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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

OCTOBER, 1967

VOL. 21, NO. 5

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

MOMENT OF FEAR

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Inside that house a stubborn, brave old lady had admitted her last visitor—Trackless Murder. And outside in the hostile dark Mike Shayne must break through a ring of deadly foes to find the key to her slaying.

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MOMENT OF FEAR



A NEW, COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

Somewhere in that house a brave old lady fought to live—and somewhere outside in the night Mike Shayne sought the deadly clue to her murder.

by BRETT HALLIDAY



MIKE SHAYNE strode from the elevator in the Flagler Street building and headed along the corridor with a smile on his face at the memory of the good lasagna he had just eaten too much of at lunch. The remembered taste of the lasagna was so good that he did not notice the woman at first.

"Mr. Shayne?"

She was a small, dark-haired

woman of about thirty. Pretty and feminine. She wore a simple shirt-waist dress that had not cost much. Her mouth was bee-stung and soft. She looked younger than she was, Shayne judged. And yet there was a maturity to the set of her jaw. There was steel behind her brown eyes. And there were rings on her right hand that said, despite the dress, that she was not poor. Or

someone in her life was not poor.

"I'm Shayne," the redhead said. "Mrs.—?"

"Miss Baxter," the woman said. "Jane Baxter. Your door is locked."

The tone of her voice was slightly annoyed, as if it were somehow improper for a detective's door to be locked. An insult to her. Shayne decided that for all her appearance, she was a young woman who was not accustomed to waiting in corridors.

"My secretary had to do an errand and I was hungry," Shayne said bluntly. "The portals will open."

He unlocked his outer door. The woman, Jane Baxter, flushed a bright pink. Shayne saw this. Miss Jane Baxter seemed to be a complicated character.

"I'm sorry if I sounded rude," Miss Baxter said. "I'm upset. Of course you have the right to eat lunch."

"Thanks," Shayne said drily as he led her across the empty outer office into his private office.

Jane Baxter laughed aloud. "My sister always said I have foot-in-mouth disease. She says I don't think enough. I told her life was too short to be so careful, and that's why I wouldn't live with Aunt Georgia, the old monster. If I sounded pompous, Mr. Shayne, I apologize."

"What else can a person do?" Shayne said with a smile. "Apology accepted."

He waved her to a seat. "Now, why are you upset, and who is Aunt Georgia?"

The woman suddenly blinked, as if slapped in the face, and there were tears in her eyes. "It's not Aunt Georgia, it's Pru. I know she's dead. I just know it, Mr. Shayne."

"Whoa," Shayne said, smiled. "This Pru is your sister?"

She nodded. "Yes, my older sister Prudence. She's quite a lot older, almost twelve years. I suppose that's why she decided to stay with Aunt Georgia."

"You didn't?"

"I have my own apartment in Miami Beach. I have for six years," Jane Baxter said, and suddenly the tears came again. "Now Pru's dead. I know it! I should have stayed!"

"When you say you know she's dead," Shayne said, "you mean that you don't know she's dead. Exactly what has happened?"

Jane Baxter took a deep breath. Her semi-hysteria dropped away, to be replaced by the steel side of her nature.

Mike Shayne watched her. She was like a chameleon. Now the cool control was in command. But he had the uneasy feeling that the hysterics could return at any time.

"Prudence always came to visit at my apartment on Wednesdays. She did not appear today. Prudence is like clockwork. She has missed only once before in six years and that turned out to be pneumonia."

"Today?" Shayne said, a bushy eyebrow raised.

"I know," Jane Baxter said, "but just wait. Pru always comes at ten o'clock. At ten-thirty I called my aunt's house. She was evasive. She finally admitted that Pru had not been home all night. In fact she became angry, said Pru had finally deserted her like the rest of her family. She said her whole family had been selfish, ungrateful beasts, etcetera, etcetera."

Shayne shrugged. "Your sister is," and he made a rapid mental calculation, "about forty-two or so. She's a big girl; she must have friends."

"My sister has almost no friends. She is close with another old maid—single woman, Paula Kurtz. I called Paula. She said Pru made no mention of leaving, of a trip, or staying away. She did say that Pru had been worried lately. Angry might be a better description, or even—" the woman looked hard at Mike Shayne "—suspicious might be the right word."

"Suspicious of what?"

"I'm not sure. Pru is a very moral person, Mr. Shayne. She would not talk about anything until she was sure. But I noticed the same thing Paula did—a sort of—well, pre-occupied manner the last time I saw Pru."

"Maybe it was personal," Shayne said. "Something on her mind about herself. A trip, a break, a man."



"Perhaps."

"After all, less than a day isn't really missing."

The Baxter girl crossed her very good legs. Shayne noticed the legs with considerable appreciation. She noticed his attention, and she did not reject it, but she didn't accept it either.

"I am aware of that, Mr. Shayne. But I know Pru and you don't. That she should be missing for one night is unusual. Perhaps you're right, and she has, at her age, suddenly changed her entire life and personality, but I have to know. I am willing to pay to find out that nothing is wrong. I would pay double to learn that Pru has become a butterfly after all."

Shayne nodded. "A hundred a day plus expenses is fair pay to find that out."

"A thousand a day isn't too much to be sure that my sister is safe."

For a second the steel vanished again, and the soft and female woman appeared. Shayne was un-

easy about these sudden shifts of Jane Baxter. He wondered if Prudence Baxter was as split as her sister.

"All right," Shayne said. "I'll find her for you. Now tell me about Aunt Georgia, and the rest of the household where your sister lives."

"Aunt Georgia is our father's sister. My father is dead. There used to be quite a family of cousins, nieces, nephews, and all that, but now only Pru and myself are still in Miami. I suppose you'd call Aunt Georgia an eccentric. She's always on some weird hobby horse. Just now it's astrology. She has a pair of astrologists, Singh and Anahid, practically living in the house."

"Is she rich?" Shayne asked. "Aunt Georgia?"

"Well, I suppose so. Grandfather was wealthy. Father lost most of his money, but Aunt Georgia was always a miser. Until the last few years, that is."

"How old is she?"

"Very old, and not well. That's always been part of her hobby horse mania—faith cures, miracle workers, religious fanatics. She's seventy-two, Mr. Shayne, and hasn't been well for many years. She's not bed-ridden, but almost. She never leaves the old house."

"So she and Prudence lived in the old house," Shayne said. "Who else. This Singh and Anahid? Were they who your sister was suspicious of, by the way?"

"I think so, but I'm not sure. I

know she thought they were charlatans, and hated them," Jane Baxter said. "And they don't really live at the house; that was only a manner of speaking. They have a kind of salon of their own where they do their readings and other high jinks for the suckers. But since Aunt Georgia can't get around, they come to the house for her, and they're at the house a great deal."

"Who does live at the house?"

"Well, besides Aunt Georgia and Pru, there's Mrs. Werke, Miss Manners, and Orville. Mrs. Werke is the cook-housekeeper. She's been with Aunt Georgia twenty-two years. Miriam Manners is the nurse, and she's relatively new. In fact she only came a year ago when Aunt Georgia thought she was dying."

"And Orville?" Shayne asked.

"Yes, Orville. Well, I don't know quite how to put it," Jane Baxter said, apparently puzzled.

"Just the facts," Shayne said.

Miss Baxter shrugged delicately. "Orville is Aunt Georgia's lover."

Shayne blinked. "Lover?"

"That's all I can call him, if you want facts. Orville Simms was Aunt Georgia's favorite lover. They almost married. He went away for some years, and came back, and Aunt Georgia took him in. He was sixty-five then and she was sixty. That is twelve years ago. Orville has been a sort of boarder ever since. He's bitter that she would never marry him, but he

likes living off her, even though she makes him act as a kind of butler. I think he is her whipping boy, her way of getting revenge on all males."

"Does she need revenge?"

"I think Aunt Georgia has always hated being female and, shall we say, the used, the underdog," Miss Baxter said.

"And Pru?"

"Perhaps the same."

Shayne smiled. "And you?"

"No, not me," Miss Baxter said. "I like being female."

"All right. I'll take the case," Shayne said. "I like females who like being females."

Miss Jane Baxter favored the redhead with a dazzling smile and a small shift of her crossed legs. Shayne did not think that there was much of a case here, but there was a lot of Miss Baxter. And it was all good.

He got the address of Aunt Georgia and sent Miss Baxter home with a gentle pat and a promise to report soon and in person. When she had gone, he clapped his panama on his red hair and strode out. Lucy Hamilton was back from her mission. She gave Shayne a frosty stare.

"A new case, angel. I'll be in touch," Shayne said.

"With who? Me or that one who just went out?" Lucy said.

"Did someone go out?"

"Oh, you men!"

Still grinning, Mike Shayne went

out and along the corridor to the elevator.

II

THE HOUSE OF Miss Georgia Baxter was one of those large, rambling mansions dating from the turn of the century. Set back from the highway, it perched like a misshapen boil on a knoll in the center of once elegant but now ragged grounds.

It was clear that whatever Orville's duties were, they did not include grounds-keeping.

Shayne parked in front of the old house. It was gloomier up close than even from the road. It needed paint and repair. Apparently Aunt Georgia still qualified as a miser. The only evidence against complete miserhood was the sight of two shiny Cadillacs parked in the *port-cochere*.

Shayne strode up the steps. No one came out to see what he wanted. He could find no bell, so he knocked. Nothing happened, so he knocked again. A window went up just to his right along the front of the house.

"Go away!"

It was the crotchety voice of an old lady. Shayne went to the edge of the steps, and leaned, but he could not see her. Just the open window.

"Miss Baxter?"

"You're trespassing! I buy nothing. Go away."

"I want to talk about your niece Prudence."

"There is no Prudence! Ungrateful bitch! Go away. I'll have my men throw you—"

"You don't have any men!" Shayne suddenly snapped, making his voice harsh.

There was a silence. Then: "You've been talking to Jane. All right, come in, you insulting man. The door is open."

Shayne pushed open the door and walked into a large but unkept entry hall. He turned right to where a door stood open. He went into a comfortable but slightly seedy sitting room of past days. The old woman sat in a stuffed chair at the window. There was a blanket across her lap and legs. She looked like she spent a lot of time at the window.

She did not ask him to sit down. He sat anyway.

She glared at him, her thin nostrils dilating with anger. Yet her small eyes seemed to twinkle. He got the picture at once. She was not a woman who hated men, no. She was a woman who liked to fight men, to defeat them, to make them grovel—but she liked the fight itself, for itself, and she liked to find a man who defied her and made a real battle out of it. He decided that the tragedy of her life was that she had never lost the battle.

"So Jane's been talking. Does she think I've done in old Prudence?" the old woman said.

"She thinks her sister's actions are strange."

"Strange? Of course they're strange. So what, young man? A dried-up spinster of forty-odd is always strange."

"She was suspicious of something," Shayne said bluntly. "Now she's missing."

"A dried-up spinster of forty-odd is always suspicious," Miss Georgia Baxter said. "Now who are you?"

"Shayne. Michael Shayne. I'm a Miami—"

"I know what you are. Mike Shayne the private-eye," and the old lady giggled like a girl. "I've read about you. I'm eccentric, but not senile. So, the famous Mike Shayne. At least Jane always had sense. I'll give the nasty little bitch that."

"She seemed a pleasant woman," Shayne said.

"She left me. She's nasty. She's waiting for my money. Probably did in Prudence herself. She's strong. I'll give her that, too," and the old woman giggled again. "You're strong, too, aren't you? A man. Good. I like strong men."

Shayne watched her. Were all the women in the Baxter family schizoid? The old women swung madly between a tough old harridan and a coy old sensualist. Or was she simply on the edge of senility? A confused mind?

"What can you tell me about Prudence?"

"Enough to fill two thick vol-

umes. Where do you want me to start?" the old woman said.

"With last night," Shayne said drily.

"What kind of detective are you? Don't you want her whole history? Some fiend may lurk in her past," the old woman mocked.

Shayne was tiring of the artificial battle. The old woman was amusing herself. Prudence Baxter had probably just gone to a health resort for her nerves.

"Let's just consider yesterday," Shayne said.

"All right. Pru and I had an argument about Singh and Anahid. She put on her grey suit, her hat, and her walking shoes, and left about four in the afternoon. I never saw or heard from her again."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"Yes, to see Singh and Anahid. Whether she got there or not I couldn't say. Singh and Anahid have not come here today. I was not interested enough to call them."

"She was going to see a pair of astrologists, and she never returned, and you're not concerned?"

"Why should I be? She disliked Singh and Anahid; I don't. They are my valued friends; they have helped me. They are fine people, with sight into the mysteries of the universe!"

The old lady had raised her voice into something like a scream. Two people appeared in the room through different doors almost in-

stantly. One was a tall, thin woman of about forty. The other was an elderly man dressed like a playboy of the thirties in some English country house—including ascot and tweeds, despite the Florida heat.

"What are you doing!" the woman snapped at Shayne.

Despite her angularity, and sharp nurse's voice, the woman was far from unattractive. In fact, to Shayne's practiced eye, the woman was actually a very good-looking female with an air of sophistication, both facts which she was clearly trying to hide.

"Mr. Shayne is looking for Prudence," the old woman said mildly. "Our Jane has hired him. Probably Jane's trying to kill me off with aggravation, so she can get the money." The old woman cackled.

The elderly playboy did not seem to think the joke was funny. For a moment Shayne saw the naked greed in his watery blue eyes. He also saw the fear of an old man who had spent his life living on his looks and masculinity, and who now had to face the loss of both with nothing in any bank. And he saw that the watery blue eyes were not watery—they were boozy.

The old woman waved a negligent hand. "The harpy is Miriam Manners, my nurse, although personally I think she's a chorus girl on the lam. The man, if you can call it that, is Mr. Orville Simms, an aging gigolo who wasn't much good

in his prime. He's panting for my money, but I'm going to fool him and outlive him."

"Really, Georgia my dear, I—" Orville Simms began.

"Shut up, Orville. Is there anything more useless than an old lover?"

