, did not look happy today.

IT WASN'T much after ten o'clock. Mrs. MacComber's house was so quiet I felt like tiptoeing in. Careful not to make any noise, I went upstairs. I heard Lewis' snores. Having had his big Saturday night, he was shamelessly sleeping it off.

My room looked better to me that morning than it ever had before. There was no one in it this time. I locked the door and yanked off my clothes. I took a steaming bath, set the clock for two fifteen, and fell into bed.

The alarm jerked me out of a sound sleep. I floundered to my feet, half-conscious. Muscles protested vigorously, all over me. Grunting, I went through some setting-up exercises to work the stiffness out. By the time I had shaved and dressed, though I still felt buzzy, I was in pretty good shape.

A little timorously, I went downstairs. I heard small sounds back in the kitchen. I took a deep breath and went through the swinging door.

Mrs. MacComber cocked her head at me. She had an apron on. She looked like a stern grandmother . . . the grandmother of somebody who'd been caught disobeying.

"Young man, sit down over there!"

Meekly, I went to the table. She poured a large glass of milk and brought it over to me. "Drink that."

I took a hefty swig. "Mrs. MacComber, I'm sorry——"

"At my age," she said testily, "a person doesn't need much sleep. Who was that young lady?"

"That was Helen Watkins, Mr. Menke's secretary. I had arranged to call on her, but I never got there. I guess she was worried."

"That," Mrs. MacComber said dryly,

"was the impression I received." She sat down opposite me and put her chin in her hands. Her old blue eyes seemed to look right into my head. I thought of the things that had collected there the last few days—the dirt and shabbiness, the raw greed and viciousness, the coldness, the crudeness—and I hoped she could perceive none of it.

"Sherman used to say there were certain things that, for reasons of their own, men found it necessary to do. Once they decided, you couldn't stop them. They only found a way to evade you and did it anyway."

I nodded. I knew what she was talking about.

"At such times, Sherman said, a man would go his own way regardless of what was good for him, regardless of what anyone said."

"Mrs. MacComber, you sound like you've been talking to Inspector Bradley."

"I have."

I thought about it, while I drank some more milk. Finally, I said, "Don't class me with that man Hitchcock yet. I may be under a temporary cloud, but my intentions are sound."

Her eyes twinkled, then slowly became serious again. "I want to be sure that if you need my help, you'll ask."

"You have my promise. And I don't —"

She tush-tushed my thanks and picked up my empty glass. "Run along," she said, "I'm busy."

I ran—but only as far as the hall telephone stand. I dialed Helen Watkins' number. After lunch, I was thinking, I could have that conference with her. Surely, recent developments had cancelled my dinner invitation with Menke. I knew I should call him and offer condolences, but under the circumstances . . .

Helen's telephone had rung several times. I was just giving up when the receiver was lifted.

I heard, "Aanh!" It was a weird sound, a slow, drawly syllable.

"Helen?" I asked sharply.

"Hellooo, honey!" It was Helen's

voice, all right. "How you been, honey?" The words wavered up and down and ended on a squeak.

"What's the matter?"

She gave a low, confidential giggle. "Nothin's matter. I'm in my cups, honey. Tha's where I am. Fine place to be."

"Stop calling me honey!"

"Honey! Honey! Honey!"

It was incredible. I couldn't imagine Helen drunk. I said irritably, "Why the hell did you do it? We were going to talk, remember?"

"Dulls the sharp edges, Donny boy."

Her voice faded. I heard it mumbling away in the background.

"Hey!"

Her voice came back. "Don't holler like that, honey. You hurt my ear."

"Well, stay at the mouthpiece. This is important."

Apology, abject and at the same time ironic.

A little desperately, I said, "Helen, you've got to snap out of it!"

"Nononono," she sang reprovingly. "Mustn't get serious, Donny boy. Too serious old world already, goin' round and round . . . round and round . . . round and . . ." Her voice disappeared again. I heard a thump.

My calls brought no response. She was sitting on the floor, not giving a damn. Or she had passed out. Either way, she was no good to me now. I might as well forget about her for the time being. It didn't occur to me to consider her in any danger. It is well known that some Power takes care of people in that condition.

I remained on the telephone stool for a few moments. So Helen Watkins had got stiff all by herself. Maybe it had significance—maybe it meant that she had reached the cracking point and that from now on she would talk. Or maybe it meant nothing at all.

Lewis came downstairs, looking remarkably fit. "How now, brown cow?" he inquired brightly.

"The next time you ask me out for a drink," I said, "remind me to go."

He laughed.

But I didn't.

X

THE BOYS WERE GATHERING in Lewis's room, planning the afternoon's trip to the ball park. They barged into my room to see if I wanted to go. Firmly, I excused myself, locking the door. I sat down by the window and began filling my pipe.

"Now," I said to myself, "now . . ."

But I couldn't get going.

At first it was the sun. It was too bright. It hung on the walls, dripped from the furniture, pooled on the floor. It distracted me. I tried shutting my eyes. I pulled down the shades. But after twenty minutes I had to assign some other reason for my dullness.

For I just couldn't get going. I'd pick one line of thought—Nancy Heath's motives, for instance—and hang onto it doggedly. It would revolve slowly, heavily, pointlessly—till I met it coming back. I couldn't seem to concentrate.

I got up and walked around. I took a drink of water. I even tried a few exercises—tentatively—and stopped them when my head began a reproachful pounding.

I sat down again, irritated and discouraged. The conditions were right. I was alone, unmolested, free to think my head off. But try hard as I could, I found myself stalled.

I finally decided that my inability to concentrate must be due to bruises and lack of sleep. My system was crying for rest and restoration, and stubbornly resisting all my efforts to push it. I found this new line of reasoning gratifying but not productive enough. I kept on feeling frustrated.

After a few more minutes it occurred to me that perhaps my trouble was staleness. Perhaps what I needed was a fresh approach. Once I thought I had that, with Helen Watkins. But Helen had let me down.

Could she have sobered up yet? There

was a chance. And if I found her, she'd be in no mood to resist pressure. She might tell me a lot of the things I was aching to find out.

Briskly I rose, combed my rumpled hair, and went downstairs to the telephone. I dialed Helen Watkins' number. The bell rang many times, but there was no answer.

I hung up and called Ray Menke's home. I didn't want to do it but I had to make some move. The Sunday papers had reported Lenore's death with all the excitement the circumstances deserved.

I got an oriental response this time. I said carefully, "This is Mr. Paulson. Is Mr. Menke taking any calls today?"

"One minute. I see," the high voice replied.

As before, an extension was lifted and Menke came on the line. His voice was low, restrained, and at the same time oddly personal and cosy. "Hello, Don. I'm glad you called."

"I'm sorry," I began, "about——"

"Thank you," he over-rode me smoothly. "I guess you're wondering about dinner tonight."

"I didn't want you to feel any obligations on account of me."

He was silent a moment. "I hadn't made any change in plan. If you still wish to come, I'd be happy to have you. Right now, I can use some company."

I could see his point. But I had assumed there would be relatives, to say nothing of other complications. "Then I'll be glad to come."

"Can I send my driver to pick you up?"

"No, thanks. But I'd appreciate directions. I haven't been able to reach Miss Watkins today."

Menke told me how to find Rancho Imperio from Foothill Boulevard. "There's no hurry," he added. "Dinner will be ready whenever you show up. Thanks very much for calling."

And that was that. Any way you looked at it, I had a big evening before me. At least, he had been civil. The uneasiness that had ridden uncomfortably in the back of my mind all day diminished, even if it didn't vanish.

I decided to make my other call. While waiting for Helen's phone to be answered, I had thought of another person with whom I could talk about the things that were bothering me.

A NUMBER of people considered Blewett pretty unexciting company. There had been times when I felt that way myself. But right now, Hank had all the things I wanted. He was solid, careful, steady. If I asked him to keep his mouth shut, I felt sure he'd do it.

He knew Zensler. He knew the Menke organization. He knew more of my problem than anyone else available. He had even been to Solex's place when we were kids together. And besides, he was my friend.

Jean answered the telephone and called him. She sounded impatient. Hank came on.

"Hello, Don."

"Hank, may I come out to see you? I want to talk to you about something."

The solemnity of my tone must have startled him. He stuttered a little when he replied. "You s-sound like you're in trouble."

"Not exactly. I'm just all fouled up. I want to talk the thing over with someone, and I think you can help me. You saw the papers today?"

"Yeah." His voice dropped. "That was pretty awful about Menke's wife. We were talking about her just last night." He was silent a moment. "Are you trying to tell me that you know what's going on?"

"No. I don't know. I've got some ideas, but I can't tie them together. I don't know if too much has happened, or if I'm tired, or if I've gone stale. But I thought a fresh viewpoint would help. Two minds instead of one."

"I'll be honest with you, Don. You don't have to talk me into it. I'm curious as the devil." Hank's voice grew thoughtful. "Let's see, now . . ." I heard chatter in the background, children's and grown-up voices. It sounded like Sunday company.

"Maybe it's a bad time for you," I said.

"Maybe . . ."

"Jean's sister came over for dinner, with her youngsters. Her husband's away

on a trip." He put his hand over the transmitter and I heard muffled talking. Then I heard Hank mutter, "Oh, the hell with it!" and his voice came back to me strong. "Look, Don, I'll meet you someplace. How about the Silver Flask?"

That was a nice spot, in Arcadia, not far from the Santa Anita race track. It had a fireplace, good drinks, and comfortable leather chairs. My idea had been to sit in the car on a hilltop, in privacy. But a crowded bar is just about as private, when you come to think of it. And a bracer or two before going on out to Menke's seemed an eminently good idea.

"Okay with me, Hank."

"I'll meet you there in about half an hour."

"Swell. And thanks."

Lewis was waiting to use the phone. I returned to my room. It was surprising how much my decision to talk the thing over with someone else lightened my outlook. Not even the lingering knowledge that it should have been Inspector Bradley instead of Hank disturbed me.

I put on my good dark blue suit, brushed the toes of my shoes and checked my collar and tie carefully. The need of doing this to go to Menkes annoyed me, but didn't keep me from doing it. When I was through I looked as well-groomed as is possible for me—which is nothing breathtaking.

I got my hat and a topcoat and went down to the coupe. Before going to the Silver Flask, I planned to make a stop in Alhambra. I was worried about Helen.

I located her apartment house without trouble. It wasn't as fancy as the one Nancy Heath lived in, but it was no hovel. I rang Helen's doorbell for a number of unproductive minutes, then buzzed the manager.

She turned out to be a bushy-haired woman who looked me over with cheerful, worldly eyes. I decided I'd better talk straight to her.

"I'm Don Paulson. I work in the same office with Helen Watkins. I don't exactly go around with her but I wouldn't mind trying. Right now I'm worried about her. I called her after lunch and she sounded drunk."

The manager's eyes widened. "That's not Helen," she said in a husky, down-to-earth voice.

"No. A little while ago I called again, thinking she might have slept it off. No answer."

The woman said nothing. She looked at me, waiting, with a polite question in her eyes. I had to give her some more.

"I'm involved in a police matter," I explained. "Helen isn't, but she's been helping me. I'm sure she's in no danger. But still and all . . ."

The woman scratched her head with a square competent finger. "Yes. I see what you mean." She brooded a few moments. "There's been nothing out of line lately. Except that last night she kept odd hours."

"I know. She thought I was in trouble, and she was right. But she wasn't able to find me."

The manager studied me. "Well," she said slowly, "I can relieve your mind on one score. Helen went out about an hour ago, and she looked kind of peaked but certainly all right."

"She . . . went out?"

"Yes. With a nice-looking man. I took a good look at him because Helen doesn't go out much. Tall, rather thin, good-natured. Red hair, a little mustache, and funny-looking eyes."

HANK BLEWETT didn't realize that he was lucky to see me. I don't remember driving from Helen's apartment to the Silver Flask.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter with you?"

I dropped into the chair beside him. I gazed at him for a full minute. Then I croaked, "The red-headed man's got her!"

Maybe Hank's scientific training accounted for his self-control. He looked startled for only an instant. Then he said easily, "Let me order you a drink. I'm one up on you already."

He didn't say anything more as I absorbed my first old-fashioned. The place was crowded and noisy. I needn't have been concerned about privacy. We could have bellowed at one another and not been noticed.

When I finished my glass I found another one waiting. I started on it and tried to think calmly about Helen. She had admitted she knew a lot, that she was involved in some way she couldn't reveal. Was it possible she *knew* the red-headed man?