"I'm all you can get to kick, Georgia my dear," Orville said, suddenly and more simply than Shayne would have expected. "For my supper I sing to your needs. We need each other, which is more than I can say for us in the past."

"Get out!" the old lady shouted. "I'll say one thing for Pru, she had you pegged, my greedy gigolo. She always told me to never let you see my will from week to week, because if the figure for you ever got above twenty-five thousand you'd kill me for it."

"No, but say fifty thousand and I might," Orville said.

"I said get out. No, get me a cup of tea."

"Yes, my dear," Simms said, and inclined his head to Shayne. "Mr. Shayne. I wouldn't worry about Prudence. She can take care of herself, and does so quite well."

"She's a meddler," the nurse, Miss Manners, said. "A frigid female who lives off her relatives, and wants no one else in the way."

Simms shrugged. "Our Pru has undoubtedly simply run off somewhere. Neither of the nieces has any true loyalty to poor Georgia. The young cannot be trusted."



"Oh, get the tea, Orville!" the old lady snapped.

Orville left sullenly. Shayne saw the glint of malicious triumph in the eyes of the old lady. He also saw

the wary interest Miss Manners betrayed.

"Have you always been a nurse, Miss Manners?" he asked.

Her eyes flickered away and back. "Yes."

"Fiddlesticks," the old lady said. "I think Manners was a B-girl. That's not a nurse's body she's got, and she's covering up what she's got. What are you doing here, Manners? I've often asked myself."

"Nursing an old harridan," Miss Manners said. "And it has always been my profession."

A heavy woman of late middle age appeared in the doorway. She glared in.

"I'm not making tea for one cup. You'll have your tea when I'm ready, and not before, and if you don't like it I quit."

Without another word the heavy woman turned and waddled back out of sight. Shayne heard a door slam. Mrs. Werke, the cook.

Georgia Baxter laughed aloud. "She does that every time. It's better for me than the tea. Only one day I'm going to take her at her word and fire her. One day when she's too old to get another job, and I won't give her a nickel."

Under the laughter Mike Shayne heard the vicious edge. There was hate in the house. Hate everywhere. Under the gruff words of the old woman. Beneath the banter of Simms and Miriam Manners. Behind the lovable bearishness of Mrs. Werke, the cook. Vicious hate

that seemed to move like a sluggish river below the surface.

He thought of the chameleon nature of Jane Baxter, and the contradictions reported about the missing Prudence Baxter. A house of vicious women engaged in deadly in-fighting day in and day out. Simms was no exception—an old woman. There was something unhealthy here.

III

MIKE SHAYNE started. "You don't like us, Mr. Shayne?" The old woman's voice had broken into his train of thought. There was a quiet tone to her voice now. She waved Miriam Manners from the room.

"Women cutting each other doesn't amuse me," Shayne said.

"It passes the time," the old woman said, with another of her sharp changes. "I suppose it's inevitable. Women cooped up together tend to become like this. Men are different. In reality, Mr. Shayne, all women live alone. That is why they are so concerned with each other. Men can live together, which is why they are not so concerned with each other."

"Paradox?" Shayne said.

"If you like. But not really. Females live by instinct in a nest. There is room in a nest for only one female. And each woman in her nest competes with all other women in their nests. Basically, women have a low instinct of co-

operation. They know, deep down, that they must compete. Men have a much higher instinct of cooperation. They live outside the nest, and in that bigger world there is room for many men, so they learn to live and let live and not worry so much about each other, or even compare themselves as much."

"You think," Shayne said.

"Yes, I think," the old woman said sharply. "Which is why I know that Singh and Anahid are harmless. They amuse me, and I am willing to pay for my amusements."

"But you're not sure Prudence is all right," Shayne said.

The old woman bit her lip. "Something was on her mind. I know that. But I think it was Singh and Anahid, and that is ridiculous."

"Would she just go off?"

Georgia Baxter smiled. "Would you? Out of this?"

"Yes," Shayne said bluntly.

"So would I if I were younger. But Pru is not a venturesome woman like Jane. Still, given the right circumstances she might have just left me."

And there was still another change. Under it all, Shayne saw that he was looking at an old woman, a sad old woman. A woman filled with the fear of loneliness, of dying alone.

"They all left me, over the years," she said, but not speaking now to Shayne.

He watched her, and knew what she was thinking. They were all

gone, her relatives and real friends. By death, by distance, by indifference, and by the edge of her own vicious tongue. But human beings are not logical, and the old woman was only a naked victim of forces she would not accept, not even death.

She laughed. "But I have my pleasures."

"One of which is badgering me," a voice said.

It was a male voice, deep and resonant. It belonged to a big, bluff man with a ruddy face, iron grey hair, and an open manner. He came into the room with the nurse, Miss Manners, and a handsome youngish woman with hair the color of white gold. The handsome woman had deep violet eyes, a soft mouth, very red, and the calm manner of an aristocratic beauty who knows that she is both aristocratic and beautiful.

"I pay you, Cranmer," the old lady snapped. "When I call, you come."

"I'm here. If it pleases you to know it, I was on my way to a party with Helen when I got your message. I hope it's urgent."

"Helen can wait," the old woman said, and laughed. "I made a pun, eh?"

"Helen can wait," the beauty with the light gold hair said. "I indulge old women."

"Because you have to, but you don't like it. I love faded aristocracy; they're so greedy," the old

woman said. She nodded to Shayne. "Shayne, this oaf is my lawyer, Jason Cranmer, and that is his wife. Helen stepped down to marry Jason, and Jason paid in cash."

Cranmer reddened more. "All right, Georgia. What do you want with me? I have things to do."

"I want you to redraw my will."

"Again?" Cranmer said. "Georgia, please wait a—"

"Quiet, Jason! I want you to redraw my will and cut Prudence out cold. You understand? I want it prepared. If she doesn't return within a week, I'll sign it."

Cranmer blinked. "Prudence has left you?"

"She's missing, Mr. Cranmer," Shayne said.

Helen Cranmer laughed. "Don't tell me our Pru finally got up the gumption to walk out on you, Georgia?"

"Perhaps she did, and perhaps she didn't, and don't call me Georgia, you young bitch!" the old woman said.

Shayne said, "I thought you just told me that you wouldn't blame her for leaving you. That you understood."

The old woman's eyes snapped. "I said I could understand, Shayne. I didn't say I could forgive."

Cranmer looked at Mike Shayne. "What do you mean by missing?"

"Just that," Shayne said. "She left here last evening and has not been seen since. She didn't show up

at her sister's place today, and she hasn't come home."

Cranmer and his wife glanced quickly at each other. Worry showed on the florid face of the big lawyer. His wife was paler than her blonde hair under her deep Florida tan.

"Is there something you know?" Shayne said.

"Well—" the lawyer glanced toward the old lady, took a deep breath. "Prudence was suspicious of two astrologists who've been victimizing—"

"They are not victimizing me! Have a care for the slander laws, lawyer!" the old woman snapped. "I'll have them sue you!"

"If you mean Singh and Anahid, I know about them," Shayne said. "You think they might have harmed her?"

Helen Cranmer spoke. "She was most upset about them. She told me she had proof that they were crooked, that they had fleeced old women before this."

The old woman bridled in fury. "I refuse to let you speak of them that way! Out of my house, you stupid blondel!"

"Come on, Helen," Cranmer said.

Shayne watched the lawyer. He sensed that Cranmer was half defending his wife, and half worried about his relations with Georgia Baxter. Cranmer was a lawyer—he agreed with his wife, but he wished she'd keep her mouth shut.

"If you have nothing else to tell me, I'll start looking," Shayne said.

The old woman was glowering in fury. "You can go to the devil for all I care. I can't stop you, but don't expect any of my money, you hear? You'll find that Prudence is just with some lying man, just like her damned sister!"

Shayne left the old woman swearing at Miriam Manners. He noted that the slim nurse watched him go. She seemed worried. Shayne caught Cranmer and his wife in the entry hall.

"What do you know about Miss Manners, Cranmer?" Shayne said.

"Nothing. She's a nurse, with a good record. She seems more sophisticated than most nurses, but —" and Cranmer shrugged. His sharp eyes watched Shayne. "You're the private detective, aren't you? Some colleagues of mine have worked with you."

"I am," Shayne said.

"Not hired by Georgia? No. I handle all her funds."

"Georgia wouldn't spend a dime to find herself," Helen Cranmer said.

"Jane Baxter hired me," Shayne said. "She's worried."

Cranmer nodded. "With reason. Prudence was a woman of habits of pure steel. If she missed her orange juice at eleven o'clock, I'd start to worry."

"Maybe she's got a man," Helen Cranmer smiled. "You have no idea how I hope Pru has a man at

last. I'd be happy if she just had a life of her own. Anything to leave Georgia."

"Helen, I've told you not to—"

"I hate her," Helen Cranmer interrupted. "I liked Pru."

Shayne broke in. "Can you tell me of anyone who really didn't like Prudence? Maybe wanted her out of here?"

Cranmer bit his lip. "Shayne, they all hated Pru. Everyone in the house, including Georgia. She was a meddler. She resented everyone in contact with Georgia. And that really included Jane. Pru hated Jane, deep down. And Jane returned it."

"Does it include you?" Shayne asked bluntly.

Cranmer shrugged. "It includes me. Pru was a busybody. She was always prying. Now, if you'll excuse me, we have a date."

They left Shayne frowning in the dim entry hall.

It looked like Pru had a lot of reasons to leave—and a lot of reasons to be helped to leave, perhaps permanently.

But a trail began at the beginning.

IV

THE SALON OF Singh and Anahid was in a funereal-looking stucco building in a sleazy section of Miami Beach. It was on the edge of better areas, and the main road passed in front. The orange stucco

box was set back from the road behind a rundown lawn and some shabby palms. There was a sign: THE SOUL OF THE STARS: *Sri Rajat Mir Singh—Yoga Anahid Singh.*

Shayne parked in the narrow, weed-grow driveway beside the orange stucco box. He saw a venetian blind move at the side window as he climbed out of his car. He strode to the front door where a sign indicated that one had to ring for admission.

He rang. There was a short wait. As he was about to ring again, the door opened abruptly and a small, brown, sharp-nosed man stood there. The man's black eyes were like buttons in the eyes of a doll. His mouth was thin and immobile. His teeth were extremely white and even.

"Yes. May I be of service?"

"If you're Singh," Shayne said.

The man bowed, smiled. "There are many Singhs, sir. If it is Rajat Mir Singh you wish, I am he."

"Then you're my man."

"Alas, we are not reading this day. The stars do not rest well. Perhaps if you will come back tomorrow?"

"No, I will come in today," Shayne said, and stepped into the doorway.

The small man put a delicate hand on Shayne big chest. "That will not be possible, I fear."

"You fear wrong," Shayne said. "It will be possible."

He did not touch the little dark

man, he simply pushed in and the man could not hold him out. Five feet inside the door Singh gave up. He stepped away from Shayne, dropped his arm, and turned without a word. Shayne followed him toward an open door to the left.

They were in a weird kind of lobby inside the stucco box. The ceiling was low. The walls were draped with some thick, yet shining



material; blue and dim green light seemed to emanate from nowhere. In the very center of the floor a large transparent sphere glowed with an inner red light, and stars seemed to move around it. In the rear wall of the exotic lobby two golden doors led into rooms Shayne could see were draped in purple velvet and contained chairs and a star-covered table.

The open door to the left, when Shayne followed Singh through, led into a very simple and very practical office. A woman sat on a lounge chair in the corner of the office. Singh sat behind the desk. No one asked Shayne to sit. The woman arched a carefully shaped eyebrow.

"A private reading," she asked, "or the cops?"

She had a beautiful low voice that caressed like a warm, soft hand. Her face was a perfect olive oval with jet black eyes, brows, and hair. Her lips were purple and like deep rose petals, and her hands moved like liquid snakes.

"Just some private questions," Shayne said.

"A cop," the woman said.

"You've had experience with cops, Anahid?" Shayne said.

"Too much. The police do not believe in the stars," the man, Singh, said.

"Do you?" Shayne said.

"Yes, Mr.—?" the woman, Anahid, said.

"Shayne. Mike Shayne."

"Yes, Mr. Shayne, we believe in the stars. To the police that is a racket."

"Is it?" Shayne said.

Singh smiled. "Everything one cannot see and touch is a racket, Mr. Shayne. If by racket you mean as most do, the acceptance of money for an unprovable service. Of course, by that token, all churches are rackets."

"You've got a point," Shayne said, "but I'm not an official cop, I'm a private one, and I'm not concerned with your racket or religion. I'm looking for Prudence Baxter."

The two dark people looked at each other. The woman paled a little. The man showed only a mild concern on his smooth, dark face.

Singh spread his hands and arms in a delicate fluid gesture of sadness and innocence.

"An unhappy woman, Mr. Shayne. I have read her stars. She has only sadness to find in this brief world."

"Did she like her stars?" Shayne said coldly.

"She did not like us, Mr. Shayne. She did not believe in the stars, nor in us. To her we were mere charlatans, cheats, parasites on her aunt. She honestly believed this. It is often a matter of one's frame of reference. As I said, to those who see no value in our work, why we are charlatans?"

"Is there any value?"

Anahid broke in. "We gave the old woman comfort and peace. We gave her something to believe. That is a value. We are not parasites, but that Prudence hounded us. Only yesterday—"

The woman stopped. Her olive face showed confusion. She bit her lip and looked at Singh again.

"What about yesterday?" Shayne snapped.

Singh nodded as if he knew that question would soon come. He looked away for a moment.

"First tell us what the trouble is with Miss Baxter. You said you were looking for her?" Singh said.

"She left her aunt's house yesterday afternoon. She hasn't been seen since. My information says she was heading here when she left the house."

"I see," Singh said. "And it is known in her house that she did not like us, and resented our association with her aunt."

"Her rich and maybe senile aunt," Shayne said bluntly, "and I think 'resent' is a pretty mild word for what she felt for you two. She seems to think you're out-and-out crooks."

Singh nodded. "Yes, she thought that definitely. Crooks, cheats, confidence people. There was no doubt. She made that quite plain yesterday."

Anahid shook her head. "Rajat, no—"

Singh waved his hand. "We have nothing to hide. Mr. Shayne is a detective. He will know that Miss Baxter came to see us yesterday afternoon."

"What happened?" Shayne demanded.

"There was an argument. A heated argument. She ordered us to remain away from her aunt's house and her aunt. We told her that such an order had to come to us from her aunt. She said that the order did come from her aunt. We doubted that. She then called us thieves as well as charlatans. I asked her to leave. She did, saying that she would take it up with her lawyers."

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

Singh raised his arms in a gesture of despair. "Mr. Shayne, do you think this is the first time we

have been called charlatans? If we had harmed everyone who called us that we would have been murderers a hundred times over. I assure you that we are not. We may practice a despised and jeered-at mystic art, but that is all."

"So she left," Shayne said. "At what time?"

Singh glanced at Anahid. "Perhaps five o'clock. Yes, I think it was just before the Morgan consultation at five."

"What did she mean by saying you were thieves as well as charlatans?"

"I presume that we were taking her aunt's money."

"Nothing more specific?"

"I do not pay too much attention to such charges. I am accustomed to them. If Miss Baxter meant anything more, I was not aware of it."

"What was she wearing?"

The woman, Anahid, answered. "A grey Shantung suit, a small grey and white hat with a veil, black walking shoes. I recall. She was as dowdy as usual. Without color."

"How did she leave?"

"She called a taxi from here," Singh said. "I recall that she said she might as well get a free telephone call for all her aunt's money. I believe Anahid remarked that it was, after all, her aunt's money and not hers. Miss Baxter was most annoyed by the suggestion. She is a woman of the type who simply have to concern themselves with the affairs of others."

"What taxi company?"

"The Blue Cab. It is the only one that comes out here."

Shayne nodded. "Okay, but maybe you better hang around until we find her."

"We are going nowhere, Mr. Shayne," Anahid said. "We have many clients."

Shayne left the office and crossed the lobby out into the sun. He got into his car and drove off to the offices of The Blue Cab Company.

V

THE DISPATCHER looked up his record sheet. "We got the call. Harry was in the area, so he took it."

"Where's Harry now?"

"Right in the garage. You want him?"

Harry turned out to be a tall, skinny man who walked stiffly, as if he had spent too much time with his long legs squeezed under the wheel of a small taxi. He remembered Prudence Baxter.

"Sure. I don't forget that place. She made me go in and get her, and that place gave me the creeps. What is it, some kind of nutty church?"

"Some kind," Shayne said. "Where did you take her?"

Harry looked at the dispatcher, who shrugged.

"It's all right. She's missing, Harry. No crimes. Her family just

wants to find her, so they hired me. They just want to know what happened to her."

"Okay. I took her to a house out in Miami. Big place, rich."

"You want to take me?"

"I never turn down a fare."

The taxi led Shayne's car back across the causeway into Miami and out toward the big house of Georgia Baxter. About two miles before reaching the area of the old mansion, the cab turned off into a rich tract area. It pulled up in front of a pseudo-Tudor house in an area of trees and landscaping that almost hid the fact that the place was a private estate.

Shayne parked, paid off the taxi driver, and walked up the driveway of the house. The driveway was empty. He reached the mailbox and read the name: Mr. Jason Cranmer.

Shayne frowned. Cranmer hadn't mentioned that Prudence Baxter had visited him last evening. But then it had not actually come up. Cranmer might have something important. Shayne reached the door and rang. There was no answer. He looked around, but the house seemed empty. Cranmer and his wife were not yet back from their party.

Shayne went back to his car and drove into the city. He drove to police headquarters, and went up to the office of his friend, Will Gentry, Chief of Miami Police. Gentry was busy, but he sat back and lighted

his perennial cigar when Shayne came in.

"What trouble are you handing me now, Mike?" Gentry said.

"I'm not sure, Will," Shayne said, and he outlined the case of Prudence Baxter. "Could be nothing but a long-delayed break-out into a personal life."

"But it could also be trouble, eh?" Gentry said. "What do you want, a run-down on any unidentified corpses?"

"And any Jane Does in the hospitals. She could have had an accident," Shayne said.

"Okay. Give me a description."

Shayne described Prudence Baxter. Gentry repeated the description to his assistant over the telephone. Then the bluff Chief leaned back and puffed on his cigar.

"One day isn't long, Mike," Gentry said.

"It's relative, Will," Shayne said. "This was a woman of pure habit, according to everyone, and there's a lot of hate in that house. I guess there's also a lot of money. It seems that Prudence Baxter was a self-appointed watchdog of her aunt's money. Unappreciated by the aunt, I might add."

"Who gets the money if Prudence doesn't turn up, or turns up dead?"

"I don't know for sure," Shayne said, "probably my client."

"It bears thinking about," Gentry said. "What happens if your client gets killed, too?"

"That I really don't know. Maybe I'll ask."

The telephone rang. Gentry answered it and listened carefully. Then he grunted and replaced the receiver.

"No unidentified stiff at all," Gentry said. "Hospitals haven't reported any Jane Doe that fits your make. It looks like she's still alive and uninjured, at least in Miami."

"Or just undiscovered," Shayne said grimly. He stood up. "Thanks, Will."

He went back down to his car and decided to have some dinner. He drove to a restaurant on the way out to Cranmer's. After he had given his order, he went to the telephone and called his office. Lucy said that no one had been trying to get him. He called Jane Baxter. She was home. Prudence had not contacted her. Jane had just talked to her aunt, who was now convinced that Prudence had abandoned her.

"She said she was going to examine the silver," Jane Baxter said to Shayne from the other end of the line. "Aunt Georgia is a terrible woman."

"She's a sad woman," Shayne said, "and probably sick. I'll keep looking for Prudence."

He hung up and went back to his dinner. By the time he had had his second cup of coffee it was growing dark outside. He paid and went out to his car. He drove back to the house of Jason Cranmer.

This time there was light in the house.

Cranmer answered the door himself. The lawyer did not look happy. There were dark shadows around the eyes of the big man. He seemed momentarily confused at the sight of Shayne. Then recognition dawned.

"Shayne," Cranmer said, and added lamely, "I just got home."

"I know. Are you alone?"

"Yes," Cranmer said. "Except for Helen, of course."

Helen Cranmer spoke from somewhere out of sight. "I'm not an 'of course,' and if I'm here you're not alone. Ask the man in, Jason."

"Yes, of course," Cranmer said. "Come in, Shayne. Drink?"

They were sitting in the living room. It was obvious that they had just come in. Their coats were thrown on a chair, and had immediately started to drink. Shayne declined a drink.

"I don't like a man who won't drink," Helen Cranmer said.

The blonde woman seemed keyed up, edgy. Cranmer sat silent and sullen. It looked like they had been having a fight, verbal, when Shayne rang.

"Sorry, but I'm more interested in Prudence Baxter just now," Shayne said. "A taxi driver said he brought her here about five-thirty yesterday evening."

Cranmer nodded. "That's right. Pru came to see us. She often did. She and Helen got along."

"As much as anyone could get along with Pru," Helen Cranmer said.

"What did she want?"

"She was worried about those damned astrologists," Cranmer said. "She wanted my help in convincing Georgia that they were con artists. I told her that I'd said about all I could."

"How did she seem? I mean, her mental attitude?"

"Nervous," Helen Cranmer said. "I remember because that was so unlike Pru. She seemed edgy, pre-occupied."

"Like someone about to change her life?"

"I wouldn't know that, Mr. Shayne. She was just—well, keyed up a little," Helen Cranmer said.

Cranmer put in. "My wife means that Pru was unusually excited. Those astrologists seemed to be annoying her a lot. I tried to calm her down, but she was very angry. I promised I would talk to Georgia again just to placate Pru and get rid of her. We had a dinner engagement."

"Did you get rid of her?"

"Yes, after a long time," Cranmer said.

"It seemed like years," Helen Cranmer said. "Pru can be an awful bore when she gets on one of her hobby horses. Once she gets moral there's no reasoning with her. She just kept talking about those astrologists."

Shayne nodded. The astrologists

were not out of it by any means as far as he was concerned. Prudence had left their stucco horror of a salon, but there was nothing to prove that she had not gone back. Still, there were other people.

"What about Orville, Manners and Werke? Could they have had reason to want Prudence Baxter out of the way?"

Cranmer snorted. "They all have reason. Orville Simms is a true leech. More, he's a scared man. He has nothing. He depends totally on Georgia's charity now, and that can be a very precarious matter, as you probably observed. Pru was disgusted by him. She's something of a prude. She called him a dirty old man. She was always working against him with Georgia."

"Manners is hiding something," Helen Cranmer said. "I don't know what, but that nurse has something on her mind. Pru thinks so too. She was talking about having her investigated."

"Pru talked about a lot of things," Cranmer said. "She liked to talk. She rarely did any of it. Still, Manners is an odd one."

"And the cook-housekeeper, Mrs. Werke?" Shayne asked.

Cranmer shrugged. "You've heard Georgia talk about her, and Pru thought her disrespectful. I'd say Mrs. Werke hates Pru."

"What about you two?" Shayne said bluntly.

Helen Cranmer said, "I got along with Pru all right. Not that



we were all pals. I wouldn't try to fool you."

"She is not an easy woman to get along with," Cranmer said.

"What time did she leave here?"

"Just before dark," Cranmer said.

"Did she say where she was going?"

"No, but I had the impression that she was going home," Cranmer said.

"I had the impression that she had some kind of appointment," Helen Cranmer said. "That was why she was edgy."

"What was she wearing?"

"A grey suit, a hat, and walking shoes. The hat was grey and white and had a small veil. Pru loved veils," Helen Cranmer said.

"That's all you can tell me?" Shayne said.

"That's all we know," Cranmer said.

"If anything happened to Prudence, who stands to gain?"

Cranmer and his wife looked at each other. The lawyer was cautious.

"I suppose Jane, eventually.

Georgia talks a lot, but she is a staunch believer in family, when you come down to it, and most of her money will go to Pru and Jane. Without Pru, I guess it would all go to Jane."

"Swell," Shayne said. "How did Prudence leave here?"

"The same as she came. I called her a cab," Cranmer said.

"Which company?"

"Biscayne Taxi; they operate out here."

Shayne nodded and turned to leave. Prudence Baxter seemed to have been busy yesterday. As he reached the door of the lawyer's house, Helen Cranmer caught him.

"I'm not quite sure that you believe us, Mr. Shayne."

"I'm not at the stage of believing or not," Shayne said. "I'm just looking right now."

"Well, if you want to check up on us, I suggest you talk to our neighbor, Mr. Gregor. He knows Pru, and he talked to her last night when she came and left."

"I'll do that," Shayne said.

He left the house and started down the walk. He noted that the driveway was edged by a blooming rose bush. He decided that he would have a talk with the neighbor, Mr. Gregor. Perhaps the man had heard where Prudence Baxter told the taxi to go.

VI

MR. ARNO GREGOR turned out to be an elderly gentleman who liked

flowers. As Mike Shayne went up the nextdoor driveway, he saw the old man working on a flower bed.

"Mr. Gregor?"

The old man looked up. "You can see that I'm busy, young man. I have to put these in tonight. I don't usually work at night."

"I just want to ask you a few questions."

The old man cocked an eyebrow at Shayne. "Questions?"

"About Prudence Baxter."

"The woman who visits Cranmer? Georgia Baxter's niece?"

"That's the one," Shayne said.

"What about her? And I'll go on with my work, if you don't mind."

"How well do you know her?"

"Well? Not well at all, young man. I know a lot about her aunt. I used to be in the same business as old Baxter, importing, on a much smaller scale. But I never really knew the family."

"But you do know Prudence?"

"By sight, and we talked across my roses whenever I happened to be at the bushes when she visited Cranmer."

"You were at your roses last evening?"

"I was. It is the time to cut roses."

"You talked to her?"

"We exchanged pleasantries, Mr.— What is your name?"

"Shayne," he said, "Mike Shayne, I'm a private detective."

The old man sat back on his haunches and looked up. "Are you,

now? How interesting. What is wrong with Prudence Baxter?"

"She seems to be missing."

"Missing?"

The old man frowned, and then got slowly and laboriously to his feet. He brushed at the knees of his old trousers, and his eyes were thoughtful. He glanced shrewdly at Shayne.

"You know, Mr. Shayne, there was something odd about Prudence Baxter last night."

"Odd? In what way?"

"Well, we talked when she arrived. Before she went into the house. She stopped and we chatted about roses, she also grows roses. But she had something on her mind, I could see that. I gave her a rose to pin on her lapel, and she hardly seemed to notice. I mean, she put it on and didn't thank me. I was annoyed. So when she left I did not go back to the bush; I simply called good night."

"Did she answer?"

"She waved rather abruptly, I'd say. She was in a definite hurry. The taxi was waiting and she almost ran to it."

"You weren't near enough to hear what she said to the driver?" Shayne said in disappointment.

"No. But I saw her lean in and talk to him before she got into the cab. I know someone in a big hurry when I see them."

Shayne thanked Arno Gregor and went back to his car. He felt that he was getting warmer. Ap-

parently Prudence Baxter had stayed too long with the Cranmers, and had been in a hurry when she left. The taxi company should be able to tell him where she had gone in such a hurry.

He found the dispatcher at Biscayne Taxi less willing to be helpful, but a quick flash of an old badge, and a ten dollar bill, made the dispatcher much more friendly.

"Yeah, I remember when Mr. Cranmer called. The Cranmers only have one car, so when she's using it he calls us. We do a lot of business with him."

"Who answered the call?" Shayne said.

The dispatcher consulted his records. "Fred Thomas. He's one of our relief men."

"Is he here?"

"No, he's not on tonight. I can give you his address."

Shayne took the address of Fred Thomas. It was a Miami address, in a fairly lower-middle-class neighborhood. Shayne drove to a shabby apartment house. There was no answer to the ring, so he rang the bell of the superintendent.

The door buzzed and Shayne went in and along the run-down hall to the rear apartment. A man in his undershirt stood in the opened door.

"Yeh?"

"I'm looking for Fred Thomas."