I shook my head. This morning, when I had told her how he hijacked me, she hadn't shown a flicker of recognition. To believe that she knew him was to believe she had been lying to me, working against me. I couldn't see that possibility at all.

But the more I thought about it the more I realized how limited the visibility was from where I sat.

"Ah," Hank said, "you're recovering."

He was an understanding guy. He didn't push me. It was my party. He was leaving it up to me to explain my incomprehensible outburst. I reached for some salted peanuts. The Silver Flask served good ones, in shallow silver dishes on low tables. I nodded at Hank and chewed the nuts slowly. They made me thirsty, as they were supposed to.

"Well," I said, "I'll back up and give it to you chronologically. You know about my finding Solex. You know that Zensler has disappeared. But you don't know that I've been involved in two other deaths."

Hank's eyes widened.

I told him about Robert Branson. Then I paused.

"And the other one?" he prompted.

"I discovered Lenore Menke's body last night."

Hank gaped at me, then half-rose from his chair.

"Now, wait," I said irritably, "don't act like that. I didn't want to find her. Just try to imagine my feelings when I opened her purse and learned who she was."

"But she was in a cabin in the foothills . . ." he let it dribble off, studying me. Man-to-man conference or not, he wasn't going to hear about my previous trip to that cabin. He continued to inspect me, chewing his lip.

Slowly, he said, "Have you noticed one thing? It all ties into Ray Menke. He sent you to Solex. He sent you to Branson. And then his wife was killed."

"You're damned right I've noticed it."

Between you and me, I'm concentrating on it."

Hank smiled briefly and ordered another round of drinks.

"Have you any more facts?"

I told him about Nancy Heath, about Greathouse, about *El Conejo Pobre* and the red-headed man. I tried to stick to facts and keep my opinions out of it, so that he'd have a clear field for his own reaction. Consequently, I didn't tell him that I had also been impelled to go to the Dolphin Cafe by a theory involving fifth magnitude stars, nor did I elaborate on my relationships with Helen Watkins and Lenore Menke.

When I was through Hank regarded the table thoughtfully. He pushed a peanut carefully along a seam in the wood. Our drinks came. I tasted mine deeply. Hank set his aside after a short, blank look at it.

"You expressed my idea," I said "that all these deaths are connected, some way. Now you've got the same facts I've been stewing over. What can you make of it?"

He didn't reply. I watched his strong fingers pushing that peanut around. Then suddenly it got out of hand. Reaching for it, he knocked the nut dish off the table. The crash made him jump.

WHEN the commotion settled and the waitress took her helpfulness somewhere else, Hank gave me an apologetic grin. Then he sobered.

"Let's approach it methodically, Don. First Menke sent you to Zensler. That was valid. Zensler was unemployed and he had proven ability. I can verify that from my own experience. Zensler turned your employment offer down. His privilege, wasn't it?"

I nodded. There was nothing easy-going or clumsy about Hank now. He was right on the ball. He was a man in his own backyard, face to face with a problem he knew how to approach.

"Zensler's turn-down," he went on, "was consistent with his erratic personality. Then he sent you to see Solex. At this point our troubles begin." Hank wet his lips with his drink and took out a cigaret, which he pointed at me. "Zensler's motive can

be considered from three angles. First, suppose Abner Solex actually was a good precision instrument man and Zensler was sincere in sending you there."

"You can check that one off. Solex didn't know the difference between a chuck wrench and a bedplate."

Hank disregarded my comment. "Secondly, Zensler could have acted from pure whimsy. He wanted to get rid of you and he sent you to the curiosity shop because it just popped into his head. Or possibly he knew it might irritate Solex and lead to discomfort for you. No premeditation. Just any combination of these things."

I said, "A good bet."

Hank lit his cigaret and pointed it at me again. "The third possibility is that Zensler sent you there deliberately, for some undisclosed purpose."

I sighed. That one I knew. That one had been sticking me, time and again.

"Number two," Hank said reflectively. "I think I like it best. It would fit the behavior of a man who would ask for a representative to talk to, then refuse to talk. It's simple and, in an eccentric kind of a way, logical. It would mean that your finding the body was accidental. It would enable you to forget Zensler entirely in your search for the real reason behind these crimes."

"Except," I pointed out, "that yesterday Zensler was in Nancy Heath's apartment. Nancy ties into Steve at the Dolphin Cafe. Steve led me to Greathouse. Greathouse knew Solex."

Hank rubbed his chin earnestly. "But you have no proof of that. You have only your identification of an odor in Nancy's apartment. Zensler had no monopoly on bad smells. On top of that, you're a pipe smoker. Your smelling ability is impaired."

I brooded about it. Hank had been a good choice for my conference. He had the relentless, professional approach.

He continued, "Let's say, then, that we've eliminated Zensler. What follows? Well, let's speculate a little. Suppose Solex's secret vice was gambling. Suppose he got in deep, way over his head, at *El Conejo Pobre*. When he didn't pay up, Patroni decided to send a man to

collect, or else. It turned out to be else.

"Go a little farther with it. You've connected Branson with the night club. What if he was Patroni's collector, the man who killed Solex? Is it unreasonable to suppose that Patroni had him killed by a car, so Branson couldn't talk later? I don't think so." Hank spread his big hands. "There you have what could be a perfectly good explanation for two of your deaths."

I blinked at him, busy taking back a lot of things I had thought about him in the past. Last night I had gone to *El Conejo Pobre* to see Patroni. My intention had been to question him about Solex and gambling. I hadn't been successful, because they wouldn't let me see him, but I had considered myself pretty sharp for thinking of it.

Hank said, "Did you ask Menke what Branson was blackmailing him about?"

"I didn't think there was any use. He wouldn't have incriminated himself. He'd have just invented something plausible."

Hank finished his drink. "We haven't accounted for Mrs. Menke's death. There are a lot of ways wealthy women can get into trouble. We have very little to go on, beside the fact that you found her dead."

"Good thing," I said gloomily, "you aren't a cop. You'd take that one fact and pound hell out of it."

He grinned. "I don't think you did it, Don." He glanced at his watch. "I think we have time for one more drink before we leave. How about it?"

I shook my head. "I'm doing fine."

He shrugged. "We can have coffee in the morning and talk about it some more. I have an idea I'll be asking questions about Mister Menke."

"Attaboy! And maybe tonight I'll be getting some of the answers for you."

Hank frowned at me. "Now you take it slow. It's easy to talk about, but this is rough stuff."

He was telling me! "I was referring to my dinner engagement. It's with Menke."

Hank choked on his drink.

I tried not to smile. "That's right. Menke invited me the other day, and he still wants me to come."

Silently, Hank set his glass down and followed me out of the Silver Flask. I had given him a shock, all right. Hadn't he been the one to point out that all these things tied into Menke?

It was fresh and bright outside. The mountains stood out sharply against a fawn-colored sky. We paused at the car-park, and Hank took hold of my arm. "Watch your step, Don," he said, soberly.

"I will. Thanks for coming, Hank."

"Thanks for asking me. I hope I can do you some good."

I DROVE toward twilight, in the direction of Sierra Madre. Following Menke's description, I came to the open end of a small canyon that was bounded by cyclone fencing. Wooded flanks rose on either side, their shadowed contours exaggerated in the still air. Two stone gateposts that looked expensively solid had gold letters set into them: *Rancho Imperio*.

The entrance road was well paved and landscaped. It went along the canyon bottom past a meadow that looked as smooth as a bowling-green, framed with sycamores and maples. White rail fences discreetly hedged it in.

Curving, the road ascended the hill to the left. Natural scrub had been supplemented by conifers and madrone and other less common plants. I came out abruptly on top of the ridge and found myself facing a great lawn which overlooked the valley.

The house was a very wide, deep structure. It was built in lateral planes that gave it a modern look yet avoided the bleakness characteristic of functional architecture. Behind it the foothills swelled protectingly, disguising its size.

The drive branched to a courtyard fronting a five-car garage. I felt disappointed at seeing the doors all closed. I'd like to have seen Menke's rolling stock.

I pulled over and parked at the side of the courtyard. I didn't feel too proud of the coupe, but still I didn't want to leave it at the service entrance. I walked around the drive to the front door. I had just raised my hand to the heavy metal knocker when the door opened.

"Mr. Paulson?"

He was a perfect butler. Pink face, smooth features, beautifully waved fine white hair.

"Yes." I handed him my hat and slipped off my topcoat before he had a chance to help me with it. He led me a short way down the entrance hall and opened a door for me. Then he stepped back.

I didn't see Ray Menke at first. It was a vast room, high-ceilinged but so long you scarcely realized it. Everything I saw was graceful and pleasant—mirrors and chairs and tables and sofas and wall hangings and rugs. But I couldn't describe a single one of them now. They were there and they were right; that's all I knew. Could anything of Menke's have been otherwise?

I did notice the unusual light panelling that ran around the room and came to a head at the fireplace, because on the hearth stood Menke. He let me come most of the way before he stepped down with his hand outstretched, smiling.

I took his hand and smiled tightly back at him and said nothing. I had already expressed my regret about his recent bereavement. From there on it was up to him.

He wore a loosely-cut suit of rich dark blue that made mine feel instantly shabby, and a navy-blue foulard tie. His hair was as glossy as ever and the firelight danced on the toes of his shoes. His eyes, his mouth, the pressure of his hand would have warmed the cockles of a stranger's heart. But I, who had begun to know him, could see the shadows behind his personable facade.

He gestured toward a nearby table. "Amontillado?"

"Thank you," I said, with the diffidence of a man whose moral position is seriously undermined.

"Sit down, Don."

I sat and took a sip of my sherry. Warily, I watched him step over and pick up his empty glass in strong, clean fingers. He looked into its mellow depths a moment. The fire rustled in a well-behaved manner; there was no other sound. In spite of the furnishings, I felt a cold lonesomeness about this room. I had the feeling that I

was the only one to come offering sympathy and the comfort of my presence.

Menke glanced at me. "You're thinking, I suppose, that I'm acting callously after what happened last night."

"I can't help feeling I'm intruding."

"Don, I try to face things squarely. Nothing will bring Lenore back. I am not forgetting her when I continue my normal life. On the contrary, I am making it easier to . . . unveil the circumstances that led to her death."

WHEN I had mentioned to Hank and Jean Blewett the glacial quality that could emanate from Menke, I'd had no idea I would experience it so soon again. I shifted in my chair. I took a larger swallow of the Spanish sherry than I had intended, or than it deserved. I had no stomach for this kind of double-talk. Could I do anything about it?

I tried. I said, "Speaking of facing things squarely . . ." And then I had to stop.

Menke's lips quirked. His disciplined voice came out soft, full of understanding, as though I were the one who merited an explanation. "I know what you mean," his tone said, "but we can't discuss such a thing openly, can we?"

His words were: "Lenore and I thought a great deal of one another, but we led separate lives."

He set his glass down and rubbed his palms together jerkily. It was the first nervous mannerism he had ever displayed in front of me. He added, "That, of course, makes it more difficult to determine what actually happened."

"I want to help too," I said inanely.

This conversation was fantastic. I think I would have welcomed his knocking me down. I wouldn't have tried to stop him, and I would have felt better. To some people I suppose, that would indicate naivete. Well, all right—it's the way I felt.

"I'm sure you can help. In fact, I'm sure that Bradley will see that you get a chance." Menke retrieved his glass, drained it, and added briskly, "Shall we eat?"

I followed him to the dining room,

wondering what he had meant by that crack about Bradley. The table had been compressed as much as possible; it was still enormous. The dark panelling was over-done. The massive silver service bore no relationship to normal human eating. My eyes came back to focus on Menke, opposite me but a long way off. I felt I would have to raise my voice to speak to him.

Seen from that perspective, he seemed suddenly funny. A grotesque little man, always immaculate, who spent his life compensating for his size. He was, I thought, a piece of granite set in platinum. He was—

I clamped down on those thoughts. In that mood, it was too easy to underestimate him, too easy to forget the vast business empire that he alone controlled. And I couldn't afford to forget that I was playing over my head tonight. As the form charts say of the lesser horses, I "needed this one".

A Filipino served the dinner with quiet elegance. We talked very little. I got to thinking of Menke in terms of discussion at Mrs. MacComber's tea. Individualism. Take Menke's other men away and what would happen to the Enterprises? Of course they would fall apart. Therefore, wasn't the very measure of his success a denial of individualism?

For the others, yes. But Menke was more than extension of their talents, more than a discerning rider on their shoulders. It was he who had made full use of their interdependence. He made the Enterprises run the way companies run on paper, the way they run in the economics books. And he did it by reducing the eccentric factor, the human element, to almost nothing.