"Apartment Four-B," the man said and started to close the door.

Shayne put his foot in the door.

"I know that. He doesn't answer. Do you know where I might find him now?"

The man in the undershirt looked suspicious. "Why do you want to find him?"

Shayne showed his credentials. "I just want to ask him some questions about a fare he had. There might be a little money in it."

"Well," the superintendent said. "If it's important, you might find him eating his supper around at The Cherry Restaurant."

"Where is it?"

"Right around the corner. You can't miss it. He usually eats around now. If he ain't there, try all the bars along the street. Fred drinks."

Shayne thanked the man, and went around the corner to The Cherry Restaurant. He asked the counterman for Fred Thomas. The counterman nodded toward a small, fat man greedily eating soup at the far end of the counter. Shayne sat down in an empty seat beside the man.

"Fred Thomas?"

The man almost jumped. "What the hell—"

"No trouble, Fred. Just some questions," Shayne said, and assessed Fred Thomas. A relief cab driver who liked to drink and ate in a luncheonette. He laid a five dollar bill on the counter. Fred Thomas looked at it, then at Shayne.

"Private cop?"

"The name is Shayne," Shayne said.

Fred Thomas covered the five dollar bill with his hand.

"Okay. What questions? I haven't taken the dough yet."

"You remember a fare you picked up at Jason Cranmer's house last night?"

"Cranmer? The lawyer. Yeah, I remember. A—" and Thomas stopped, waited.

"A woman, average height, grey Shantung suit, grey and white hat with a veil, walking shoes," Shayne described.

Thomas nodded. "Okay, you know her. I picked her up, all right. She came down the driveway fast. She give me the address, and hopped in the cab and never said nothing more. Only she was real nervous. I could see her hands. I mean, I noticed the diamonds she had. Rings, you know? So I noticed, and she was really twitching."

"Where did she go?"

"A hotel, mister. The Galton Arms Hotel."

"She went into the hotel?"

"That she did. I noticed that, too, because she sort of wobbled. I thought she maybe couldn't make the walk, but she did. She went inside, and that's all."

"Did she meet anyone?"

"Not that I saw."

"And she didn't say anything? She didn't talk to you?"

"Nope, not a word, and I tried.

It gets lonesome driving a cab, and I get thirsty, so I talk to keep my mind busy, you know?"

Thomas pocketed the five, and went back to slopping his soup. Shayne left him looking happy—five dollars from the blue would buy a good night in the bars.

Shayne remembered The Galton Arms. It was a residential-transient hotel in a not-very-good section of Miami. Since it was obvious that Prudence Baxter didn't live there, she must have been visiting someone. It occurred to Shayne that maybe Prudence had decided to look deeper into the background of Singh and Anahid.

When he left The Cherry Restaurant, he walked toward his car, and then decided to call Lucy. He stepped into the first bar and went to the pay telephone. Lucy sounded tired.

"A Miss Georgia Baxter called, Michael. She seemed agitated, but she wouldn't talk to anyone but you. She told me to tell you to get out to her house as soon as you called in."

"Okay, Angel. Anything else?"

"Jane Baxter called and wanted to know if you had found anything."

"I haven't," Shayne said. "That's all?"

"That's all, Michael."

"Okay. Lock up and go home. I'll be in touch."

The redhead hung up and strode out to his car. He drove through



the city back past the turn-off to the Cranmer's house, and reached the turn-off to the Baxter mansion.

As he turned into the driveway he came suddenly alert.

Cars filled the driveway. Police cars. One of them Shayne recognized as the car of Chief Will Gentry himself.

Shayne parked and walked fast up to the front door of the house. A uniformed policeman stepped out to stop him, and then recognized him.

"Hello, Mr. Shayne. You involved in this?"

"It looks like it, Mario. Gentry inside?"

"Yeh, the Chief himself. This Baxter woman must have had pull."

Shayne went in. Will Gentry stood in the seedy entry hall talking to Lieutenant George Bellow of Homicide. Gentry looked up and saw Shayne.

"Did you find Prudence Baxter, Mike?"

"Not yet."

Gentry nodded. "You've got help now."

"Help?" Shayne said.

"Yeah. When you find her, the charge against her is going to be murder."

VII

MIKE SHAYNE blinked and looked from Gentry to Bellow. Then he saw the white face of his client, Jane Baxter. The woman had just come from a door in the rear of the entry hall. She looked at him, but did not seem to see him. Then—

"Who's dead, Will?" Shayne said.

"The old woman, Mike," Gentry said.

"Georgia Baxter?"

"In person," Gentry said gruffly. All his years on the force, and as Chief, had not accustomed Gentry to death.

"What makes you think that Prudence did it?"

"Two witnesses," Gentry said. "Come on."

Gentry led Shayne into the room from which Jane Baxter had come. The client of Shayne was seated on a straight chair in the hall now, with Lieutenant Bellow hovering over her. She still had not seen Shayne. She seemed to be lost in some kind of fog.

Shayne followed Gentry into the rear room that proved to be a kind of study or office. There was a safe and a desk and some shabby leather chairs and a sofa. The safe was open. The desk was strewn with papers.

"There," Gentry said.

Georgia Baxter lay behind the desk. A desk chair lay on its side next to her. Blood had spread in a pool all around her head. The blood was not dry.

"A thirty-eight police special, from the look of the bullet," Gentry said. "Once in the heart. Close range; there are powder burns. The M.E. says about a half hour ago, which checks with the witnesses. It also checks with the sound of the shot."

"Who heard the shot?" Shayne said.

"The two witnesses and the nurse. The cook is out, so is someone named Simms. You know Simms, Mike?"

Shayne nodded. "Yeah, he's a sort of hanger-on around here. Who are the witnesses, Will, and what did they see?"

"A delivery man and your client. The delivery man saw a woman run out of the front door, turn, and go around the house toward the rear—he thinks. I mean, he knows he saw the woman, but he really only saw her go around the house. After that he didn't see her."

"Just a woman?"

"A woman in some kind of grey outfit with a small hat and a veil," Gentry said.

"It fits," Shayne said.

"Yeh. Your client describes it about the same only better. She says she saw the woman, and it was a grey suit, a grey and white hat, and black walking shoes. She says it was her sister. She's sure."

"Where did she see it from?"

"An upstairs room. She thinks the woman went off toward the road after turning the corner of the house, but she admits she's not sure."

"Someone could have come back into the house," Shayne said.

"I know. Your client was upstairs, she says, but no one saw her. The old woman was alone down here. The nurse, Miss Manners, was in her room in the back of the house. Your client got to her Aunt first. Manners came in later. We're still looking for Simms and the cook."

"The gun?"

Gentry shook his head. "Not around. But it could have been stashed outside or even in the house. We're looking."

"You're not sure of the outside woman?"

"I'm not sure of anything yet. I don't even know the motive. The safe's open, but that could have been a blind. I've got her lawyer on his way over. Maybe he can tell us if anything is missing."

Gentry took out a fresh cigar and bit the end. "It could have been anyone, but the description fits Prudence. On the other hand no one is in the clear. The delivery man saw a woman, and his story is solid. But a man can disguise himself, which puts Simms in the picture, and the delivery man didn't get a good enough look to rule out the cook. Then, there's nothing that says the nurse didn't shoot her, run out, double around, and come back as if coming from her room."

"And you only have my client's word that she saw the woman. She could have been the woman, and faked a run," Shayne said.

"From what I hear she stands to gain the most."

"On the other hand, I heard the old woman tell Cranmer, her lawyer, to cut Prudence out of her will. Maybe Prudence heard, and came back to fix the old woman before the change could be made. The way it is now, Will, Prudence and Jane share the loot."

Gentry nodded. "I know, that's why we're after Prudence."

"Can I talk to my client?"

"Go ahead," Gentry said, and looked gloomily around the study.

"We've got a lot of work here. Prints and everything."

Shayne left Gentry in the murder room and went back out into the entry hall. Jane Baxter was still seated in the straight hall chair. She looked up now as Shayne stood over her.

"How do you feel?" Shayne said.

"Dead," she said. "We'd had a fight. I screamed at her, Mr. Shayne. I told her she'd driven Prudence out—or worse. Now—"

"Start from the top," Shayne said. "Why did you come out here?"

She sat up straighter, lighted a nervous cigarette. Her hands shook and she looked at them as if they were not part of her.

"After I talked to you the last time, I began to think. I realized that I had panicked in going to you. I became sure that Pru was safe, that she had simply finally had all she could stand of Aunt Georgia."

Jane Baxter stopped, as if aware that she was speaking ill of an old woman who could no longer speak back. An old woman who had been irascible, even vicious, but whom she had really loved.

"Anyway," Jane said, "I came out here. I was going to tell Aunt Georgia what she had done to Pru. I—did tell her. Aunt Georgia wasn't even interested in what I was saying. She laughed at me, and said that she didn't need detectives! Then she went downstairs to her study."

"What did she mean when she said she didn't need detectives?"

"I don't know, Mr. Shayne."

"Okay, go on."

"Well, she went downstairs and I stayed up in my room. That was where we had argued about Pru. She hadn't been gone more than ten minutes, and I was about to leave, when I heard the shot. I thought it was from outside at first, so I went to the window. I saw Pru come out running, go around the house, and I'm sure run off toward the road."

"You know it was Pru?"

She nodded miserably. "I know what she was wearing, and those shoes! No one wears shoes like that except Pru."

"But you didn't actually see her?"

"Not her face, no. But—"

"Never mind, go on."

"Well, I must have frozen a moment. Then I suppose I knew who had been shot. I ran down the stairs and found Aunt Georgia. She was dead. I tried to talk to her. I called to her. Oh, it was horrible."

The woman buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders heaved. She seemed to shudder. Then she took a deep breath, raised her face.

"That won't help, will it?"

"No, but it helps you," Shayne said gently.

"I'm all right. Where was I? Oh, well, I must have tried to revive her for at least two or three minutes. I'm afraid the police are going

to find my fingerprints everywhere. Anyway, a few minutes later Miss Manners came in and took charge. She called the police."

"Was the safe open and all those papers scattered around?"

"Yes, we touched nothing. Miss Manners just called the police and Mr. Cranmer."

Shayne nodded. The story sounded true enough, but it was all her word. No one had seen her. For all anyone knew the argument could have taken place in the study and not upstairs. Which would have given Jane time to run out of the house, re-enter, go up to her room by the back stairs, and then come running down to discover the body.

The key was still Prudence Baxter, and Shayne wanted to get to the missing sister first.

"You just sit tight and don't answer any questions," Shayne said. "I'm going to find Prudence."

Gentry stood beside him. "If you do, Mike, you better tell us fast."

Gentry held a small watch in his hand. He showed it to Mike Shayne. On the back of the case was the inscription: *PB, for sweet sixteen.*

"Aunt Georgia gave that to Pru," Jane said in a sad voice.

"We found it near the body," Gentry said.

Jane nodded. "It was all the jewelry Prudence would wear."

Shayne looked at the small watch, a lapel type, and his grey eyes were like points of steel. Something was moving in his head.

Something he could not quite remember. Before he could work it out any farther, Jason Cranmer strode into the room.

"Jane, don't say anything more," Cranmer boomed. "Chief Gentry, I want to talk to you."

"That's a coincidence," Gentry said drily. "I want to talk to you."

While Cranmer and Gentry fenced verbally, Shayne smiled at his client and slipped out unseen.

VIII

THE GALTON ARMS Hotel was a halfway respectable hotel in an older section of the city. It was on the edge of the downtown district. It shared the street with shops, taverns, and one small nightclub type tavern.

Shayne described Prudence Baxter to the man on the desk. The desk man was a thin youth of about twenty, with pimples, horn-rimmed glasses, and a book hidden away under the counter. The youth did not like to be interrupted at his reading.

"I'm not allowed—"

Shayne cut him short. "It's police business, son, and the trouble is murder."

He used his best official manner, and the boy was too nervous to ask for his badge. The clerk's Adam's apple did a dance up and down his scrawny neck.

"Okay, okay. Yes, I remember a woman like that. She came in



last night about eight-thirty, right? I remember because the suit looked expensive, and most of our people don't have that kind of money. She also didn't have much baggage, just the one case."

"She had a suitcase?" The cab driver had not mentioned any suitcase. Neither had the Cranmers, Singh and Anahid, or Mr. Gregor.

"She certainly did," the clerk said primly.

Shayne thought. It was almost certain, then, that Prudence Baxter had had a suitcase checked in one of the coin lockers in the hotel lobby.

"What name did she use?"

The clerk looked up his records. "Mrs. Pauline Bennet. She had initials on her handbag, PB. I notice those things."

"Good for you," Shayne said.

"She also made airline reservations," the clerk offered.

Shayne's eyes snapped. "When?"

"This morning. I know, because she asked me to get National Airlines on the telephone for her."

"When did she check out?"

"She didn't," the clerk said.

"You mean she's still here?"

The clerk glanced behind him at the key boxes. "No. Her key's in the box, but she didn't check out. Maybe she's in the bar."

"Why the bar?"

"Because last night, first thing after she checked in, she had a bottle sent up to her room."

"Booze?"

The clerk nodded. Shayne rubbed his gaunt chin. No one had said that Prudence Baxter didn't drink, but Shayne's mental picture of the spinster was of an abstainer. He had the impression that Prudence Baxter was temperance all the way, and probably opposed to liquor in any form. It looked like he would have to revise his opinion.

"Did she have any visitors?" Shayne asked.

"Not who asked for her."

"Did she leave her room since she checked in?"

"I don't—wait! I remember because I thought it was funny. I mean, it was maybe an hour after she had the whisky sent up. She came back down, hadn't even changed her clothes, and went out. She came back maybe two hours later, and she was weaving some. I mean, that's why I remember so well. There she had a bottle in her room—I mean one she sent for—and then she goes out and gets drunk."

Shayne tugged on his left earlobe. It was peculiar. Unless she had had to go out to meet someone. The whole thing had the ring of a meet-

ing, an assignation. Maybe whoever Prudence Baxter was supposed to meet had changed his, or her, mind, and Prudence had gone to meet him somewhere else.

"I better have a look at the room," Shayne said.

The clerk handed him the key. Shayne smiled inside. It was lucky for him the clerk was so inexperienced. Without a search warrant he should not have gone up, which would have forced him to sneak up and in. But the clerk handed him the key and he went up.

He opened the door quickly and jumped inside with his automatic ready. But the room was empty. He holstered his gun. The room was a typical cheap hotel room. Not yet a flop house, but long since not first class.

There was the double bed instead of twins, and the chests-of-drawers were chipped and stained. The rug was worn, and the rest of the furniture was three straight chairs and an armchair.

There was nothing in the room.

No suitcase. No clothes. No sign of human habitation.

Shayne checked all the drawers. They were empty. They looked as though they had always been empty.

He went into the bathroom. The medicine chest was empty. There was nothing at all in the bathroom. No personal effects of any kind.

Shayne came back out into the silent hotel room. There was an air

of despair to the place, as if no one had ever lived here, and no one ever would. The bed did not look as though it had ever been slept in. He blinked, and looked around again. At least there should be a bottle of booze.

There was no bottle.

Shayne thought for a moment. Then he let himself out of the room again and walked down the corridor. He found the stairway at the far end of the corridor in the rear of the hotel. He looked out a window and saw that the stairs probably opened out into the alley below.

He returned to the room.

He leaned against the door and tried to picture Prudence Baxter there in the room. She had called for airline reservations. She had ordered booze, but had then changed her mind and gone out. She had come back. If she was a drinker, as it seemed now, then she had probably killed the bottle. Holed up in this room all day?

From the suitcase that was almost sure to have been checked earlier in the lobby, and her trip out, it looked as though she had been expecting to meet someone. Had that someone left her alone? Had her meeting been bad? Whatever, had she then left the hotel, with all her possessions and probably by the back way, and gone out to kill her aunt?

Why?

Perhaps he could find out who

she had met. The problem was how to know where she had gone. The clerk had made it sound like she had walked wherever she had gone. The clerk had made no mention of a taxi, and the taxi rank was directly in front of the hotel. The clerk could have seen her get into a cab. Unless she had purposely walked up the street first.

Thinking all this, Mike Shayne's grey eyes slowly became aware of something they were seeing. A faint shine down low in a corner near the bed table. Something that was catching a stray ray of light. Shayne walked to it and got down on his hands and knees. It was wedged into a crack in the floor. His fingers dug it out. It was a red plastic swizzle stick with the name of a bar on it.

Shayne held it in his hands. He looked down. From directly above it could have been seen clearly. It had not been wedged very tightly into the crack. It was in just the spot it might have been if used to stir a drink on the night table, laid down, and rolled off and was forgotten.

Shayne put it into his pocket. It could be nothing, but he had a hunch. Prudence Baxter had been drinking somewhere last night. There were some women who had a habit of slipping swizzles into their handbags.

Shayne went over the room once more. This time he found one more piece of paydirt. Staring him in the

face at the bottom of the bathroom wastebasket was a matchbook cover—empty. But the name on the cover was the same bar as the swizzlestick! *Manny's Place*. With an address this time that was less than five blocks from The Galton Arms.

But an address that was some five blocks—with many bars in-between. So if that was where Prudence Baxter had gone, she had gone there purposely, for a specific reason.

Shayne picked up the telephone and had the clerk get him National Airlines. Yes, the musical voice at the other end said, a Mrs. Pauline Bennet had made a reservation, and, no, she had not picked up her tickets or even had the space confirmed. The ticket had been for tonight, and to New York.

Shayne hung up. All right. Something had changed Prudence's plans. That something was probably murder, and she would have the brains not to make a reservation again in the same name. But the same destination would be probable.

Sure that there was nothing else to find, Shayne returned to the lobby. The clerk looked expectant.

"You're sure you don't know of any visitors, or any telephone calls besides the one to the airlines?"

"I didn't say there were no calls," the clerk said.

Shayne blinked. "She had calls?" The clerk nodded. "Yes. One early this morning. Don't ask me

who it was. A man. He gave no name and I don't listen."

"But it was a man?"

"Unless it was a woman with a very deep voice."

"That was all? The one call?"

"That was all. Do you want me to notify you when she comes back?"

"Sure, but I don't think she'll be back."

The clerk arched a brow over his pimply face. "You mean you think she'll just leave all her things and not come back? Without paying?"

"You didn't get your money?"

"Not for today," the clerk said.

"Well that's it, son, because all her things are gone. The room is stripped bare."

"Gone? Why that's impossible! She could never have gotten past me with her bag! Never!"

"She did," Shayne said.

"No, it's impossible!"

Shayne smiled. "Nothing is impossible."

He left the clerk biting his lip. He would be blamed. Shayne was still grinning, but there was another small worm gnawing in his mind with the one that still gnawed about the watch. How had Prudence Baxter got past the clerk with her suitcase?

Unless someone else had first taken the suitcase out the back way. No, that wouldn't work. Maybe someone else had taken the suitcase and walked out—someone else

registered in the hotel. But why? Why not just pay the bill?

Shayne was still wondering about this as he crossed the lobby. He was a little worried about his client. He stopped at the pay phone and called Jane Baxter's number. There was no answer. It was possible she was still at police headquarters giving her statement. He dialed the number of Headquarters and asked for Gentry.

"The Chief's not here, Mike," Sergeant Morgan said.

"Is he still at the Baxter house?"

"No, but he's still on the Baxter case. They found a stiff in the bay. Gentry's down there."

"A body?" Shayne asked.

"Whose body?"

But the instant he asked that question he knew the answer. There could only be one answer.

"A dame. Prudence Baxter, or something like that."

"Tell me where she is," Shayne said in a dead voice.

He had hoped that it had all been some kind of mistake, for his client's sake.

IX

THE FLOODLIGHTS lit up the night like some grotesque movie set. The water of the Bay was dark and oily in the glare. Beyond the lighted area boats floated at anchor. Small waves lapped on the beach.

Will Gentry looked down at the body. "Shot in the heart. Same cal-

iber gun. Ballistics will tell us if it was the same gun."

"It will be," Shayne said.

"That's what I think," Gentry said.

The body of Prudence Baxter was clothed in somewhat old-fashioned underwear—probably the only time in her life that Prudence Baxter had been seen in her underwear by strangers, or anyone else. Now she lay there, all her secrets laid bare, her modesty destroyed, with no longer any control over the body she had thought belonged only to her.

"No rape, no sex as far as the M.E. can tell without an autopsy. Whoever killed her kept her clothes and her watch and used them to make us think she killed her aunt," Gentry said.

Shayne tugged on his ear. "Not necessarily, Will. She killed her aunt, ran; her conscience got the better of her, and she shot herself."

"And threw herself into the bay?"

"She shot herself on the edge of the bay."

"I know you're just fishing, Mike, but let's not fly too high," Gentry growled. "The wound isn't like a suicide wound, and who strips to underwear in public? Besides, where are the clothes and the gun? The tide and current here brought her in. If she'd shot herself around here she'd be near her clothes."

"All right," Shayne said. "After she killed her aunt, she got into a

fight with someone. I've been tracing her. She stayed at a hotel. She boozed up a lot. She met someone. She was using a phony name. She had airline tickets to New York. It all adds up to her being shot by whoever she was meeting with, and that was probably a man, because a man called her this morning."

"This morning?" Gentry said.

"That's right. The hotel clerk remembers."

"The hotel clerk is out of his mind," Gentry growled flatly. "And she didn't kill her aunt, Mike. Someone tried to frame her for that, and a lousy frame it was."

"How do you know she didn't kill her aunt?" Shayne said.

"Because the M.E. says she's been in the bay since at least midnight last night," Gentry said, his cigar stump doing an angry dance in his mouth.

"Midnight? In the bay?" Shayne gaped.

"You look like a confused fish," Gentry said. "Yeah, in the bay since at least midnight, and dead since maybe a couple of hours earlier. The M.E. says she was shot somewhere between seven o'clock and ten o'clock. He can't fix it much closer with her in the bay."

Shayne's head reeled for a moment. Dead since last night. Dead when Jane Baxter had become his client. Gentry seemed to be reading his thoughts.

"Your client's in trouble, Mike. Big trouble. She's the one who

swore she saw her sister leave the house. And she's the only one who really gains by the deaths of both of them."

"But she came to me?"

"You never had a killer come to you? Maybe she wanted to look innocent."

"Why cook up such a story if she knew her sister was dead?"

"The body had been weighed down. She probably figured we'd take a lot longer to find it. Only the weights got broken off."

"The delivery man saw the woman leave the house."

"The delivery man saw some woman leave, and only for a second. Your client is the one who insisted that woman was Prudence. The delivery man didn't see the woman go toward the road; only your client says that. The delivery man said she went around the house."

"How would she have time to change clothes?"

"Who said she did? That delivery guy said 'something grey' for what she was wearing. Only your client described it in detail as a suit and hat. Maybe your client just had something grey over her regular clothes. It wouldn't take twenty seconds to get around that house, shuck the cover, and into the study."

"Have you picked her up?" Shayne said.

Gentry nodded. "Ten minutes ago, Bellows called in. She's at



headquarters. Cranmer is with her. He's screaming, Bellows tells me. That's Cranmer's job."

And his job, Shayne thought, was to find a killer. Because he did not believe that Jane Baxter was a killer. Yet he felt cold. Even colder than when Gentry had been talking, because the time came back to him. Prudence Baxter had been dead certainly before ten o'clock. Then who had come back to the Galton Arms?

Who would know Prudence well enough to take her place?

Had someone impersonated Prudence Baxter at the Galton Arms last night? Had the real Prudence been lured from the room where she was hiding and killed, and someone else had come back? It would explain how she had got-

ten past the hotel clerk—she was not the same woman!

Then that same person came, disguised still as Prudence, and killed Georgia Baxter? Georgia Baxter had tried to call him. She had said something about not needing a detective to Jane. She had left a message for him to get out to her house. Why?

Because she had learned something she had not known in the morning. Maybe she had learned that Prudence was dead—and who had killed her!

Whatever the motive for the old woman's murder, it was clearly tied in with the murder of Prudence. And whatever had happened to Prudence had happened some time between eight o'clock, when she left the Cranmers, and eleven o'clock, when she returned to the hotel room. Nothing had happened in the hotel room, because the wound in Prudence had bled a lot, and there had been no trace of blood in that hotel room.

All the time he had been thinking, Gentry had been discussing the search of the area. Now Shayne listened. They had found nothing. Gentry faced him.

"It looks clear to me, Mike. Your client is the only good suspect. Her own story of seeing Prudence just about cinches it for me. And even Cranmer admits that Jane Baxter is a rich woman, now that they're both dead. She gains, she was there, and she had troubles with them

both. Motive, opportunity, and desire."

"And one impossible point, Will," Shayne said. "These aren't murders for gain. Too messy, too obvious. If I were a niece who wanted to inherit my aunt's money, I couldn't have picked a worse way of going about it."

"What kind of murders are they, Mike?"

"Fear, Will. Sudden fear. Psycho killings done out of self-protection. Prudence Baxter was worried, preoccupied, suspicious of something. She was killed because of that. And the old lady was killed because she found out why Prudence was killed."

Gentry chewed on his cigar stump. He frowned heavily, his black brows lowered. At last he swore.

"Maybe, Mike. Maybe. But I've got to go on what I have until I find different. I'm booking Jane Baxter."

The two men faced each other in silence for a moment. The shouts of Gentry's men carried clear in the light of the macabre scene. Some were out in boats, dragging the bay. It was like a vision of hell with all the men caught in the pitiless glare of the searchlights, and the body still lying beneath its canvas.

"Do what you have to, Will," Shayne said. "I'll be in touch."

He left the bluff Chief still chewing on his cold cigar stump. Will would not go off half-cocked. But

as of now, Jane Baxter looked like the logical killer.

As Shayne walked back to his car he had to admit that he was not sure himself. All his arguments of a killing from sudden fear fitted Jane Baxter, too. The claim to have seen Prudence was just the kind of spur-of-the-moment story a person who had killed without a plan might cook up, especially if she knew that Prudence was not alive to deny it. Gentry could be right that Jane had killed Prudence, sunk her body, and then cooked up her yarn in the belief that the police would not find Prudence's body until too late to be sure just when she had been killed. Which would have made her story seem true.

The only real doubt of Will Gentry's analysis Shayne had was that he was convinced that someone had impersonated Prudence Baxter at the Galton Arms, and that person could just as easily have been Jane Baxter as anyone else.

X

MANNY'S PLACE turned out to be a small nightclub type bar some five blocks from the Galton Arms, as Shayne had deduced. It was a gaudy red and blue between two very dark store fronts. Above it was an apartment house with lights on in most of the windows even at the late night hour.

Manny's Place itself was loud and smoky as Shayne pushed open

the door and walked into the wall of din that greeted him. It was a long, narrow room with a miniature stage at the far end where a sweating man pounded on a piano while an over-age blonde sang over-age songs to drunks who couldn't hear. The tables were set cheek-to-jowl and were just large enough to hold four drinks if no one tried to lean an elbow on them.

The bar was a small alcove to the left inside the door. Shayne walked into the bar and took a stool. He ordered a sidecar, and laid a twenty beside his glass with his hand still on it. The barman looked at the twenty, and then at Shayne.

"I'm looking for a woman," Shayne said.

"Who isn't?" the barman said.

But the man did not walk away. He was a beefy type in a gold-frogged blue jacket that looked like the uniform of a Swiss admiral. He stood there polishing a glass, with one whisky-eye focused distantly on the twenty under Shayne's fingers.

"This is a special woman. She was in last night about nine o'clock. She probably met someone here. They left together before eleven."

"They're all special," the barman said, "and they were all in here last night."

"Try remembering one who met a man."

Shayne did not describe Prudence Baxter yet. The beefy bar-

man looked like the kind of man who would remember whatever woman Shayne described. The twenty loomed large in the greedy eyes above the glass that was being polished like an antique.

"Small blonde?" the barman said hopefully. "She met a big, smooth type who was probably heeled."