I sighed. In a way, such thinking was as futile as jabbering in a barrel. It was as bad as trying to figure why Helen Watkins had gone out with the red-headed man. I didn't arrive at any conclusions and the more I wrestled the more mixed up I got.

What conversation I had with Menke was impersonal. Although I ate the best filet I had ever tasted, the portions seemed small to me. Menke ate in a care-

ful, methodical manner, as though stoking a delicate stove. I had many contradictory things to brood upon . . . and so we reached the coffee.

"Through?" he asked, before I was. Obviously, he wanted to get away from the table.

Back at the fireplace, he said, "That room reminds me too much of Lenore."

PROBABLY it had been the only place they saw one another. I considered a monthful of meals in that heavy, somber room, facing Menke's restrained perfectionism. No wonder Lenore escaped to places like *El Conejo Pobre!*

The butler brought in a tray with port and nuts. I asked for and got some California brandy. It was dark outside now; the man drew the drapes before he left us alone.

The room and the fire seemed to have a cheering effect on Menke. He took a sip of port. He picked up a hazelnut and crunched it with efficient enjoyment between his strong white teeth.

"Well, Paulson," he said buoyantly, "now we can talk."

Now we could talk! And it was "Paulson", not "Don".

"First of all I have to thank you."

What did he have to thank me for?

"For putting Bradley on my tail. Most of the movements I've made for the last three days have been checked. After last night, it will be worse."

I put three or four almonds in my mouth. I had no other immediate use for it.

There was no irritation in Menke's tone. He had the air of an adult explaining something difficult to a small child. "You remember, don't you, that I warned you about that to begin with? And that I mentioned it again yesterday morning?"

I looked steadily back at him till I had swallowed my mouthful. "I remember. And I know exactly how your tail feels. I've had Bradley on mine ever since I found Solex."

"That's so. But I asked you to stop doing anything that would involve us further."

"Yes."

He waited, but I said no more.

Menke's eyes found his glass full of port. He frowned at it. He didn't act like a man who enjoyed drinking. "I see your reasons, Paulson. From an impersonal standpoint, no one could quarrel with them. But I have an intensely personal interest in this matter. You were working for me at the time."

Well, I thought, that was a new way of getting the gate. But it had nonetheless been offered me. I was disappointed but hardly surprised.

Menke gave me an odd look. Softly, he said, "I think it's time for you to say something."

"Why did you send me to see Zensler, when we have a whole personnel department full of specialists?"

He said promptly, "Because of Zensler's personality. He's a sullen and twisted little soul. A professional personnel man would have got nowhere with him. You had no overtones. You could talk straight to him, with intrinsic sincerity, and be much more convincing. That's why I sent you."

It would do until a better reason came along. I couldn't quarrel with it. A little pugnaciously, I went on, "My position should be obvious to you. I've managed to stay out of jail so far in my life. Working for you, I could expect you to stand up for me, to a point. Your loyalty, however, couldn't be depended on to survive a show-down involving murder.

"I had to start scratching on my own. The way things were heading, I couldn't count on you. You'd have dusted me off your lapel, but hastily."

He nodded. His air of polite interest faded. His face, in repose, was homely and gaunt. I saw plainly the evidence of strain.

"I picked up a couple of odd facts. They gave me ideas, the chief one being that I could explore my way out of trouble. I haven't gotten very far. I'm still taking a beating for being so presumptuous. But I haven't given up my theory."

Menke eyed me. "And what was your theory?"

I shook my head.

"Tell me." It was a command.

Again I shook my head.

Something happened to Menke's eyes. So help me, they almost sparked. "And why not?"

"Because I don't trust you."

HE STARED at the rug. The fire gave a muffled pop. My hands tightened on the arms of my chair. Then Menke threw back his head and laughed—a single, humorless shout. "Paulson, you're wonderful! Have a cigar."

I was wonderful and would I have a cigar! Dazedly, I accepted one.

It was strange to see Menke light his and begin to puff on it. He handled it delicately. Like his drinking, it seemed a thing done for social necessity rather than pleasure.

"Look," I said abruptly, "while I still have a chance, let me say that I have appreciated your hospitality."

"Thank you." His blue eyes, over his cigar, were faintly mocking.

"Is it my turn for a question?"

He inclined his head.

"Why did you invite me here?"

"Principally to question you. To learn what in hell you'd been up to. You have described your position. It could just as well be mine. My status as your employer doesn't make me any the less vulnerable to Bradley's investigation. To protect myself, I want to know every detail of this business." He paused. "And I want to know what happened last night."

I was on an emotional see-saw. One moment I warned myself to watch him, watch him like a sharp-shinned hawk. And the next moment I thought: can this man possibly be anything but what he seems? Liking for him, even trust, flowed up so easily . . . and receded so swiftly at the memory of his ruthlessness.

"For instance," Menke went on slowly, "you and Helen Watkins had lunch together yesterday. Before, there was nothing but formality between you. I want an explanation."

I could arrange that. "I pestered her, on the spur of the moment. I think she accepted just to shut me up. I don't know why I did it, except perhaps to have a little fun breaking down her reserve."

My glibness covered up much confusion. How the devil had he learned about the lunch? I couldn't imagine her telling him, because that meant she was working with him and against me.

Yet the more I considered it, the worse my cigar tasted. She had known Menke much, much longer than I. They had the same characteristics: efficiency, cleverness, control. And a short while ago she had gone out with a red-headed man with funny eyes.

There was a piquant sidelight—I had practically dragged her into my confidence. I had assured her I trusted her. Earlier today I had been eager to bare my heart to her. Some of the bitterness of it got into my voice. "How did you know about that date?"

"Helen told me."

Menke was lying. Or he wasn't lying. And there I was.

"Five hundred," he said, "beginning the First of April." I looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"I told you to begin with you'd get a raise when you deserved it."

I shook my head. "I don't get it. I disregard your instructions and bring the police down on you. I talk back to you—and so you offer me a raise. I'm sorry, but I don't get it."

"Paulson, I had big plans for you. You must have realized you didn't receive an ordinary introduction to the business. I'm attempting to indicate that I still have faith in you."

"Yes, but—"

"You wish to resign?"

I faced it, and I said, "No."

"All right." Menke spread his hands and leaned back in his chair as though everything were settled. He wet his lips with port. "How do you and Bradley actually stand?"

"I'm still at large."

"If he's going to jail you, I'd like to know."

"So would I."

Moodily, Menke regarded me. "If you were as deeply implicated as you seem to think, Bradley would have taken steps before this."

"You want me put away?"

"No-o. But at least I'd know where you were and what you were doing."

"Perhaps you can arrange it," I said sourly.

He didn't answer for a few moments. Then he said, "Paulson, I have tried to keep this discussion on an unemotional, adult basis. If you're going to become childish we might as well terminate it right now."

I reached for my brandy glass but I didn't trust myself to lift it. I brought my arm back tight against my side. While he had me so neatly at a disadvantage, Menke murmured, "Do you seriously think I was involved in the Solex murder?"

This time I seized the glass and slugged myself with the remainder of the brandy. I recaptured my maturity. I said, "I don't see how you could be. You don't have to risk murder to get the things you want. And I can't see you committing a crime of passion."

That, I thought, should hold him. He sat frowning for a long time. "But, if a motive could be uncovered, you could swallow the possibility."

"Yes."

While I waited for his reaction, he looked past me attentively and nodded. I turned. The butler had come in soundlessly and was standing by the door.

Menke bounced to his feet. His whole personality underwent a change. He was cordial, sincere, and yet restrained as one should be in a house of mourning.

"Paulson, thank you for coming. We've had a nice talk and you've made this evening easier for me to bear."

Almost before I knew it, I was on my feet and halfway to the door. "By the way," my host said, "forget about that Ramsey assignment. There's been a change in plans. Take your time coming in tomorrow. But I want to see you without fail at noon."

He wouldn't let the butler get my things; he went after them himself. He insisted on helping me on with the coat, though he had to stand on tip-toe to do it.

"Now," he said anxiously, "what did I do with your hat?"

I reached toward the marble-topped

table where he had laid it—and froze. In the hollow light of the lamp something else was shining. A golden griffon with bright green eyes, unique and whimsical, like a drawing by Tenniel.

XI

A GOOD SOUND SLEEP. THAT'S what I needed and that's what I got, Sunday night. I left Menke's house in a daze, a confused montage of his smooth farewell, the faint polite smile of the butler, the over-riding luxury, and—shining through it all—the stunning evidence on the hall table of Helen Watkins' presence.

On the way home, I picked up a little sense. I said to myself, "Paulson, you're in a cage. There's no sense chewing the bars. No sense exhausting yourself on the treadmill. Stop fighting, boy. Stretch out in that dish of sunflower seeds and go peacefully to sleep."

So, resolutely keeping my mind empty, I hit the sack. I didn't dream. I doubt if I even moved. I needed that sleep.

Early Monday morning, I slid gently out of it, refreshed and renewed. My mind was no longer in a snarl. I knew very clearly what I needed to do.

I went to the window and took a big sample of air. I put on a sport shirt, a suede coat and a tough pair of slacks. I filled my new tobacco pouch and stuck my cherrywood pipe in a side pocket. I loped downstairs and absorbed a box of cereal and a quart of milk in Mrs. MacComber's silent kitchen.

As I tip-toed through the hall the telephone rang. My watch said seven o'clock. The bell shrilled twice more before I was out of the house. I hoped no one answered it. I had a strong feeling it was Inspector Bradley, calling for me.

I walked down to the garage, whistling. Menke had told me to take my time about coming in this morning, hadn't he?

Up through Pasadena I drove, over Devil's Gate Dam, across to Flintridge, and up to Angelus Crest Highway. The coupe climbed the shoulders of the Foothills and around behind the first ridge of the Sierra Madre mountains. It was a day that almost quivered with Spring. As I drove, I began to sing. I felt like a giant ready to play catch with some planets.

Then I noticed a car following me. A dark, new model sedan, some ways behind, rounding the turns as regularly as clockwork. The driver needn't have had his hat brim down he was too far back to recognize.

No longer singing, I came to the turn-off I was seeking. It was an old construction road that ran a half a mile or so and then expired. Down the side of the hill from its end was a small, sheltered ravine that Sunday picnickers had never discovered. I had found it by accident, myself, chasing what I thought was a Sierra Crassbill one day. The bird turned out to be a Purple Finch, but it led me to the spot.

I set the brakes, reached into the dash compartment, and opened the emergency fishing kit I had bought at a Government Surplus sale. I hadn't expected it to come in handy so soon. I took out the stick of heavy cord and put it into a side pocket.

The sedan had not shown itself yet. Hurriedly I dropped down the side of the hill, through brush and gravelly slides, till I came to a thick clump of wild lilac. I picked my way up the bank a few feet, slid behind the screening branches, and waited. There was no trace of my ambush; not a twig cracked or a leaf moved. Practice in trailing birds had taught me how to move quickly and soundlessly.

But it hadn't prepared me for the shock I received two minutes later. The red-headed man, sneaking along the trail. He was intent and businesslike. If the accident had injured him, he was healed already. The habitual good-nature in his face was gone.

He came opposite me, frowning, shifting his red brown eyes, his gun pointing three or four directions at once. I was already braced. I threw myself forward and down, hurtling through the branches. I hit him like half a mountain, and no jolt ever gave

me more pleasure. His gun went flying; his body was crumpled and rolled out of control beneath me.

BUT he was tough and wiry. The complete surprise and the cruel way his face had smashed the gravelly bottom did little to discourage him. My only advantage was that I was on top, and that I'd been planning just how I would take him.

The red-headed man was playing for keeps. He went for my groin and my eyes. He bit. He butted. So I didn't clutter the situation with any moral considerations. With one knee across his heaving body, I connected with a mighty roundhouse swing to the side of his head. It didn't knock him out but it served my purpose. His resistance collapsed. He made growling noises in his throat and his hands groped aimlessly.

I rolled him flat and sat on his buttocks and took out the heavy cord from my fishing-kit. I pulled back his arms and tied them tight. As I bent his legs he began to revive and kick. I doubled my fist and smashed his knee tendons. He groaned and stopped resisting. In peace, I finished my job, pulling the cord till my arms ached.

Then I got up, dusted my hands, and searched him thoroughly. He twisted his head so he could see me. I walked over and picked up his gun and checked it. "Comfy?" I asked.

He didn't speak. His strange eyes glittered. His face had started to swell and his little red mustache was bloody. There was no point in trying to learn anything from him, so I just said, "You were doing a job, and now you're not doing it."

Keeping away from his head and teeth, I bent, hoisted him up, and gave him a pushing toss over to the opposite bank. He lit hard. His head banged against the dirt. It came up immediately, and all he did was glare—but he got a lot of mileage out of those eyes.

"I'll look in on my way back," I told him cheerfully. "If you're interested in natural history you'll appreciate knowing those leaves tickling you are poison oak."

Then I hitched up my belt and went on down the canyon. I had his gun. And if

he got out of those knots in less than half a day a lot of Boy Scout training had been wasted. I felt fine. Now I could think of the San Gabriel Wash without wincing. The auspicious tone of the morning was sustaining itself.

I found a rock that was comfortable to my behind and a view that was comfortable to my eyes. I lit my cherrywood pipe and did what I had tried so hard to do before—took an unhurried, thoughtful look at the whole situation. Later, when I talked to Hank, I meant to have some answers, too.

First I made a chronology. I laid my facts out, neat little bits in a row. Where did they lead? Which of them was irrelevant, which accidental, which pertinent? Could they be made to fit into a pattern of causation?

I went up and down, around, through, behind and under them. I kept at it till my head ached, there in my peaceful thinking-spot. My facts were all related, to each other and to the three people who were dead, yet they remained tantalizing scraps upon which I could hang nothing at all.

The one person these things had in common—besides myself—was Ray Menke, who of all people involved seemed the least likely suspect. Not from a moral standpoint, but because I considered him too intelligent to become vulnerable. He was a man who hired his work done, and he had an Italian middle name: Incognito.

I considered him, nevertheless, as a murderer. Why would he kill Solex? What could that ineffectual old chiseler have done to him? Or why kill Branson, that wild, unfortunate man? He was only working for someone else, someone much more dangerous, the one who really counted and above all, why should he kill Lenore?

I repacked my pipe and ground my posterior frustratedly against the rock. Before I went back to the coupe, I *had* to have the pattern. My freedom of action might be limited very soon.

I took Hank's gambling theory apart piece by piece. It was ingenious, but it just didn't stretch far enough.

Patiently, one by one, I reexamined my

own possibilities. I couldn't make any one of them cover it. It would take a super-man to stretch over all the conflicting data, to have been in all those places at the right times.

I dropped my pipe. I'd been thinking in terms of one person. Well, I still could—but what if that one person were the target?

With a rush, my facts began to slide into place. Branson represented someone out to get Menke, probably Patroni, who Watkins had said was mad at him. Nancy Heath had pulsed with hate for him. An enemy had killed his wife. Zensler's position wasn't entirely clear, but he had sneered at the mention of Menke's name and involved Menke's personal representative in the first murder. In addition, the smell of him had been in Nancy's place.

The more I considered this switch in viewpoint, the more enthusiastic I became. Different forces converging on Menke, each in its own peculiar way. For once, he found himself on the defensive.

Helen Watkins' invitation to lunch became abruptly clear. As the golden griffon had testified last night, she was working with Menke. She had been put on my trail to learn what I was doing, and I, of course, had been very obliging. This also explained how Menke had known about that lunch.

Now my "Why?" became a little clearer. Now a powerful motive could be shown for Menke. With a ruthless group out to bring him down, he had to fight back. Viciously, hurriedly, with no time for the long-range subtleties at which he was so adept.

A small tendril of sympathy for the man tried to creep out. I crushed it. I had no sympathy for anyone but Don Paulson, now. And high time, too.

Across the bank from me was a group of shooting stars, the flowers the Greeks had named Dodecatheon. They stood in company with miner's lettuce and Saxifrage, and their old bright heads had been watching me. Now, at a sudden breeze, they nodded solemnly in unison. I nodded back to them. I had the pattern. I knew what I had to do next. I could return to the coupe.

SAM HELLER was a small man, round and balding. His suit had a second-hand, crumpled air. His tie looked as if it had been knotted by a child. His shirt sleeves, as always, were so long their rumpled dirtiness cluttered his wrists. He slouched apathetically behind his desk and shook his head at me. In my opinion, he was the best credit man in the seven western states.

After seeing his surroundings, the average man would have been leery of entrusting him with fourth-class mail. Hopeful sharpers lurked in every dirty hallway of the building. The stairs looked like there should be a buzzer halfway up. Most of his neighbors were characters out of a police tank.

On Sam's desk were two corrugated cardboard boxes full of data on clients. A 1942 calender hung crookedly on the wall, next to a map of Wyoming. His telephone looked like something Bell and Watson had discarded early in the game.

He screwed his pudgy face up affectionately. If he'd wheezed and gargled a bit he'd have made a good Boston Bull. One with a hangover. He said, "It's about time you came to see me."

"You look like you'd done a stretch as a construction engineer on the road to hell."

He gave his chin a sideways wiping motion that was habitual. His eyes lingered significantly on my bruised face. "And you, I suppose, have been cultivating Easter lilies?"

I pulled over his dilapidated armchair and settled into it. He watched me fill my pipe. "Okay," Sam said equably when I was lit up and puffing. "Now, what's on your mind?"

Slowly I said, "I've got a story to tell you, Sam."

"Pour it into the chute, boy."

I gave him my facts, all of them. I didn't mention my theories. I wanted to see if he would draw the same conclusions.

He made no comment when I was through. After waiting, I said, "Reaction?"

Sam shrugged. "I investigated Menke on my own hook when you went to work for him. I found nothing, except that he

showed up suddenly in the industrial field with plenty of capital and plenty of savvy. A lot of people dislike him. But I think that's because of his irritating habit of always being right. He's too damned good to be true."

"What about the things I've just told you?"

He squinted at me. "Do I understand you? Are you serious about planting these killings on Menke?"

"Can't I try?"

Sam wiped his chin. You would have sworn he felt a beetle walking there. His bloodshot eyes focused on the window. Then he turned back to me. "If we missed, Menke'd never let us get away with it."

"That's right but we won't miss. It's gone too far now. All we need is one thing—the thing that set it off."

Sam sighed and blinked his eyes as though the daylight hurt them. He crossed his legs and groaned a little doing it. "I feel like a pile of slag today."

"Forget it. We've got work to do. We've got to crack open Menke's past."

Sam wiped his chin, worriedly. "Honest, I don't feel so good, boy."

I started a wisecrack and choked it off. He wasn't kidding. "What do you mean?"

"Ever hear of undulant fever?"

I shook my head.

"Well, I had it when you were away. It's something like Malaria. Your temperature fluctuates every day. You feel lousy and can't do anything. I was six months getting over it."

"You think it's coming back?"

"I hope not." Sam felt his forehead, critically. "They told me I got it from raw milk. The State Department of Health ran me ragged, trying to discover where I'd bought it." He snorted. "Raw milk!"

I grinned unsympathetically.

"It's also called Malta fever, because it originally came from goats on the island. It makes cows drop their calves."

"Oh? And did you drop a ca—" I broke off and stared at Sam. I stared at him so long, so fixedly, that he became worried. He got up and shambled around his desk and shook my shoulder roughly. "You all right?"

Perhaps I answered him. His chance remark was still clanging in my head, sounding out that hidden thing—the thing I needed, the answer to all my "Whys".

THE headquarters of Menke Enterprises, Inc., looked as sleek as ever, with Instrumex humming away and fumes blooming from Chemtol's high smokestacks. Several aristocratic cars were parked before the Administration Building. Something was up—a conference, apparently. I parked the coupe next to them and went upstairs.

I was riding high on a wave of confidence and enthusiasm. My troubles were nearly over, I thought. Half hoping Miss Watkins would give me a reason to start something, I pushed open the door.

But Watkins was not at the desk. Weiss looked up, in her eager-to-please, hunted way. Obviously, sitting there in the Big Boss's outer office was a strain on her. But she was a good little kid, even if nature had dealt her one or two handicaps, and I tried to make my voice reassuring.

"Hello, Miss Weiss. Mr. Menke wanted to see me around noon."

She gave me an unsure smile. "He's in conference with the Allied Manufacturers. I'm taking all his calls."

The Allied Manufacturers. That accounted for the expensive horsepower out front. Menke was squeezing his way into the top drawer, all right.

I studied Miss Weiss while I thought it over. Under my preoccupied glance, she blushed. Finally I said, "Don't go out of your way to tell him I'm here. But mention it if the occasion comes up."

She nodded.

"Thanks. By the way, where's Miss Watkins this morning?"

"I don't know, Mr. Paulson."

I went down the hall, reflecting that it was probably the first time Helen Watkins had ever been absent. It gave me some satisfaction to think that it was probably due to a hangover, underlaid by her sleepless Saturday night. I had believed her story that she had been motivated by concern for me. That was before she went out with the red-headed man, and before I saw her ornament on Menke's

hall table. When all the time, it seemed, she had simply been keeping track of me for her boss.

I found my office stuffy and unappealing. I threw open the window and got some clean tobacco burning.

All around me I heard the bustle and rumble and mutter of Menke Enterprises. They were a big, vital economic entity, rolling smoothly along, unaware of the clouds that had gathered. A man had given them life, and now they were too big to die. On and on they would go, and men would have to serve them. But for Ray Menke, I reminded myself, they would never have been.

The morning had started early and my cereal had long since been turned into corpuscles that were racing around looking for company.

I called Hank. "You can have coffee and I'll have an early lunch."

"Okay, Don. Go ahead. I'm tied up for a few minutes."

I went to the cafeteria and loaded a tray. Somebody had left a morning paper at the table where I found a seat. What I saw in it took away some of my appetite.

The newspapers were beating the drums about the unsolved murders. Solex, of course, was a natural for color. So was the beautiful wife of a great businessman. They went the whole way, in pictures and summary stories. "What are the Police doing?" they asked in shouting 42-point-bold type.

The time of Lenore's death was estimated to have been six in the evening, subject to medical qualifications. So far, there was no explanation for her presence in the cabin. All references to her were filled with deference and respect. Probably, I thought, the work of the Menke Enterprises, Inc., publicity staff. Menke, too, got sympathetic treatment. Deft phrases suggested his great ability, his growing stature in Los Angeles County, his shock and devastation at such a tragedy.

When you got through reading, you thought: this Menke's a big shot but he sounds like a pretty nice guy and that's a hell of a thing to have happen to him. What's the matter with the L. A. cops, anyway?

THE matter with the cops was taken up at great length editorially. I'd like to have seen Inspector Bradley's face as he read it. Apparently this particular newspaper had not been given any inside dope and felt wronged. Bradley had announced only that he had a definite lead.

I felt very sure his investigation had gone much farther. I wasn't going to fall into the error of underestimating him. But much more of this kind of publicity and he'd have to produce.

That last realization made me uneasy. I reread the newspaper accounts. I found no reference that could be applied to me. But even now, Bradley might be planning to pull me in as an exhibit of prowess. A big hand thumped my shoulder. I rose right off my chair.

"Lose your appetite?" Hank asked, glancing at my uneaten lunch.

I handed him the paper. He read it carefully while I set to work on the balance of my meal.

"Well?" I asked when he was through.

"There's only one answer that fits into everything you gave me. Menke. And yet I can hardly believe it." He looked around, then leaned toward me. "What did you learn last night?"

"Nothing startling. A magnificent lay-out, of course. He gave me a bad time, trying to find out if I was up to anything. All I learned was that he and his secretary were on close terms."

"Oh."

"He didn't give anything away. But neither did he give me any reason to think he might not be involved."

Hank shook his head wonderingly.

"This morning, however, I did pick up a thing or two."

Hank waited, his eyes on my face.

"What are you going to be doing this afternoon?"

He gave me a puzzled look. "After lunch I've got to run over to McNabb Engine for half-hour or so. Then back to the office. Why?"

"I'm going to a showdown. I'd like your help."

He gulped. "You serious?"

"Yes."

It was obvious Hank didn't know what

to say. He wanted to help me, and yet... Menke was a formidable man to tangle with. I fed Hank a little encouragement, "Wait till you hear what I learned this morning."

"What?"

I shook my head. "Can't tell you yet. I haven't filled in all the gaps. But you'd be sorry if you missed it."

He still didn't seem convinced.

"I need you there, Hank. I've been carrying this thing a long ways alone."

His face cleared abruptly. "What's the matter with me? Of course I'll help, any way I can."

"Good boy."

We left it that I'd call him later, and my eyes lingered on his big shoulders as he went off. Hank didn't move very fast, but when he did there was plenty of momentum. It was good to know that I could count on him.