"Try again," Shayne said.

The barman thought. Shayne saw that the man was really thinking. The twenty was important to the man. Shayne took his fingers off the bill, but he did not yet move it toward the man.

"Redhead," the barman said, eager. "Yeh, a small carrot-top, I served her a stinger. She was waiting for someone. Only the party never showed."

The barman looked at the twenty. Shayne shook his head. The barman sighed, shrugged.

"That was it. It was slow last night, believe me. Those was the only two looked like they expected, or even wanted company."

"I know she was in here," Shayne said.

"Look, buddy, I tried. I mean, I answered the questions, right? What are you, a private eye?"

"Why not a cop?"

"I know every cop in Miami," the barman said.

"I'll bet you do," Shayne said. "All right, try once more."

The barman shook his head. "Like I said, it was slow. Those

two, and a big blonde who was so far gone she wouldn't have known what she was waiting for if it was the Queen Mary. Then there was the—" The barman frowned. "No, she left before nine. I remember because she asked the time. That was— Hold it. Wait a minute. Sure, the funny one."

"Funny one?"

"Yeh. Funny peculiar, not funny hah-hah. She was dark-haired, looked about fifty, only I know she ain't. Kind of beat-up. I seen her in here a lot, only last night she was funny, you know?"

"She was meeting a man?"

"Hell no. This one was all alone. Usually she ain't alone, if you know what I mean, but last night she was alone, and she acted like she didn't want company. In fact she acted like she don't even want anyone to see her."

"She tried to stay hidden?"

The barman nodded. "That's it. Like she always turned her face away when someone come in. Not that anyone was gonna go for that face in no hurry."

"What was she wearing?"

"Grey, yeah. A kind of grey suit, I think. And a hat. That was one of the funny things. A small hat with a veil. I never saw her wear a hat before. And she had on real square toes. I saw the shoes because I dropped something and had to bend over on the other side of the bar. Real old lady shoes, and that sure wasn't like her."

Shayne rubbed at his chin. It was Prudence Baxter all right, but— It didn't sound like Prudence Baxter. Unless the story Jane Baxter had given him had been a pack of lies all along. Which was possible.

"You say she came in here regularly?" Shayne asked.

"Not regular, exactly, but enough. I mean, sometimes she'd be in here almost twice a week for a couple of months. Then she don't show for a while at all."

"She didn't meet anyone? You're sure?"

"Positive. She come in about nine, and she left just about eleven. She drank straight bourbon with water, and didn't give no trouble. She had her mind on her drinking." The bartender stopped, thought. "One thing, though. Like I said, she acted like she didn't want no one to see her, and a couple of times she jumped like she was shot when a guy came into the place."

"You know her name?"

"No, I mean not really. I maybe heard it sometime, only I don't remember."

"Jane?" Shayne said.

"Nah."

"Miriam?"

"Hell, no. Miriam!"

"What about Pru?"

"Nope."

"Helen?"

"Way off. Something easier."

Shayne did not know the name of the cook, Mrs. Werke, but the

cook could hardly impersonate Prudence Baxter—not by about twenty years."

"I know," the barman said. "Sally knows her. I saw them talking a couple minutes before she left."

"Sally?"

"The bar waitress," the barman said.

Shayne finally pushed the twenty toward the man. The beefy bartender had earned it. The bill vanished into the pocket of the fake admiral's jacket.

"Get Sally for me," Shayne said.

The barman walked away. Shayne sipped at his sidecar. He was trying not to think right now. But something kept buzzing around—the faint twinge of memory he had left at the time Gentry had brought out Prudence Baxter's watch. And with it there was something else now, the woman who had been in the Galton Arms Hotel had not met anyone in the bar.

He believed the barman. Still, the barman could be off about the time she had left, and she could have met someone outside the bar. It did not take long to shoot someone in a car. Then the switch could have been made—except that the woman in the bar sounded a lot like the woman in the hotel.

Shayne scratched his left ear. What if the switch had been made before Prudence Baxter reached *Manny's*? That could explain it. Prudence left the hotel, met some-

one, and was killed. Then the switch was made, and the woman who did not want to be seen sat in *Manny's* while the killer disposed of Prudence's body. That could explain the jumping when men came in.

"You the fellow buying answers?"

Sally was a skinny blonde with breasts too big for her rib cage and no hips at all. She looked like an Olympic runner someone had blown up in front with a tire pump. Her hip bones stuck up against the cloth of the black waitresses' skirt. Her belly was flat. But her mouth was all smile and all hunger. Money-hunger. Mike Shayne sighed. Everyone was money-hungry.

"That depends on the answers," Shayne said.

"Ask the question. I'll name the price."

"The woman in the grey suit and small grey-and-white hat with a veil. Who is she?"

A curtain descended over the waitress's eyes. "Cop?"

"A private, but what made you ask?"

"Private working for who?"

"Look, there are two murders in this. Now I'm about one jump ahead of Homicide. You can talk now, or later. Later it'll be the hard way."

The blonde gulped. "Annie wouldn't kill no one!"

"Annie who?"

"Look, mister, Annie's a good kid. She ain't had it easy. She needs a buck, that's all."

"Annie who, Sally?" the redhead asked.

"Annie DuBois," Sally said reluctantly. "She's a real sweet woman. She comes in here kind of regular. Last night—"

"What about last night? You asked about cops right away. Why?"

Sally licked her thin lips. "She was, well, nervous. I mean, she needed the jolts, you know? I mean, *needed*. And I knew there was something wrong right off."

"How did you know?"

"That get-up she was in. That wasn't the way Annie dressed, you know? She was a real sharp dresser usually. She shows up in that old-lady outfit, and she's drinking like she means it. I knew there had to be something wrong."

"She met a man?"

"No, she didn't even talk to anyone. She just got up at about eleven and left. You should have seen those shoes!"

"Maybe I will. Where do I find Annie DuBois?"

The waitress shrugged. "Search me, mister. Maybe you could try one of the unions."

"Unions?"

"Yeh. Equity or AFTRA. She belongs to both, I think. She talked about it. She said it was hard enough on an actress without two unions on her neck."



Shayne blinked. "Actress? Annie's an actress?"

"That's what she does for a living."

Shayne gripped her arm. "Try to think of where I can find her, and fast."

"Ouch! Let go, you ape! I don't know where she lives, only it ain't far. She got no car. She come in regular when she was in town, so it got to be close. Maybe try Lou Wasur's place. It's up the street. She said she knew Lou himself."

Shayne let her arm drop and turned for the door.

"Hey! What about my money?"

Shayne dug into his pocket and brought out a ten. He dropped it on the bar. The waitress's hands grabbed it like claws.

"Pay for my drink out of it," Shayne said.

The waitress laughed. "Let Mack pay for it out of his twenty."

Shayne left them arguing about who would take the price of his sidecar. He went out the door already aware of who would get stuck for his sidecar—the boss.

XI

LOU WASUR's tavern was a block up the street, and a hundred miles higher on the social scale. It was a quiet, dim, expensive cocktail lounge. Some of the customer's looked as if they were armed with more than money and front. Others looked like they were armed only with money and front.

Lou Wasur condescended to see Shayne in his private office. Shayne knew the man slightly. Wasur was small and neat and expensive. It was rumored that he had once had friends in Chicago. The friends were in Leavenworth, and Wasur was here. Which might mean that he was smart. Wasur was also thought to have some kind of relationship with Ray Incavo, the gambler.

"Sit down, Shayne," Wasur said from behind his desk. "I've heard a lot about you from Ray."

"You can believe the bad parts," Shayne said.

Wasur smiled politely. "You didn't come to crack jokes."

"I came for information," Shayne said. As Wasur's eyes went into quick hiding, he added, "Not the kind that can hurt you. At least, I don't think it can."

"Make it a good story," Wasur said.

Shayne had found over a lot of years that with a professional hard-guy or gambler or racketeer, you could expect him to be very reasonable and practical and honest—as long as his toes or his code were not being singed. Beyond his own private world, a businessman-crook could usually be counted on to play straight.

"I'm looking for Annie DuBois," Shayne said, and told the story straight but without names. Wasur listened like a man who has spent his life hearing stories and learning how to tell truth from lie, and even from part-truth.

"You think someone hired Annie to help cover two murders?" Wasur said slowly.

"That's what I think."

"Is Annie in trouble about it?"

"I don't think so, unless the killer has ideas. She can probably identify the killer."

That was an argument Wasur understood. The dapper club-owner thought about it for a long minute. He was putting himself in the place of Annie DuBois, and of a man who had hired her and killed twice.

"No trouble with the cops?"

"I can't be sure. I don't figure so, except as a material witness. My guess is she didn't know what she was hired to do."

"Annie's a smart girl," Wasur said.

"No law says a person has to guess about why she was hired. I don't think there's a law like that."

"The killings in the papers?"

"Not yet. She couldn't know about it that way yet."

Wasur was considering all laws and all angles of trouble for Annie DuBois that he could think of.

"You don't figure Annie was around the killings?"

"As far away as the killer could get her is my guess," Shayne said. "She was a cover."

Wasur nodded. "Okay. I guess I'm doing her a favor."

"If I get to her before the killer."

"You do that. Maybe I should come along."

"Thanks, but I better be legal. Just her address will do."

"She lives right upstairs in the apartment over this place. I'm her landlord. That's how I know her so good."

"Thanks," Shayne said and stood up.

Lou Wasur halted him with a gesture. "She's not a bad woman, Shayne. Be easy, okay? Annie's a pretty fair actress, but life hasn't been easy for her. Fifteen years she wanted to get up to New York, only she could never get the stake when she was free to go."

"Free?" Shayne said.

"When she was a kid there was her mother here, sick. Later there was a husband. A bum who ran out on her after she supported

him for ten years down here. The last three or four years she couldn't get a lot of work. I figure she'd do almost any job for a good bundle. Only not murder."

"I'll take it easy," Shayne said.

As he left Wasur's office, and walked through the plush cocktail lounge filled with the upper middle class of Miami and the underworld, he was thinking about an airline ticket to New York that had not been picked up. Maybe the ticket had been part of Annie DuBois's pay-off for a job. He hoped that that did not mean that Annie was unable to pick up the tickets, or take a trip anywhere in this world.

He found the name of Annie DuBois on the mail box of the apartment building in the entrance next to Wasur's bar. He did not ring the bell under the name. Instead he rang the bell of the superintendent.

The answering buzz let him in, and he went along the corridor to the door at the rear.

"Yes sir?" the super said.

"Lou Wasur sent me," Shayne said, which was only a half lie. "Is Annie DuBois at home?"

"I wouldn't know. She was in earlier; I saw her. But I don't know now."

"You have a pass key?"

"Yes, but—"

"I said I was sent by Wasur. I'm also a cop."

The man hesitated, shrugged.

"If Mr. Wasur sent you. Is anything wrong with Annie?"

"Just bad company."

"I knew it! She said she had a job yesterday, but I didn't like the sound of it. She didn't tell me the name of the show, and that's not like Annie."

"How about the key?"

The man vanished into his apartment, and came back with a key.

"You'll ring first?"

"I'm always a gentlemen," Shayne said drily. "Has anyone else been looking for her?"

"Why, yes. There was a man here this afternoon. My roommate tells me he wanted to know where Annie had gone. Apparently she was out." The man frowned. "I wonder how he got into the building? Mr. Wasur didn't send him."

"Can you describe him?"

"No. My roommate talked to him."

"Where's your roommate now?"

"In Palm Beach, the clod. He'll be back tomorrow."

"I'll be back," Shayne said.

He took the key and walked to the elevator. Annie DuBois lived on the third floor, in the rear. Shayne got off the elevator and walked along the bright, carpeted hallway to her door. Wasur kept a decent apartment house. And Annie DuBois' history was written by the place in which she lived—a dream of New York, but not a

dream so strong that she could accept a present life without a decent apartment.

Shayne had known a hundred of them, actors and actresses who had to have a nice place and nice things if they ate beans and day-old bread and never made it to New York. But dreams never die, and so they are always hungry for money. The next big job is going to be their ticket. And they don't want a cheap place in New York either. They tell themselves that they have to have a front in New York, so they take jobs without asking too many questions.

He pressed the bell of Annie DuBois' apartment.

There was no answer.

Shayne pressed again, and waited.

Then he used the pass key. Automatic in hand, he opened the door and jumped inside. Nothing happened. The apartment was dark except for a small lamp alight on the table near the door. There was no one at home.

Shayne surveyed the room he saw. A good room; almost bare. Annie DuBois had a good apartment, and nothing much in it. A few old chairs. One good modern chair, probably bought by a transient lover. A shabby couch that must have come from the home of an old lady. A memento of Annie's mother for sure. A big-screen color television set. No rug. One bureau and a scratched

wooden table with the remains of a TV dinner on it.

All typical—the big television, and the bare floor. Mike Shayne was beginning to get a clear picture of Annie DuBois. An actress, no longer young, only occasionally successful, with long and bitter memories behind her, and about one last hope left for the future. The exact woman to be asked to do a private acting job that she might guess was slightly shady but would ask no questions if the price was better than right.

Shayne went through the apartment with one ear cocked for any sound in the hall or at the door. He searched warily, half afraid that he would find a third body. But from the undisturbed aura of the apartment that was not likely. He found nothing of particular interest, and no trace of Prudence Baxter ever having been near the place.

Then he went out and sat in the single armchair facing the door, and waited.

The night was clear outside the window, and growing quiet as the city slowly wound down toward the morning hours. Soon the few hours of comparative rest would come to Miami before the new day dawned.

Mike Shayne waited.

XII

HE HEARD THE elevator start up. Mike Shayne came alert in the

chair. The motor sound moved slowly upward and came to a lingering stop. The elevator door sighed open. High heels clicked along the corridor, echoing in the silent building. The elevator door closed, and the cab began its whining descent.

The high heels clicked wearily toward the door behind which Shayne waited. He opened his jacket and swung the butt of his automatic out closer to hand. The high heels stopped at the door. There was the sound of fumbling in a hand bag, and then the rasping noise of a key searching for the lock.

The key slid into the lock.

The door swung open and a woman stood silhouetted against the light of the corridor. Looking into the dim room, she did not see Shayne at once. She stood in the doorway, swaying slightly as if a little drunk, and fumbling in her bag to replace her key as if that were the most important thing in the world.

She watched her. She was a woman of average height, about forty but worn by years of trouble and booze. She was somewhat flashily dressed, and wore extreme high heels. But Shayne imagined her in a severe grey suit, small grey-and-white hat, and sensible shoes, and she would look a lot like the way Prudence Baxter had been described to him.

She would look like Prudence to

a stranger, but probably not to anyone who really knew her. Which had bothered Shayne all along. Why had Annie DuBois impersonated Prudence Baxter for the benefit of strangers? What was the reason, since the woman could not fool anyone who knew Pru—

Shayne heard the sound, and Annie DuBois saw him, all in the same instant.

Annie DuBois screamed.

A shadow moved in the corridor.

Shayne jumped out of the chair, clawing for his automatic.

Annie DuBois turned in the open doorway to run away from Shayne.

Shayne almost reached her.

The shot exploded in the corridor.

Annie DuBois slammed against the door frame, bounced, and slid to the floor. Shayne reached her, his automatic out, and stepped over her fallen form.

Something slammed against his head, and he was knocked backward. A searing burn dug into his head. He heard the shot only then. He tripped over the fallen Annie DuBois and fell backwards into the room. Something flashed with a great noise inside his head and then a wave of black water engulfed him.

Shayne came to lying on his back on the floor, just inside the door of Annie DuBois's apartment. For a moment he lay with-



out moving. His automatic was still gripped in his hand. Everything seemed silent. He looked at his watch. He was not sure what the time had been when Annie DuBois opened the door, but he did not think he had been out more than a few minutes.

Just long enough for the killer to escape.

Swearing at himself for being a fool, Mike Shayne climbed to his feet. His head ached. He reached up and touched the welt of the flesh wound in his scalp. The bleeding had all but stopped. Tomorrow he would have a bad

headache and a very sore head, but tonight he was too mad at himself. He should have been ready for such an attack.

Instead he had been caught napping, and now he was alone with a dead body and no idea who had done the shooting. Whoever it was was apparently a good shot. Feeling almost sick at his own mistake, Shayne bent down and looked at Annie DuBois. Then he bent closer, his grey eyes bright as points of shiny steel.

Annie DuBois was not dead!

Shayne listened to the woman's chest. Her heart was beating strongly. Shayne examined the bullet wound. It was in her chest, but it had missed the heart, and apparently any other vital organ. She was unconscious and in shock, but she was very much alive.

Shayne stood up, feeling better. His presence, and rush to the door, had done some good. It had probably made the killer shoot too quickly, and it had certainly made the killer run without making sure of Annie DuBois.

He realized that by falling backward inside the room he had prevented the killer from knowing that he was knocked out. The killer, unable to see him and aware that he was armed, had panicked and run without finishing the job.

But the job had been pretty good, and Shayne strode quickly to the telephone. He called Gen-

try's office. The Chief was not there at this hour, but Shayne reported the shooting and told them to rush an ambulance. He explained enough to Lieutenant George Bellows, who was on duty, to make the importance of Annie DuBois clear.

"You think she knows who the killer is?"

"I'm sure of it," Shayne said. "And my client is in the clear. Right?"

"How do you figure that, Mike?" Bellows' voice said quietly from the distant police headquarters.

"She's in your jail, isn't she?"

"No, Mike. Cranmer got her out on a writ."

"From a murder charge?"

"The Chief didn't charge her with murder, Mike. He listened to you, and reduced it to material witness. Cranmer got a judge in half an hour to grant a writ. She left an hour and a half ago."

Shayne hung up slowly. The ambulance was on its way. But that was not what he was thinking about. Jane Baxter was free, and on his say-so. He wondered if he had done his client any favor by his insistence on her innocence. He also wondered if he had done Annie DuBois any favor. Maybe it had been Jane Baxter out there in the hall.

Still thinking about this, Shayne lit a cigarette and sat close to the unconscious Annie DuBois while

he waited for the ambulance. He smoked, and wondered what would happen if the actress died without speaking. He looked at her and again blamed himself for her shooting. Where she lay now she looked younger, almost innocent and vulnerable.

The siren of the approaching ambulance was faint in the late night air when Shayne found himself staring at Annie DuBois' hands. The redhead forgot to smoke. He held his cigarette like a suspended wand and blinked his grey eyes. The small worm that had been gnawing in his brain moved and took shape.

Annie DuBois wore two rings on each hand.

Diamond rings.

Shayne stood up and went to bend over the unconscious woman again. The rings were not diamonds, of course, but they looked like diamonds. Big diamonds. Shayne heard the voice in his head: *"I could see her hands. I mean, I noticed the diamonds she had. Rings, you know?"*

The taxi driver. The second taxi driver. Fred Thomas. The fat Fred Thomas had noticed the rings on Prudence Baxter's fingers.

And then another voice spoke quietly inside Shayne's head. The voice of his client: *"It was all the jewelry Prudence would wear."* The small lapel watch. The watch was all the jewelry Prudence Bax-

ter would wear. And yet Fred Thomas had seen diamond rings, and Annie DuBois wore diamond rings.

The ambulance siren was very close now. Shayne's head had begun to throb heavily. But the police and the ambulance crew knew where to find Annie DuBois, and they did not need Shayne's help.

Someone else might need his help.

XIII

SHAYNE DROVE HIS car as fast as the law allowed, and a little faster. A faint grey streak of dawn was in the eastern sky. He drove and wondered why he had not seen it before. A man had called the woman at The Galton Arms. The suitcase had been ready in the lobby, and someone had gotten the suitcase out of the hotel. With Prudence Baxter's clothes in it, of course.

He drove and thought about a rose. The next door neighbor, Mr. Arno Gregor, had given Prudence Baxter a rose when she stopped to talk to him on her way into the house of Jason Cranmer. But no one had mentioned a rose on the way out. Fred Thomas had seen no rose. The clerk had not mentioned a rose. The woman Jane Baxter had seen run from her aunt's house had not been wearing a rose.

And the woman who had come

out of Jason Cranmer's house had been nervous, in a hurry, too pre-occupied to stop and talk to Mr. Gregor. Too much in a hurry to do more than wave! A woman who wore Prudence Baxter's clothes—and four diamond rings!

Shayne parked some distance from the house and approached silently in the night. He circled the dark house. Cranmer's car was in the garage. He found a rear window open. He peered in and saw that it was a kitchen window. He climbed through and dropped like a big cat to the floor.

He waited. All was quiet. He stood in the kitchen and thought. The living room was clean; he had seen it. Where would you talk with an accusing woman? He moved in silence through the downstairs of the house and found what he wanted, a small study off the living room in the rear.

In the study he waited until his eyes were completely accustomed to the light. Then he began to look around carefully. It was not hard to find. A throw rug lay near the small desk in the room. A throw rug that did not seem to belong on the thick wall-to-wall carpet. Shayne pushed aside the throw rug.

The stain had been scrubbed, bleached, attacked. It was now very faint, but it was there. Shayne had no doubt that it was blood. Laboratory tests would prove that. No matter how hard

you worked on a bloodstain, something always remained. In time Cranmer would have replaced the rug. But there had not been time.

Shayne straightened up. Prudence Baxter had died here. The woman had never left Cranmer's house. It was all clear now. The only question was—

The light almost blinded Shayne.

"Don't move, Mr. Shayne."

Cranmer stood behind him. Shayne turned slowly and looked at the lawyer. The dark circles around Cranmer's eyes had become deep craters. The lawyer's eyes were bottomless pools of pain. The .45 automatic in the hand of the lawyer shook with something that was not fear.

"Put the gun down, Cranmer," Shayne said. "It won't help. I'm not the only one who knows."

"Knows?" Cranmer said.

Shayne nodded downward. "That's blood there, a lot of it. Prudence Baxter never left this house alive. Why did you kill her, Cranmer?"

Cranmer wavered, passed his big hand across the sunken eyes. He seemed to be thinking, considering. At last he sighed and lowered his gun. Mike Shayne went and took it from him. Cranmer turned to the single window of the study and stood looking out at the faint greying of dawn with his back to Shayne.

"She learned that I had been stealing from her aunt," Cranmer said. There was a thickness to his voice as if even now he could barely make his tongue say such a thing. "Over quite some years. It wasn't hard. Georgia is—was—a miser, but she knows nothing about finance, and she was really quite trusting.

"I manipulated her stocks, without her knowledge, and took the profits. The balance never changed, and that was all Georgia ever cared about."

Cranmer's shoulders heaved as if in pain. "She never guessed I was using her money to speculate. I made a fair bundle. Now and again I appropriated some cash. You know, Shayne. Phony expenses?"

"Was that what Prudence discovered?"

"Yes. That and the fact that I was taking a kickback from those astrologists. I brought them to Georgia and they shared what they milked from her. Pru discovered that something was odd. I don't know how, and she didn't know quite what. But once Pru got suspicious of something she would never stop until she found the whole story."

"So when she came here you shot her?"

"Yes," Cranmer said, his shoulders firm now where he stood at the window. "She was always too morally righteous. She said she

knew I was a crook and she would prove it. So I shot her."

Shayne rubbed his gaunt chin. "Just like that? In your own house? That was a pretty dumb play."

Cranmer's shoulders tensed. "I suppose it was."

"A taxi had brought her here. You were caught cold. Even your next door neighbor had seen her come in," Shayne went on, his grey eyes narrowed to dark points as he watched Cranmer's back.

"I remembered Annie DuBois. I go to Lou Wasur's bar quite often. My city office isn't far from there. I had met Annie in Wasur's. I knew she was an actress, always needed money, and looked something like Prudence.

"I called her, offered her a thousand dollars and a ticket to New York to impersonate Pru. I told her it was a legal matter, I wanted my client hidden. She probably didn't believe me, but my story was good enough to let her pretend to believe it.

"She came by cab, was dropped off some distance away, and came around to the back without being seen. Prudence's clothes were bloody, of course, but my wife has a grey suit, and neither the hat nor the shoes had been harmed."

Shayne nodded. "So she went out as Prudence, and went to the Galton Arms. What about the suitcase?"

"I had instructed her to buy it



and check it there. She had phone books in it. Later she put the clothes in it, and I went and checked in. I got the case and checked out. She just walked out in her own clothes without a bag. No one knew her, of course. I brought the case home with me. It's still here."

"While she was playing Prudence at the Galton Arms, you got rid of the body?"

"Yes. It wasn't hard. I simply got her into the car, tied on some weights, and drove her to the bay. I suppose I did a bad job with the weights."

"This was all last night before Jane Baxter came to me?"

"Yes. We—I had quite a shock when I saw you at Georgia's place. It never occurred to me that someone would be looking for Prudence so soon."

"And after I talked to her, Aunt Georgia got around to wondering about Prudence's disappearance," Shayne said. "She dug and found

out something. She tried to call me. Did she call you, too?"

Jason Cranmer nodded, the back of his head going up and down, up and down as if on a string. "She was an arrogant old woman. She couldn't resist calling to tell me that she had me caught. With you nosing around, I had—"

"You dressed up as Prudence and went to kill the old woman?"

"Yes."

"No," Shayne said.

Cranmer's back stiffened.

"You couldn't even begin to look like Prudence, even on a dark night," Shayne said. "And don't tell me it was Annie DuBois. You'd already finished with her part."

Cranmer's shoulders heaved. "The witnesses were mistaken. I wore women's clothes, but much larger. It happened so fast."

"No," Shayne said. "You didn't impersonate Prudence. You didn't kill Aunt Georgia. You didn't kill Prudence. That killing, right here at home, was too stupid, too insane. You're not the type to make such a crazy play."

"I killed them," Cranmer said, his back rigid.

"Where is she, Cranmer? Do you know?"

"I killed them. I'm guilty."

"Your wife, Cranmer, where is she? You're guilty, all right, but not of killing them yourself. You covered for her, and you let her stay free to kill twice more."

Jason Cranmer turned. The lawyer stared at Shayne from eyes sunk in horror and pain.

"Twice?"

"Annie DuBois, Cranmer."

Cranmer groaned like a wounded animal.

"Only she made a mistake, Cranmer. Annie DuBois isn't dead. She's going to live, and she'll talk. You might as well—"

He heard the movement.

She stood in the open doorway. She was fully dressed and her blonde hair was in wild disarray. Her clothes were torn as if she had been fighting through thick bushes. A .38 Police Special was in her right hand.

Cranmer groaned again. "No, Helen. No more."

Helen Cranmer stepped one step into the room.

XIV

HELEN CRANMER'S eyes were insane. She pointed the .38. "Just him, Jason. He's the last. Him and then the DuBois woman again. He made me miss. I never miss; you know that. I was a pistol champion, wasn't I? Prudence didn't know that. When she accused us of stealing her precious aunt's money she didn't think I would shoot. She laughed at me. The old maid! I shot her."

Helen Cranmer giggled. Shayne watched her. All the poise that covered her essential insanity was

gone now. She was like a school-girl with a secret triumph.

"I'm a pistol champion. The old lady didn't know either. But him!" She scowled at Mike Shayne like a child who has been thwarted. "He made me lose my aim with that actress creature. He shouldn't have done that."

Helen Cranmer peered toward Shayne as if having trouble seeing him. The detective suddenly felt that she was going to suck her thumb next.

Only her thumb was now a .38 Police Special.

Cranmer stepped toward her. "Helen, no more. Please, dear. You promised you'd stay home. You lied to me and went out and killed Georgia. I want you to promise—"

Helen Cranmer giggled. Suddenly she was really sucking her thumb. She chewed on the left thumb, sucked.

"That old biddy! All that money and we needed money. I like money. Daddy said money was dirty to real aristocrats, but Daddy never had any money and he died. We had to have money. I told you that story and you never guessed. All I have to do is kill this one and it'll be all right. Okay?"

Cranmer smiled at her. The big lawyer stepped closer. The gun swung toward his belly. Helen Cranmer blinked. Cranmer went closer. Mike Shayne watched,

tensed to jump when the pistol was steady on Cranmer. But he was too far away. It would be risky.