Back at the office, Weiss held out a sheet of paper. "This was on the Dictaphone. Mr. Paulson. I hadn't got to it when you were here before."

"Thanks." I glanced at Menke's closed door. "The Board of Governors still in session?"

She nodded.

IN MY office, I settled down to reading Weiss's closely-typed sheet. It was characteristic of Menke to come down early and dictate instructions to his staff. It made an irrefutable record and it saved time.

I found my instructions clear and precise. Menke's crisp, commanding personality came through even those bare words. In South Gate a man named Bentraub had invented and patented a new type of metal window. Made of some kind of laminated glass, it came in one standard size and was *adjustable in height and width*. It sounded mad. Menke left no doubt that he considered it a very sane and a very hot proposition.

Bentraub, a middle-aged man who had eaten the crusts of failure all his life, owned a small sheet-metal shop. This was his one valuable idea. It was a natural and he knew it. He wouldn't talk to anyone. He wouldn't listen to anyone. He wouldn't

even look at anyone. This was his last try at making the grade, and no one was going to slow him up.

He didn't know Ray Menke. "Get that window. Start after him now. Keep on his trail, night and day. Pattern yourself after him. Discover his hobbies, his likes and dislikes. Find out where he eats and eat there yourself. Use any means you can think of to get next to him.

"Use your head. Don't antagonize him. Don't patronize him. Don't approach him directly. If he's married, work on his wife. If he has a daughter, make love to her. Do anything. But get that window!"

So far, I could think of it as something funny. But the rest of it took the humor away. Menke wanted a report on my activity, night and day, hour by hour, till the job was done. Where I ate, where I slept, every single thing I did. He recognized, he added, that such a twenty-four-hour assignment was outside my normal tour of duty, and had taken that into consideration. Bentraub's idea was worth a great deal. For my part in it, if successful, I would receive ten percent.

I let the paper drift to my desk, as I considered the implications of this latest development. Menke had not mentioned what Bentraub was to get, if the plan succeeded. What the inventor would get could not be described by a word you could ask a steno to set down on paper. But the essence of it lingered in my room.

Then my door opened. It was Ray Menke himself, brisk and businesslike. He raised his clean, strong hands. "Don't get up, Paulson. I just left the conference a moment to be sure to catch you. That Bentraub assignment. You'll never regret it."

I opened my mouth—

"Good boy! I'm counting on you." And with one of his dazzling smiles, he was gone.

I closed my mouth.

XII

IT WAS A FINE, LARGE BRIGHT day—Monday, the 21st of April—so full of Spring you could almost feel it

tremble. Had there been another day like this, ninety-six hours ago? I seemed to remember something like that—having started out in the coupe with a lungful of balmy air and nothing but a small orderly life of my own to worry about.

The coupe hummed cheerfully along. It wasn't aware, as I was, that police patrol cars were waiting to pounce on it like ravenous wolves. For I had talked to Bradley, before I left the office.

"I want you right away, Paulson!"

"Playtime is over," that meant. Had the newspapers forced him into it? Or did he really think he could pin something on me? I didn't wait to find out.

"Yes, sir," I said, and hung up on him. Thus, I had gone over the hill.

I passed fields softly washed with wild-flower colors. I passed small farms with greenness bursting from the soil. I passed neighborhood shopping centers, bright with housewives in halters and shorts, leading the healthy life.

The yellow chests of meadowlarks gleamed from the fence rails. The streaky, zig-zag flight of warblers glinted in windy meadows. Blackbirds and orioles and linnets and sparrow hawks and juncos—they blended with the sun and the springness, they tried to pull me away from the thing I had to do this day.

I pulled up at the Lone Tree Inn. "Two fried ham sandwiches," I said to Mary.

She looked at me coldly. "You still owe me for coffee the other night."

I put a dime on the counter. "That better?"

She nodded grumpily. At two o'clock, the Lone Tree Inn was empty of customers.

"Now can I have a dollar's worth of change?"

"It's a lot of trouble," her shoulders said, but she got it.

I jingled the coins. "Like a tune from the joybox?"

She gave me a dirty look. I grinned briefly and crossed to the pay telephone and inserted my first nickle. For a while this place would have to be my office.

"You just left here," Sam Heller growled.

"I need it now, Sam."

There was a pause while he found his notes. Then he began reading them off to me. The material was terrific.

When he was through I chortled, "That's it, Sam."

He grunted pessimistically. "You'll never make it stick. Not on that."

"I'll try."

"Now wait"—his voice became sharp, urgent—"let me give a hand."

"No, thanks. It's my baby."

I cut him off and immediately placed a call to Inspector Bradley. I had no trouble getting through. He sounded coldly, thoroughly angry. "Where the blue hell are you?"

"No matter," I said. "I want——"

"What *you* want is immaterial!" His voice had faded slightly and then came back full of strength. I knew what that meant. He was getting a steno on the line, and probably arranging to trace the call. "You've gone too far this time, Paulson."

"Maybe. But I think I've solved the killings."

Silence. Then quietly, like the slice of a thin, cold blade. "Oh you do, do you?"

"Yes. I'm not a complete fool. I've remembered what you told me. But it just happened that I was in a position to put together the answer."

"Ah, yes." A long pause. "Well, who was it?"

"Not that simple. I have some facts but I need to force the issue. I want your help."

Abruptly, Bradley lost his temper. He roared at me. "Help you! You pure, damned fool. What good could I possibly be? I've only spent twenty years at this game! I'm only a policeman, a——" His voice choked off. I heard short, puffing sounds, as a man trying to control himself.

I said nothing. I was awed by the outburst.

HE WON his battle. His voice came out as genially as a merchant's on the verge of a sale, "And just what is it you want me to do?"

"Hold a meeting in your office. I'll invite the——"

"Paulson!" he said scathingly.

"I know what you mean. But I'm asking you to do it."

"Who would you invite?"

"Will you do it or won't you?"

"You can't expect me to jump into something like that without more information. Can you?" Bradley added, when I didn't respond.

Tracing a call in a telephone office takes some time, particularly if the personnel is not forewarned. But it doesn't take much.

"Inspector Bradley," I said, "for the last time, will you do it?"

"I have a public responsibility, Paulson. I can't jump right into a hare-brained stunt like that. If you'd only——"

"If you want the answer, come to the cabin in Fishhook Canyon at three o'clock. And I hung up. I was sweating. It wasn't what I wanted, but it was my only alternative, if Bradley wouldn't cooperate. And I couldn't really blame him for refusing.

Thoughtfully, I went over to the counter and picked up one sandwich. Mary made sounds. I didn't even look at her. I paced back to the telephone and put in a call to Hank Blewett. After being shunted through three extensions, I reached him.

"Hello!"

"Hank, can you get away now?"

"Yep." His voice was tight.

"Good. Got a car?"

"Yep."

"Meet me at the end of the road in Fishhook Canyon as soon as you can. Know where it is?"

"Off Foothill, beyond Glendora?"

"That's right. You turn opposite a white stone house in an orange grove. Go in about three miles, and there's the cabin. The sooner the better."

"What"—he was a little breathless—"are we going to do?"

"We are going to apply the squeeze. I haven't got much time. The police are mad at me."

Hank said tensely, "I see. Do I bring anything?"

"A gun, if you have it. But don't waste any time getting one."

"Okay."

I heard a sudden scramble, then a crash! and the line went dead. Hank had knocked his phone off the desk.

My next call was to Ray Menke. I got him immediately; he had evidently left special instructions at the switchboard. I came right to the point. "This is Paulson. I haven't been near Bentraub. But if you want to learn something about these murders come to the cabin at three o'clock."

Even as I said it I knew how melodramatic is sounded. But that couldn't be helped. Seconds ticked away. Menke could have asked a hundred questions.

He just said curtly, "Very well!" and hung up.

I went back for my other sandwich. Maybe it would work, maybe it wouldn't.

"You didn't hear a word I said!" Mary's accusing voice reached my attention.

"Shut up." I picked up my second sandwich. "Get me some coffee."

She put the coffee down so hard it splashed over. Her lower lip was out. "So I'm okay when you want something, but not good enough to talk to!"

"Oh, hell!" I thought. "Don't you start. Things are tough enough already."

"Mary," I said, "simmer down. I'm in the middle of something big. The other night that red-headed man took me out of here at the point of a gun, and then he slugged me." I tipped my head to show her a welt. The red-headed man had not made that particular one, but it served my purpose.

She drew her lip in and bit it. "Sorry."

"Okay. Now forget it, and excuse me again." I returned to the phone and called Mrs. MacComber.

HER thin, precise old voice came over the wire. "Inspector Bradley wants to put you in jail. I'm not sure but that he's right."

"I know," I said meekly. "I just talked to him."

"I'll have to report that you called me."

"Don't worry, Mrs. MacComber. Things are well under control."

She made some remark to herself that I didn't catch. Then, "Miss Watkins has called you twice."

"Oh?"

"She said she was desperate to reach you."

"Um. Anyone else?"

"No. Now you take care of yourself, Don Paulson. I hope you know what you're doing."

I rolled out a number of large, confident syllables.

She gave a skeptical grunt. "There's not much an old woman can do, but I'll be waiting here by the telephone."

I thanked her and hung up. My ear was beginning to feel abused. But I had one more call to make.

Nancy Heath's telephone manner was soft, inviting, intimate. I shattered it by asking, "Still hate Ray Menke?"

"Well?" As harsh, that word, as a rock through a window.

"Don Paulson wants to know. Because he's having a party this afternoon. We're going to play drop the handkerchief. The black one."

I listened to her quick breathing for a while.

"Where?"

I told her.

"I want to know more about it."

"Uh-huh." I waited through another few moments of silence. "You've certainly changed your tune. The other day you were ready to tear Menke's guts out. Now, it's—"

The crash of bakelite assaulted my ear. I shrugged and walked back to the counter. Mary looked pretty good to me, after that.

"You're a nice girl," I told her. "Thanks for putting up with all this from me."

She took my money. Her pretty, overly-made up face was serious. "You talk big. But I think you're in trouble. And I think you're scared."

I picked up my change. "Maybe you're right."

"No maybe," she said, and she sounded a little bit sad.

I parked the coupe opposite the cabin in a place where I could make a quick getaway. I had strong feeling the need might arise. I took the red-head's gun out of the dash compartment. It was in good condition, ready to punch holes in anything. I

slid it carefully into a side pocket of my jacket.

My watch said two-thirty. Guests should start showing up before long. The cabin looked rustic and peaceful against bay and sycamore trees and a higher, farther mass of greenery across the stream. I got out and gave myself a lingering stretch. Then I walked the twenty yards or so to the cabin.

There was a sagebrush growing against the wall, right next to the door. It held, surprisingly, a bird's nest—good testimony to how seldom this cabin was used. I bent and gave it a professional squint. Three hideous yellow-lined mouths gaped up at me. Three wheezy little voices yammered for food. I had to smile at those babies. They weren't overlooking any bets. Maybe I had a nice fat grub in my beak.

THEY were some kind of a finch. I looked around and found the mother, hopping anxiously in the next bush. As I tried to get a closer look at her, I heard a voice piping beyond and above—the male bird. I had no trouble identifying his bright plumage. A lazuli bunting.

I scratched my head. I'd studied birds a long time without getting more than glimpses of this variety. But in the last few days I'd been overwhelmed with them. Now I'd even stumbled onto a nest.

I took a closer look at it. These were bunting young, all right. The male bird had left some feathers on the twigs. This brood was a month early, but here it was.

I waved a finger at the family. "Pipe down. I'm not going to feed you. You'll get used to big shadows today, and your folks will be psychos before the afternoon is over."

As I turned away, I saw a fourth baby. This one wasn't asking for food. It was out of the nest, halfway to the ground, caught in a crotch of the sagebrush. I reached down and disengaged the cold, naked body, held it in my hand. Its ugly head rolled loosely on the long, wrinkled neck.

Poor baby bunting. Pushed out of the nest, to die. Its parents had twitted anxiously for a while, then forgotten it in the

demanding clamor of their three remaining babies.

I shook myself. What was I doing, brooding over a dead fledgling, with all hell ready to break loose? I drew back my arm with the intention of throwing the body into the brush, for disposal by small carnivores or busy insects. But I stopped myself.

I held my breath so long it hurt. And then I began to swear. Still swearing, I leaned over the nest and the bush it was built in and examined them carefully. And when I got through I was cold.

A little later, I opened the cabin door and left it wide. In the bright afternoon sunlight, the rustic living-room looked over-done. Indian rugs, rattan furniture, trophies and stone fireplace—they were out of place in this suburban canyon, a naive attempt to create a wilderness atmosphere where none should exist.

I laid the dead baby bunting on the center table and placed my gun beside it. I moved chairs till I had a rough circle, thinking as I did so of Bradley's scornful response when I'd asked him to conduct this meeting.

Having finished, I made a precautionary tour of the cabin. I skipped one of the bedrooms. As I returned to the living room I found myself humming. The insistent refrain eluded me for a moment. When I recognized it I stopped abruptly.

I took a small clay bowl and inverted it over the dead bird. "Yes," I thought grimly, "Daddy's gone a-hunting, all right."

I sat down to do some thinking. I had plenty of mental readjustment to make. I got most of it done before I heard a car tearing up the canyon. I reached for my gun, stopped to one-side of the front door, and waited. I can't say I was calm.

Hank got out of his car and came toward me, walking on his toes, peering, a regular caricature of caution.

"Boo," I said.

He jerked, and then looked at me sheepishly. "Anything started yet?"

"Nope."

He stepped in and looked around the room. "This is a pretty nice place."

"It's where Lenore Menke was killed."

Hank gave me a startled glance.

I pointed. "In there, if you want to see the spot."

"No, thanks."

"Got a gun?"

Hank shook his head. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know, exactly. Pick a chair and relax."

HANK picked a chair but he didn't relax, because just as he lowered himself we heard another car. He hopped up and looked at me anxiously. I raised my hand for caution, and together we watched a cab come into sight. It throttled down and pulled up near the door with a skid and a splatter of gravel. Both of the lazuli buntings buzzed away into the trees. The babies, I expect, opened their mouths hungrily.

The driver let Nancy Heath out. All in gray, she stood frowning at the cabin.

"Welcome," I called.

She focused her frown on me. "The cab?"

"Let him go."

She gave the driver a five dollar bill and said, "Keep it." The cab moved off with less of a flourish, the man looking back curiously.

"Well?" Nancy asked sharply.

I introduced Hank to her. He stumbled over his response; I couldn't blame him. Steel gray enhanced her color and the suit had been designed by a sensuous tailor. Delicately, she stepped across the threshold.

She examined the room briefly. "All right. I came. Now what about Menke?"

"The others will be here soon. Then you'll know. Meanwhile, please sit down." I put some force into it, made it a command, just to straighten her out.

Hank's eyes rested on her calculatingly as he held her chair. He glanced at me over her head and raised his eyebrows. He was getting that greener-pasture feeling again.

Nancy took a cigaret out of her purse and began to smoke it in a "This-had-better-be-good" manner. Then all of us turned as we heard a car door shut with a solid, expansive sound. We watched Ray Menke walk around a limousine and

open the other door for a young woman. Helen Watkins.

Beside me, Nancy gasped. She dropped her cigaret and let it smoulder on the rug. It took me a moment to get my own reactions organized well enough to step on it.

Menke approached quickly, ahead of Helen. "Good afternoon," I said formally.

He didn't answer. He stepped past me as though he owned the cabin. It came to me, with a sense of shock, that after all he did. Helen Watkins approached me eagerly. I didn't quite turn my back on her, but I might as well have. The golden griffon blinked up at me from her lapel.

My introductions brought me a neat collection of curt nods. Helen and Nancy locked eyes hotly, then both turned away. Hank gave me a small, knowing smile. His expression said, "Ah, fireworks!"

Menke had put several miles between himself and the rest of us. I got just as much of his attention as the padding under the ring. Apparently, he wouldn't unbend enough to ask what was up. So I said, "This is strictly an informal gathering. Please compose yourselves. Our other guest should arrive soon."

Menke sat in the farthestmost chair, and held himself as though something were going to splash on him any minute. The two women took opposite seats and looked past one another. Hank wandered around the room, keeping his eyes on Menke, with now and then a meaningful glance at me.

Five minutes ground themselves to very fine dust before the throb of a powerful motor began to grow in volume. I would have bet that Bradley couldn't stay away, but all the same I was greatly relieved.

He slid out of the police sedan and waited for the driver, who came quickly around to join him. The driver was the red-headed man.

I braced myself against the door frame. Wordlessly, I moved aside to let them enter. The red-headed man's queer eyes were alert; they encompassed me with no sign of recognition. The others didn't seem to know him. Helen Watkins gave him a calm, disinterested glance.

Bradley stood looking at the people I had gathered, while in the stillness I tried to put my tumbling thoughts in order. It

was tough going, but in the end I was pleased. It gave me some more of my answers.

The red-headed man eased back to the door and lounged against it as I moved away. His little mustache rode high on a puffy lip. There was a raw spot on his chin, an ugly dark lump on his forehead. In spite of his bruises, he looked lithe, graceful and deadly.

"Bradley," said Menke coldly, "what's this all about?"

Bradley merely shifted his attention to me.

XIII

"I WON'T APOLOGISE," I said, "for bringing you out here. My purpose is to try to clear up who killed Abner Solex, Lenore Menke, and a man named Robert Branson."

"Since when," Menke cut it, "have you assumed the function of the police?"

"Let it go," Bradley said, in a tone that implied, "Let's humor him."

Without looking at Menke, I went on, "Two people couldn't make it today. One of them goes by the name of Dad Great-house. The other one is S. Zensler, who started the whole thing off and then disappeared. We'll get along all right without them.

"I believe these killings are related. I'm going to start at the beginning and tell you just how I arrived at that belief. I expect you to help me when you can. And I believe that when some of the hidden things are revealed, the guilt will be obvious."

Helen Watkins' hands pushed and pried at one another. Hank sat still, breathing heavily, glancing interestedly from one to the other of us, Nancy was trying to look aloof and not succeeding too well. The red-headed man scratched himself.

"I don't know how much Inspector Bradley has found out. But I can't blame him for refusing to cooperate with me. I haven't done very well by him."

Bradley's gray eyes met mine. "You haven't said much yet, Paulson. We're all listening."

"All right. Here are the facts: I offered Zensler a job and in refusing it he referred me to Abner Solex. I found Solex dead on the floor of his curiosity shop. Later Menke sent me to see Robert Branson, to say 'No' to the latter's attempt at

I saw Menke's lips tighten. blackmail."

"That same evening Branson was struck and killed by a car. Two nights later Mrs. Menke was shot, in this cabin.

"Finding Solex as I did put me on the spot, and got me started on what you might call defensive investigation. I had reason to be sorry for that, because the more the thing grew the more I found I couldn't let go.

"But I learned things. I discovered that Miss Heath would entertain anything to ruin Menke. She refused to say why." I stopped and looked at Nancy. So did everyone else. She gave me an angry glance, then faced the others defiantly. She, at least, did not intend to be helpful.

"I followed her to a joint called the Dolphin Cafe in Huntington Park. She was trying to get information from a bartender to incriminate Menke. She didn't get anything. I did."

Nancy's eyes jumped fearfully to Menke. He didn't react in any way that I could detect.

I went on, "From Robert Branson's widow I got a clue that led me to a night club called *El Conejo Pobre*. Patroni, the proprietor, laughed at me. But my evening at his place was a revealing experience."

I looked at Bradley. "Was Patroni shot at or threatened in any way the night Branson was killed?"

He considered, frowning thoughtfully. Then he said, "Not that I know of."

I filled my pipe from my new pouch. I tamped it carefully and got it going well. I was still full of confidence, even though I was fighting against the current. I

glanced around the circle of unsympathetic eyes and said,

"At that point these items stood out: Nancy Heath hated Menke. Branson, or the man behind him, was after Menke. *El Conejo Pobre*, a set-up that's out of this world, had one unmistakable characteristic. It was just too good to be true. It had the Menke touch."

There was a violent rattling, like a jackhammer loose on the roof. Even Bradley jumped. I recognized it as the sound that had awakened me here one morning. I stepped over and banged on the wall. The hammering stopped.

"What on earth was that?" Hank asked.

"A woodpecker."

NANCY HEATH picked up her purse from the floor. Watkins took a long, shuddering breath. The red-headed man scratched himself again. I resumed my explanation.

"Besides the three point, I had minor puzzles. That bartender mentioned a man named Greathouse who lived in Azusa. Who was he? Well, Helen Watkins came close to hysteria when I said I was going to visit him. And when I informed Greathouse that Solex had died, he nearly had a fit."

I paused. "You see?"

"Yep," Hank said encouragingly. No one else was willing to make my recital one bit easier. But I noticed that Bradley had leaned forward intently.

"Then there were a couple of other items. Zensler had disappeared completely. And later I found out that Zensler had been in Nancy Heath's apartment."

Again Nancy ran the gauntlet of eyes. Her assurance was perceptibly crumbling but her defiance didn't crack. It didn't bother me. I knew now why Zensler had been in her apartment.

"I began to realize that everything revolved around one person. Item by item, these events kept linking themselves. It was enough to keep me going, even though I was no longer a free agent. By now Bradley was on my heels."

Menke said abruptly, "I see no point in listening to any more of this. I'm leaving."

Rage boiled up in me. I turned on him.

"Hold it," Bradley said. "Both of you."

The red-headed man no longer slouched. He had slid to a point where he could cover both of us, and he had something to do it with."

The authority in Bradley's voice matched any I'd ever heard from Menke. "You'll stay, and you'll listen. I don't think much more of the idea than you. But now that I'm here I'll see that Paulson gets his chance. We'll judge him when he's through."

Menke stared fixedly at Bradley, then shrugged and relaxed. The red-headed man put his gun away. As he did so, our glances crossed. His lips twitched, and I smiled. Somehow, he made me feel that he understood what I was trying to do this afternoon. I appreciated that. I needed all the moral support I could get.

Bradley nodded to me. I continued, "I decided I would keep out of the way of the police, if I could, till I found the key-stone the evidence pointed to. I'm glad I was able to do it. Because this morning I found what I was after."

I considered that quite a revelation. I had figured on some response from these people. If I hadn't dropped a bomb, at least I had tossed a grenade.

Menke watched Bradley with a cynical intensity. My words seemed to have had no effect on him. Both women kept their faces carefully smooth; I decided it was costing Helen something to do it. The red-headed man patted his mustache. Hank's eyes moved from person to person behind his glasses; when he reached me he nodded slightly. There was a pointed grunt from Bradley.

"I'm telling you this for a reason," I said curtly. "I decided this outburst of crime might not have been engineered by one person. Perhaps that one person was only the target.

"Right away, things started falling into place. I felt I was on the right track at last. The question left was . . . why?"

My hand reached for the clay bowl on the table. As the eyes of my audience shifted, I raised it. There was a gasp from Nancy.

"Yes. You're looking at a dead baby. It would have grown into a bird, a kind

called a lazuli bunting, but it never had a chance."

Helen Watkins' eyes met mine in a look of shocked awareness.

I picked it up by one thin leg and swung it. "Bye Baby Bunting. Daddy's gone a-hunting . . ."

"Don't!" Helen almost screamed.

Bradley opened his mouth and then closed it. The red-headed man sucked his teeth thoughtfully. Nancy gave me a look of loathing.

"Well, Menke," I said, "look at it."

WITH fantastic slowness, Ray Menke rose to his feet. His blond hair gleamed in a shaft of sunlight. His hard blue eyes still had their power—it took an effort for me to oppose them. He stood perfectly still and tense. Then, jaw muscles rigid, he sat slowly down again.

Very calmly, he said, "Paulson, we are busy people. We've tolerated your dramatic egomania long enough. Get to the point."

"Very well. A few years ago you appeared with unlimited capital and an aversion to discussing your past. Skillfully and ruthlessly you built yourself an empire. You wound up with a power and a position few men ever achieve. You even bought a wife, to round out the picture.

"Did you dream you would get so far, when you were at L. A. High, and your name was Ray Maggard. Miss Kranz did. Remember her? She taught you United States history, and she said you'd either go a long way in the world or you'd be hung. She had you pegged, even then.

"The point, you wanted? The point is that Dad Greathouse was an abortionist, and you brought him his business. You operated from Abner Solex's Curiosity Shop—an innocent front if there ever was one. You were a smart kid, Menke. At seventeen, you had learned how well the rotten side of life paid off."

With just the right amount of shocked self-righteousness, he said, "That's a complete and utter lie."

Hank's face, I noticed, had turned red. was a twisted knot of disgust.

I turned to Nancy Heath. "I know why you hate Menke, and why you're reluctant

to tell the reason. I'm sorry I have to say it—but your mother died from a botched curettement, didn't she?"

Her mouth opened in amazement. She tried for a moment, before words burst out. "Absoulutely not! That's a lie!" Her voice carried ringing conviction. It stopped me cold.

Helen's strained face was trying desperately to convey something to me. I avoided her glance.

Bradley said, "Don't look so cast down, Paulson. Someone's relative died from an illegal abortion."

I gawked at him.

"Zensler's sister. A Mrs. Martin. I've had Zensler in jail for three days; we picked him up late Saturday afternoon. He has a fixation on his sister's death. It's the only thing we've been able to drag out of him."

Jubilation surged through me. It fitted. It was the kind of corroboration I needed. And it did a lot to explain the leniency of the police toward me.

I turned back to Menke. He seemed preoccupied, but I wasn't fooled. His mental cyclotron was on full throttle; Bradley had just given him an earful. I pounded the words at him: "You built your illicit fortune, before you were forced out of the business. You retired, still young, well-heeled, and full of fire. You had enough evidence on the people involved to protect yourself. So you decided to go legitimate."

"The busy war years made it easy for you. You slid into the industrial field and the momentum of your capital and your own shrewdness carried you a long way. No one thought to question your antecedents. You nearly got away with it, Menke."

He didn't seem to be listening to me. He was looking out the door. Every eye in the room was on him—pouring out hate and disgust and suspicion and anger.

HIS EYES remained on the door as he said slowly, "You have made a fantastic fabrication out of nothing. Why, I can't imagine. You have no shred of tangible evidence. For what you've done, I'll crucify you."

"You can start any time." Emotion was yanking at me but I tried my damndest to keep my voice level. I picked up the dead fledgeling. "Menke, I'm going to make you eat this . . ."

"Bradley, stop this farce!"

Bradley shook his head.

"You will!" It was a furious command.

Bradley didn't answer, didn't move. No one else moved.

I took a step toward him. His head began to move in tiny, negative shakes. His eyes jumped around the room, stopped on Helen Watkins. "You've known me for years. Tell them how false this is!"

Helen rose unsteadily. Her brown eyes searched mine, then moved away. Lines of strain made her face haggard. She said, "I'll tell them it's the truth."

The room seemed unable to contain those words without bursting. In the intolerable silence that followed, it was sickeningly obvious that Menke had been sure of Helen. We watched his personality disintegrate. His jaws and lips worked a full minute. When words came, sputum came with them, "You dirty tramp. I picked you out of the gutter . . ." The sounds went on but they weren't coherent.

Helen shut her eyes. Bradley's voice chopped across the room, "Shut up!"

Menke's head swayed toward the door again.

Bradley went on powerfully, irresistibly. "Don't look out the door, Menke. Patroni and his strong men aren't there. I'm the only one who planted reinforcements in the canyon today. Patroni hated you, for a reason you could never understand."

Menke's head swung toward Bradley.

"We know your history, Menke. We're not dolts. It wasn't hard to backtrack, once we got started. You knew Patroni in the old abortion days. You helped him out of jams, you even finally designed him a night club and helped him finance it. You thought you were being good to him. You never recognized that he took your help only because he was forced to, and that he resented every dollar of it."

A curious quality of pity seeped into Bradley's hard voice. "There's nobody on your side, Menke. Nobody at all. Not even Helen Watkins, who stood by

you all these years because you gave her a new life."

I stood, staring at Helen, the dead bird still in my hand. I heard an odd thump, and jerked around. Ray Menke was sitting on the floor, looking up at us. His face was contorted.

I heard Bradley's quick indrawn breath, and a squeal from Nancy. Then Menke began to cry, sitting there on the floor, holding his hands up appealingly. He turned his head from one to another of us, crying as if his heart were breaking. He made little wordless, watery sounds, and the tears dripped off his jowls.

Nancy Heath fell out of her chair, onto her knees beside him. She looked deep into his eyes. She reared back, and then she began to scream.

Have you ever heard a woman scream uncontrollably? It's the most frightful sound in the world. The cabin was unbearable with it.

I saw Bradley's mouth move, his hand jerk. Jaw set, the red-headed man went over to Nancy. His first slap knocked her three feet. Her head came up, round damp mouth still deafening, and he slapped her again. It was cruel; it hurt her. But this time it stopped her.

The silence was blissful . . . till we heard Menke's sobs.

HELEN wouldn't look at him. Hank's face was torn by a curious mixture of repugnance and satisfaction. I became aware of the red-headed man at my side.

"The lady was right," he muttered. "He's gone."

I watched Ray Menke, rocking there on the floor. His eyes met mine. There was no recognition, just a piteous, unanswerable appeal. I realized I was still holding the limp body of the baby bunting. I threw it out the door as hard as I could.

Bradley stepped up to us, touched the red-headed man. "Get the boys." The red-head went out the door.

Nancy was on her hands and knees, floundering. I went over, picked her up, and laid her on a couch.

"Here," Bradley said, handing me an ammonia capsule. I broke it in my hand-

kerchief and held it for her. Helen came to help. Nancy saw her and recoiled, thrashing. Helen moved away. At the moment, I was too busy to wonder about it.

The next thing I knew, two uniformed policemen were lifting Menke off the floor and walking him to the door. I didn't watch them. I didn't envy them their job. I heard a car start up and leave.

There was a thumping sound. Bradley was bumping the table with a bottle of bourbon, to get our attention. "Found this in the kitchen," he said grimly. "I'm not suggesting anything, but some of you might be better off with a bracer."

I gave Nancy a slug that brought tears to her eyes, and took about six fingers myself. Then I stepped over to Helen. She looked bleakly back at me.

"I heard it," I said, "but it doesn't make any difference to me."

She didn't believe me.

"I'm sorry, Helen. Seeing that ornament at M—at *his* house last night kind of threw me."

She shrugged. "Well, now you know everything."

"Where does Nancy fit into this? She didn't act like she hated him."

"Of course she didn't. She's his girl friend. Didn't you wonder how she got such a fancy apartment?"

At that point, I had a right to be stupid. I just stood there blinking at Helen. Finally, I said, "Well, don't mind her. She's—"

"She's my sister."

There were little clicks in my head, like relays falling into place. No wonder Helen had acted as she did. No wonder I had seen a resemblance between them. No wonder . . .

Bradley was gripping my arm. "I guess your little party is over."

I examined his grave, heavy face. "Is it?"

"You want me to eat some words?" He smiled.

I shook my head. "All I want to do is button this thing up."

Even the red-headed man looked startled. Hank set down his glass and stared at me. Pressure built up in that room a-

gain. Then Bradley said roughly, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Menke was guilty of plenty, but he wasn't the murderer we came up here to find."

XIV

BRADLEY STOOD PERFECTLY still. Then he motioned to the red-headed man and went back to his chair. Nancy began to sob quietly. Her breath-taking smartness was gone. Her hair looked stringy and her cheek was blotched from the slapping.

Hank scratched his head and eyed me anxiously. Helen sat down as if she no longer cared what happened. The red-headed man took up his station by the door. We were back where we had started—except I wished someone would turn a valve and let the excess air out of the room.

I cleared my throat. The explanation was ready in my head—clear, logical and convincing. No one would have to know how recently I had filled some of the gaps.

"I meant to bear down on Menke. He deserved it. But I had something else in mind.

"Do you remember I mentioned one person as a target? Try to put yourself in Menke's position. Your past has given you trouble, but you've always been able to control it. Exposure would ruin Solex's livelihood. Greathouse you handled with money. Helen Watkins was not likely to give herself away and destroy all she had gained. Patroni, your only remaining link with the world of crime, you financed in his club. As it turned out, you misjudged him badly. Like a lot of brilliant, intense men, you had a few very large blind spots.

"Then Zensler appeared. No problem there. Your careful roster of everyone

connected with your illegal past had to stop somewhere. It didn't include the brother of the unfortunate Mrs Martin who died aborting. Zensler had been recommended as a good worker and you decided to offer him a job. The result was the discovery of a murder.

"At first, you were glad to hear that Abner Solex was dead. Another undesirable bit of the past was gone. You had nothing personally to worry about, although the circumstances were a little peculiar. You spend some time thinking about your new man, Paulson. His story of Zensler's sending him to Solex's sounds as phony to you as it does to the police. He'll bear watching, you decide.

"You feel the first real twinges of unease when Robert Branson tries to blackmail you, fails, and is killed. His blackmail has reference to your past. The police don't appear to be suspicious but they've had to ask certain necessary questions. And Paulson, who obviously thinks something is fishy, is right in the middle of this incident, too.

"Pretty soon you've worked yourself into a state of alarm. You have two main problems: first, to satisfy yourself as to what Paulson knows and what he is up to; and second, check back on the people in your past, to see if any of them might be causing all this. So you have a talk with Nancy Heath, your girl friend. You give her certain instructions.

"She appears at your office for the first time, ostensibly trying to see you and being rebuffed. One of her purposes is to establish publicly an apparent dislike for you, and the other is to identify Paulson. In Paulson's presence, Nancy mentions that she is going to the Dolphin Cafe, and then she storms out.

"She has a reason for going to the Dolphin Cafe. One of the people you're checking on is Steve, the man who used to drive for Greathouse. You have asked Nancy to sound him out, to see if he might be responsible for the troubles. She sees him, does a good job of pretending to hate you, but learns nothing.

"The thing that jolts you is—Paulson follows her to the Dolphin Cafe. He has followed up her mention of the name,

and to you that amounts to a dead giveaway. A little later, you are informed by your contacts at *El Conejo Pobre* that he's been seen out there. And he keeps looking at you strangely. What kind of ideas has he got?

"Now seriously concerned, you have Nancy get in touch with Paulson directly and do her best to learn what he's up to. You have his apartment searched. But, because the police are watching him too, you can't press too hard.

"Then, Saturday night, Lenore is killed.

"At this point, you are close to desperation. You no longer have any doubt that your past is reaching for you, coming closer and closer. In spite of your almost invulnerable position, your A-1 standing with the police, you feel the first jabs of panic. Try as you will you can't identify or locate this new pressure.

"Your consult with Helen, tell her your suspicions about Paulson. Though she knows in a general way what he is up to, she does not think he is trying to do more than unravel the mystery. Her defense of him impresses you."

AS I said this I watched Helen Watkins. I was way out on a limb but I felt pretty sure I was right. It was the only explanation. Otherwise, Menke would have had me toes up long before this. Helen just looked at me. She didn't say anything; her expression didn't change.

I went on, "You talk to Patroni. He is sullen, non-committal. He could tell you things about Branson, things about Lenore. But he won't. Though you refuse to believe it, he hates you.

"You find yourself waiting helplessly for the next development. The more you wait the worse your state of mind becomes. If you had known Paulson talked to Greathouse you'd have felt even worse. But it doesn't seem likely that Greathouse told you. He, like Helen Watkins, recognized that Paulson was still shooting in the dark, and he liked his quiet life too well to want to stir up any trouble.

"You can't get Paulson out of your mind, however. You demonstrate that you have

lost your sense of perspective completely when you have him at your house for dinner the evening after your wife is killed. You try to pump him. You sound out the effects of a raise on him. There is no appreciable response.

"You learn that Zensler has been at Nancy's apartment. He has heard that she hates you and comes to her to share some of his own hate. But he's very, very cagy. He won't commit himself. The only thing he leaves with her is his smell. Then he disappears again—the police have picked him up. You are ready to skin him alive to find what he knows, but you can't find him.

"Your next idea is to try to pull Paulson off his investigation by giving him a night and day assignment. For inducement, you use your old standby—money. Big money, this time."

A little interest came into Helen's face. She nodded. In that flat, drained voice, she said, "I don't think anyone could realize the pace he was operating at. Once or twice before today. I thought he was going to lose his mind. But he had terrific self-control." She made a rueful face. "It was nearly as hard on me. I was trying to stay neutral."

I caught her involuntary glance at Nancy, and understood what she meant. Even though Nancy wasn't speaking to her, they were sisters. Helen didn't want to see her hurt in the smashup that seemed so inevitable.

I went on with my explanation, still from Menke's viewpoint, "That's about all you can do. You're blocked from taking overt action because the police are watching. It's a pretty feeble effort, for a man of your ability. But you can't just grab your suspects and torture them into revealing what's up. You've got to remain consistent with the position you've attained. So you're caught. Neither money nor shrewdness can resolve your dilemma. You're forced to wait and wonder what will come next."

I stopped and glanced at Bradley. "This morning I telephoned Greathouse and told him to get the hell out of town. He didn't need any explanation. I think I saved his life."

Bradley just looked back at me, through narrowed eyes.

"That was the picture when Menke came this afternoon. I was sure he couldn't afford to stay away. I knew I had him when the idea of abortion was suggested to me this morning in Sam Heller's office. But I didn't expect the reaction I got."

This time, at least, my words had received flattering attention.

Bradley cleared his throat. "I can swallow that. Every bit of it."

"Now," I said, "to the killer. He—or she—had to be someone who knew Menke's past. Someone very familiar with his present. And someone who hated him. Because if these murders have any point at all, it is that they are related, purposeful—that they converge.

"I think it was a deliberate structure of revenge. Someone who had been greatly wronged by Menke was out to bring him down. It wasn't impulsive; the person had time to plan. He—or she—was determined to make Menke sweat before he cracked . . . even if it meant other people's lives.

"First Solex was killed. Zensler, to start the ball rolling, telephoned for a representative from Menke's. Branson made his blackmail attempt and a little later was killed—probably because he got out of hand. I met him—I wouldn't have depended on him either. At first I thought Patroni knew something about Branson's death. Now I'm not so sure. If he had actually been connected with it, I'd have had a different reception from him.

"Perhaps Lenore was killed deliberately. I don't think so. I think the murderer misjudged her. Friday night, when I talked with her, she said, 'It's nice to meet someone who hasn't ulterior motives.' The murderer had looked her up, and his motives had been plenty ulterior. He expected to talk her into cooperating with him. He had a deal all ready. When she turned out to be loyal to the bargain she had made, he killed her." I paused. "I think Greathouse was next on the schedule. Or me."

Nancy was listening numbly. I couldn't tell how much of it she was absorbing. Hank lit a cigaret.

I went on, "It was very shrewdly done. Psychological pressure, building up against Menke till it was too much to bear."

Bradley moved restlessly. "Okay, Paulson. That's enough background. Now let's come down to earth."

Helen Watkins tried a couple of times and then said, almost inaudibly, "Who was it, then?"

I LOOKED at what it was. The one who had been aiming at Menke. The one who had killed three people. His eyes blinked behind his glasses. There was a puzzled look on his broad, healthy-looking face.

Like an animal, the red-headed man flowed to a spot just behind Hank Blewett. Carefully, Bradley uncrossed his legs.

"Don," Hank said, "this is no time to be funny. You—"

"Your wife gave it away when she mentioned the 'casting' invention you lost. While you were at Cal-Tech you invented a technique for moulding metal to exceptionally close tolerances. It was a terrific idea. Menke swiped it from you and used it to start Instrumex. You had no capital, no know-how, no recourse. All you could do was hate him.

"You met Zensler while you were working at Apex, before you landed a job with Instrumex, and you started to plan your revenge. It took four years of patient planning and investigation. But you were an engineer. You had practice in being patient and methodical.

"I can imagine that scene, after you came back from killing Solex. You had accused him—on Zensler's say-so—of his abortion dealings. In the row that followed, you lost your head. I knew Solex—he was a stubborn, cantankerous old cheat. The more in the wrong he was, the more infuriatingly nasty he could be. You were going to kill him anyway, and he made it easy for you. You went right to Zensler and said, 'Here it is. Now we go. The first thing you've got to do is see that Menke finds it out.'

"Zensler had plenty of desire for revenge. But he was a weak and disorder-

ly man. It took a man of your background to plan the thing and carry it through."

Hank shook his head. His hands made helpless gestures. "Do you know what you're saying, Don? This thing has gone to your head. You're a friend of mine. How can you possibly accuse me like this?"

I started with the little things; the bell-shaped sand-jars on his children's play shelf, the kind I'd bought myself at Solex's and never seen anywhere else. The way he always jumped at sudden noises and yet when the woodpecker startled everyone in the cabin he proved he'd been there before by not even flinching.

The way he had seen Nancy Heath in the Administration Building, learned her name from me, and sent Zensler out to see her right away, because of her attitude toward Menke. He hadn't overlooked any bets, in his campaign. The way he had questioned me, one time or another, about every significant fact in the case. The way he had been anxious to dismiss Zensler and pin the blame on Menke, when talking to me. The way he drank that Saturday night I came to dinner. He'd needed those drinks, bad.

Oh; it had looked good, there in my head!

Hank turned to Bradley. "Can he judge me guilty of murder because of things like that?"

Bradley shifted in his chair. He rubbed his head, roughly. He gave me a brief, scowling glance. He said, "Let's have some facts."

I had my clincher. I'd been saving it. I pulled out my wallet and extracted the blue feather, the one I had picked from Hank's coat, the one that had frightened his little girl.

"Blewett," I said, "when you were late for dinner last Saturday night, this was on the side of your coat. I showed it to you then, remember?"

His air of polite concern didn't change. I pointed. "Outside the door is an Artemesia — sagebrush to you — so close you touched it coming in today. Look it over. It's the thing that tripped you up. Scattered on it, near the nest, you'll find other

blue feathers like this. They come from an exceptional bird, a bird that nests only in such low sagebrush."

HANK glanced at each of the others. He spread his hands and rolled his eyes. Without words, he said, "This would be funny if the accusation weren't so serious."

I said to Bradley. "I'm an ornithologist. Check with the Audubon Society if you want to. Lazuli buntings are not common birds. Nesting pairs this early in the year are extremely rare. There's not one chance in millions of such a blue feather being picked up elsewhere. Hank Blewett was here Saturday, before he came home to dinner. And Lenore Menke was killed here about six o'clock that afternoon."

Then I folded my arms and rested my case.

"I've never been near this cabin!" It was the first sign of truculence Hank had displayed. The red-headed man looked at Bradley and shifted his balance. Nancy had stopped sniffing; she was staring at Hank.

Bradley said, "Dammit, Paulson, why didn't you come to me sooner?"

I couldn't tell him I didn't have my conclusions sooner, that they had come only after I'd found the bunting nest. I couldn't tell him that an hour ago I hadn't even begun to suspect Hank. So I didn't say anything.

Bradley sighed. "Like many facts, yours can be arranged in a highly incriminating manner. But do they put fingerprints on the club that killed Solex? Do they put blood on the bumper that killed Branson, and demonstrate that Blewett owns it?"

"You mean," I said unbelievably, "that you won't go for this?"

"What have you proved about last Saturday evening? I'm talking about evidence that a lawyer could take to court. I need things like witnesses. Show me absolute proof of anyone having been in this cabin around six o'clock, near the time Lenore Menke was killed, and I'll get excited."

"I just gave you proof that Blewett was here!"

Bradley shrugged. He might as well have shaken his head.

I waved the feather. "This is evidence! Get some of those other feathers under a microscope and compare them. Check the time Blewett left his office. Make him account for every minute of every day. Go back and really put some heat on Zensler. I'll crack him, if you can't. Talk some more to Petroni. He'll loosen up now. He can tell you how Blewett met Branson. Get Mrs. Branson. See if Blewett isn't the blond man she saw once in a car in front of her house."

Bradley just looked at me without saying anything. A half-smile lingered on Hank's face. I caught Helen Watkins giving me a sympathetic look. I picked up my pipe, but I didn't have the heart to light it. I wanted to keep on, to shout Bradley. But I couldn't get past the respect I had for his ability. If he couldn't swallow my blue feather clue, there was no use shouting.

He rose suddenly and strode to the door. I couldn't see who he was talking to. I didn't care, till I heard him say, "All right, one minute, no more."

In walked two Mexicans. One was the girl I'd met in the canyon—the one with the sumptuous figure. The other was an elderly man who bore himself with uneasy dignity.

"They want to see you," Bradley explained shortly.

The old fellow burst out, in Spanish. His name, he said, was *Banco Delfin*, and he—

"Talk English," Bradley said. "Take your time."

The old one looked offended. Shyly, the girl spoke up. "You left this when you ate with us." And she held out my tobacco pouch.

Bradley reached for it. He looked long at it, then handed it on.

"Thank you very much," I said to the girl.

"What's it all about?" Bradley snapped.

There being no way out of it, I told him of my early morning bird-walk and my breakfast with the Mexicans. I didn't mention my stay in the cabin. But from

the look on Bradley's face I knew I'd have some explaining to do later.

Delfin cleared his throat and said in heavily-accented English, "The girl, she would not come. But I made her to. I made her to come one time more."

"One more?"

"*Verdad, senor.* We came here one time before."

"Well?"

He didn't want to answer. Many and strange were the ways in which Mexicans got into trouble in this country. But I prodded him, and he finally said, "Last Saturday we worked nearby in the grove of the white stone house. Afterward we came here with your thing. But we did not see you."

My heart lost its rhythm. "Did you see anybody?"

Silence. Neither pair of dark eyes would meet mine.

"What did you see?" I roared.

The girl fiddled with the front of her dress. "A beautiful lady in brown, with hair the color of cream. And a man."

Delfin's discreet cough told me the rest. The lady, they had assumed, was my wife. And the man had been a stranger.

With monumental casualness, Bradley asked, "What time was this?"

They consulted, in rapid Spanish. They nodded at one another. "Six o'clock," the girl said.

I said huskily, "The lady was not mine. Just a friend. And the man . . . do you see him now?"

The girl raised her eyes. Her face brightened. She nodded, and pointed a smooth young finger at Hank Blewett.

"LITTLE CHILDREN," Sam Heller said, "and drunks. They get taken care of. You and me, we've proved it."

"Hand me that bottle," I said.

Sam's eyes sparkled. His ugly face gleamed. He took a wicked slug of the rye and passed the pint to me. Moodily, I tipped it. The way I felt, I could tip it all night without any effect.

"Or you could say a sackful of blind luck and a bellyful of providence."

Those were almost Bradley's words. I didn't like them any better from Sam.

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"You needn't elaborate," I said grumpily.

He waggled his fingers for the bottle, and grinned at me. "What I can't understand is, how did you stay out of jail?"

"Bradley had plenty of theories of his own. He wouldn't admit it, but he was using me for bait."

Sam nodded thoughtfully. "That sounds like a cop."

"He was pretty fed up, Saturday night, when he sent the red-headed man out to get me. Bradley'd had enough of my evasions. His instructions were to pull me in, and he didn't care if I got mussed up in the process."

"You had it coming to you."

I threw my tobacco pouch at Sam. "You're pretty sharp, for a man with Malta fever."

"Ah"—Sam waved a hand—"that was a temporary decline. All gone now." He reached down, picked up my pouch, and regarded it. "You know, boy, those Mexicans wouldn't have come back for anyone but you. You tipped the case. Don't feel too bad."

I looked out the window at the Sierra Madre mountains, soft again with twilight, and touched with a distant glory. "I don't feel too bad. I just feel dirty."

"What do you expect? Crime is that way, boy. Rough and mean and dirty."

I rubbed one of the lumps on my head. I wouldn't forget the roughness, for a while. The dirtiness would take longer to erase. I thought of Hank Blewett, down at the station. Right now, he was in a room with the red-headed man. Hell was a mild word for what he was going through. Quickly, I reached for the bottle.

"What are you going to do now?" Sam asked.

I looked at him. "Maybe I'll try to get back into credit investigation. It's dull, but it's healthy."

Sam screwed his face up happily and wiped his chin. "You're learning, boy. Your work for a fancy outfit, it takes quite a while to get disillusioned. You work for me, you get disillusioned in a hurry. Then you can go ahead and have some fun." He held up a finger. "But no bright ideas."

I shook my head: I was through with bright ideas for a while. I sat there, remembering a waitress named Mary and a fry-cook named Ike. I remembered Lenore's warm directness, and the smell of that Spring night. I remembered Helen Watkins, the best secretary I ever hoped to see. Now I knew where Menke found her.

Sam picked up the empty pint and dropped it delicately into the wastebasket. He reached down into his lower drawer for a fresh one, humming cheerfully.

Well, I thought, it was over. A few odd bits of knowledge had come in handy. Even if they hadn't led to a brilliant clean-up they had at least pointed the way. And my theory, my great astronomical clue, the message that Solex's dying hands had spelled out with starfish . . . had been completely wrong.

Well, there was one thing I'd never tell Sam. Neither he nor anyone else would ever know about Delphinus, the Dolphin, that small rhomb of stars. And it was too bad, in a way, because it had been a swell idea. It should have been in at the end.

I went cold. It had been in at the end, with *Banco Delfin!* *Delfin* was the Spanish word for dolphin.

"Sam," I said hoarsely, "hurry up and open that thing!"

Sam nodded. He pried at the seal, humming. He didn't even realize what the tune was. Probably he'd forgotten his nursery rhymes.

I was going to shut him up, but I didn't.

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