Cranmer moved closer. "Give me the pistol, Helen. You've been a bad girl, but that's all right. You'll have a nap now. You'll get a long rest. You are tired, aren't you, baby?"

Helen blinked, nodded. "Yes. Tired. I'm awfully tired, Daddy. Can we go away? I have the money, Daddy. You can take me on a holiday now, Daddy. We've got the money."

"Of course, baby. Just let me have the pistol. You won the contest. Aren't you happy?"

Helen smiled, sucked on her thumb. "I did win, didn't I? Take good care of the pistol. It's my favorite."

Helen Cranmer handed Cranmer the pistol, turned, walked out into the living room, lay on the couch and curled up like a small child. Shayne took the gun from Cranmer and went to stand over the sleeping woman. She was fast asleep.

"She'll sleep for hours now," Cranmer said wearily.

Shayne went to the telephone and called Will Gentry. The Chief was in, furious at Mike Shayne leaving the DuBois woman. Shayne told his story and Gentry was no longer angry. The DuBois woman would make it. Shayne said he would wait with Cranmer.

He hung up and turned to Cranmer.

"How long have you known?" Shayne snapped.

"That she was crazy?" Cranmer said. "I didn't know. She had a breakdown when she was a girl, when her father died. She had another a few years ago. But no one said she was insane or dangerous."

more than it was. I never suspected what she was stealing."

"How much of your story about it all is true?"

Cranmer shrugged. "Most of it. Except that I wasn't here when Prudence came. When I came home that night Prudence was dead. Helen was the way you see her, almost. I did all that I told you about Annie DuBois, and get-

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"She probably wasn't. Until shock triggered her. And fear when Prudence found her out. How did she manage to fool you about the money?"

"She told me her Uncle was sending her money. He lives in California, almost a recluse. I never met him, and he does send her money. I never knew how much. She simply told me it was

ting rid of the body. I gave Helen a sedative. By morning she was normal. Or I thought so.

"Then you came around. After you left she slipped out on me. We had been drinking. I tried to stop her from drinking, but it didn't work. She just went in to take a nap, and when I looked in she was gone."

Cranmer looked at Shayne.

"She had had a telephone call. She told me it was a girl friend. I know now that it must have been Georgia. I suppose Georgia thought I had been stealing the money and told her so. She took Prudence's clothes with her when she slipped out. I went out to try to find her."

"That's why it took you so long to get to Aunt Georgia's house after that killing? You looked at Annie DuBois' place?"

"Yes. I didn't know where Helen was. I had to go to the jail with Jane. I—I never thought she would try to kill Annie DuBois. I was waiting for her to come home when I heard you in the house. I—"

Shayne was harsh. "You tried to cover a murder, and by doing that you let her go free to kill again. You're as guilty as sin, Cranmer."

The big lawyer sat down and covered his face. "I know. I—just couldn't turn her in. I—love her, you know."

Jason Cranmer looked up at Mike Shayne with eyes that floated and had already drowned in a sea of pain and horror.

The next day Will Gentry sat in his office and smoked a new black cigar. The Chief was not satisfied.

"He's suffered, Mike, but he's going to suffer more. He's an accessory a hundred ways, not to mention getting rid of the body. She'll go to the happy farm, but

Cranmer'll go to jail for a long time."

"I wonder if he'll care," Shayne said. "He's not a bad man, Will, just weak. He panicked when he saw Prudence on his study floor. I think his own guilt will punish him more than prison."

"Maybe," Gentry said. "But he'll get prison, too. You had it pegged, I'll give you that. Fear murders. Only an insane person would have shot right there in her own house."

Shayne nodded. The Chief's office seemed especially gloomy today. Shayne was wondering what he would have done if he had walked into his own home and found his insane wife standing over a body with a pistol. What good would it do to turn her in? He wondered if he could have turned her in to be put away for life?

Will Gentry laughed. "One thing, Mike. Remember how everyone said that the nurse, Miriam Manners, acted like a woman in hiding, someone with a secret? Well, she was all right. Or she is. She's hiding from an ex-husband and a gambling mania! That's' all. She's a reformed gambler, an addict of gambling, and her ex-husband is a gambler who wants her back."

Mike Shayne smiled. A murder case sometimes shakes a lot of loose skeletons. He smiled. But he was not happy.

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October—1967

The Quick Ambition

She was slave to his every wish. How was he to know that her soft eyes promised—ruin!

by JAMES McKIMMEY

BERTRAM WINTROATH sat at his desk in the San Francisco office of the Mayhew General Insurance Company, watching the new girl step into the glassed partition used by the district manager, Bob Harrton. He saw, with surprise, that she sat down on the corner of his wide desk, smiling and talking rapidly.

"Who is she?" asked Donovan, another underwriter who sat behind Wintroath.

"I don't know. But she's got guts."

"Yeah, and looks."

Wintroath agreed with that, but he did not continue the conversation. His association with other employees was no more than was necessary to accomplish his work. One did not associate intimately with one's inferiors.

It mattered not that Wintroath was no higher in the Mayhew ranks than Donovan. He would be one day.

Wintroath continued to inspect the girl sitting blithely on Bob Harrton's desk. Her black hair was pulled back from a face which was sensually attractive. She had a small, pretty mouth, and her green eyes were dramatically in use. Wintroath's telephone rang. He picked it up and said in his cool voice, "Wintróath here."

"Western Union calling," the girl answered. "Shall I read the message, sir?"

Wintroath frowned. "Yes."

"From Cleveland, Ohio, Fairwell and Grislow, Attorneys at Law. Quote: 'Great-grandmother Wintroath passed away, leaving you a quarter of a million dollars. Letter following.'"

Wintroath's palm turned moist against the plastic of the telephone. He lost focus on the dark-haired girl sitting in Bob Harrton's office. His great-grandmother, he thought, had succeeded in detesting him ever since he'd been old enough to

of Bertram Wintroath



crawl. He had not been in contact with her since he'd come West years ago. She'd left him a quarter of a million dollars?

"My God!" he whispered.

He heard throaty laughter, then flushed with anger, realizing that it was Nina executing another of her practical jokes.

"That was supposed to be funny?" he said edgily.

Her normally husky voice returned: "Oh, how you fell for it! Were sugar plums dancing in your sweet head, darling?"

"No," he lied. "I thought we were finished with that, anyway."

"I couldn't help, sweet. Honestly."

He closed his eyes, visualizing her in the advertising office where she worked as a secretary. She owned a soft, striking face, framed by clover-honey hair. She was tall and splendidly shaped.

He'd considered his fortune extremely good when he'd met her at Paoli's one late afternoon. That had been seven months ago, which was approximately five months longer than he'd ever involved himself with any girl before. Wintroath liked the short-chase, the connection, then the sudden flight to other woods, looking for that right one which might spring his drive for success straight up the ladder.

Nina Thompson might be beautiful, with that stunning body. But she had become tiresome lately. Only last Sunday morning he had

awakened in her bed to find her placing a breakfast tray on his lap, saying, "Truly, sweet, I'm not trying to push. But—"

She had wound her arms around his neck and cried, for God's sake.

"I think we had a promise about these so-called jokes of yours," he said archly.

"I'm sorry."

He listened to that disbelievingly, thinking that there were other aspects of Nina which he'd found extremely annoying.

Her friends, notably. Totally gregarious, she would pick up with any sort of undesirable simply because she found him interesting.

Over the past months he'd been introduced to a set of acquaintances ranging from jazz musicians to sculptors to painters to television and stage actors.

Wintroath, of course, had an absorbing interest in the arts. Only last year he had taken a group-plan flight to Paris and spent days in the Louvre. In his small apartment he listened to Debussy and Beethoven by the hour. In the past month he had read books by Saroyan, Bellow and Baldwin.

But Nina's artists were phonies. There was not only that group, but longshoremen, waiters, truck drivers, and a few, he was certain, who actually worked outside the law. She'd demonstrated no discretion whatever in the matter.

He had finally had to tell her that their relationship would be discon-

tinued unless she divorced herself from those people.

She had shown a surprising anger, saying, "Look. Those are my dear, sweet friends. I don't just tell them to cool it."

"If you don't," he said, "I'm out of it."

"Like how?" she asked, eyes darkening.

"We'll simply meet for cock-



tails, and I'll tell you quite calmly and reasonably that it's over."

Her anger dissolved. She'd become tender and affectionate again. "I'll get rid of them. Because, honey . . ." She pressed her face against his. "I am hopelessly and totally. No strings, baby, like we've said. But don't ever leave me. Please—"

Now he said bitingly, "I really didn't think that was too funny."

"Never again," she said positively. "What are we doing to-night?"

And that, he thought, was another annoyance. She'd begun counting on everything. She liked to eat in quaint, cheap restaurants, and often prepared dinners at home for

him, so that he was able to continue his rigid savings program. But she'd begun to take their relationship for granted. That, he considered, was a severe mistake.

Nina was a good-looking broad, stacked from here to there, with a fair mind and a devotion unmatched by any of the previous girls he'd found so easy to attract. But she was a secretary, with no connections. And that was no future for him.

The girl in Bob Harrton's cubicle slid gracefully from his desk and walked back through the office to the table assigned to file girls; there was something extraordinarily polished about her manner.

"I'll call you back, Nina."

He hung up and studied a new policy with the conscientiousness he'd demonstrated ever since he'd gone to work here. Then he got up and walked back to the water cooler next to the girl's table. He saw, with satisfaction, that she was examining him with interest.

Wintroath was strict with his money, but he carefully chose the proper clothing for his slim, dark good looks. Watching for sales in the men's shops he had accumulated a wardrobe unmatched by anyone else in the office, including Bob Harrton, who demonstrated no taste whatever.

He drew a paper cup of water, shifted his neatly jacketed shoulders, then turned to find the girl smiling at him.

"Like the job?" he asked.

"It's horrid."

"That's honest."

"You're Bert Wintroath, aren't you?"

"That's right," he said, pleased.

"Bob told me. I noticed you, when I came in this morning," she said.

"This gets better all the time. Know him?"

"I'm from Los Angeles. He knows the family."

"But I don't know your name, do I?"

"Eloise."

"I like that."

"Eloise Mayhew."

He felt his pulse speeding. But then he said, knowing that it was absolutely the right response, "All right. The president's daughter. But what if I told you I don't hold that against you?"

She laughed with delight. "You're interesting me more every minute."

"File clerk?"

"Daddy wanted a boy. He got me. He thinks I'm going to take over some day. He wants me to learn the business from the bottom up. It's ridiculous. But I adore San Francisco. So here I am. Even if I am a girl."

"I'll buy that."

"I do think I like you, Mr. Wintroath."

"Why don't I capitalize and ask what you're doing for dinner this evening?"

"Why," she said, her eyes shining merrily, "don't you?"

With a short call to Nina, he pleaded homework that night. At five o'clock he walked up the street to his bank, preparing to deposit the usual amount from his pay check.

Then, remembering the expensive dress Eloise Mayhew had worn, he cashed the entire check and placed the currency in his wallet. He called for her at her suite in the Fairmont.

They had cocktails, dined and danced. When it was over he had just enough money left to buy bus transportation to his apartment. Still, she'd allowed him to kiss her several times. It might easily have gone farther than that had he not reasonably, and with some will power, left at the discretionary moment.

This was not, he told himself, the quick job. And he was going to demonstrate the facade of absolute correctness. Nobody got ahead in a company like Mayhew General Insurance without proving that he was faultless in his conduct, even with the possible advantage of an Eloise Mayhew in his pocket.

He evaded Nina for the next two weeks, concentrating solely on Eloise. It went along faster than he'd hoped. He cut deeply into his savings in order to keep up with her entertainment tastes. She also owned some annoying habits which had been entirely absent in Nina: she often demanded curtly that he

do small things, as she might instruct a servant. She liked to drink more than he was accustomed to; her laughter often became shrill, and she had no real depth.

However, when the inevitable happened and he lay beside her in her suite, he said, "This should happen more often."

"You're damned right," she whispered huskily.

"Well, but don't laugh—I mean legally."

"Who's laughing?"

Two days later Bob Harrton called him into his office. The man's smile seemed vague; his eyes held an odd expression that Wintroath could not identify. Wintroath maintained his cool but friendly manner and sat down beside Harrton's desk, smiling gently.

"Bert," Harrton said expansively, "you've been doing a nice job for us."

"Thank you, sir."

"I'm—aware that you've been seeing something of our little girl, Eloise."

Wintroath nodded slowly. "That's true. We seem to have hit it off from the beginning."

Harrton ran a palm down the length of his blood-red necktie. "Of course, I've known that girl ever since she was a child. George Mayhew worships her, you understand. When she was born, he said to me, 'By God, she isn't a boy, but I never reneged on anything yet! That girl gets the best!' She has, Bert."

"Yes, sir." He looked through the glass to see Eloise smiling at him.

"She's expensive to squire around, isn't she?"

"That's rather personal, isn't it, sir?"

"Yes. But I know that you, as one of our junior underwriters—"

"Well, I do have some money put away, if that's what you mean."

Harrton stroked his tie once more. "I've just learned that the Mayhews are intending to fly up this weekend. I think they'll be interested in meeting you."

"Eloise hadn't told me that."

"George wanted to tell me first. Seems Eloise has been phoning and writing about nothing but you. George asked what sort of lad you were. I told him you were above reproach. George demands it, you know."

"I'm deeply grateful, sir."

"I was mentioning money. I think I've got a little surprise for you."

"That's very interesting."

"I've been considering adding a personal assistant for some time now. I'm naming him. There'll be a nice raise for you. What do you think of that?"

Wintroath saw that peculiar expression in the man's eyes again. He knew now what it was: fear. The promotion was a last-minute, somewhat desperate tactic to get in good with the man he would be working for very soon.

Wintroath attempted to keep sarcasm out of his voice, holding on to his proper pose even when he knew that he had the cards. "Thanks, Bob."

He met Nina for cocktails that afternoon. When he'd finished the brief, cold explanation, he saw shock in her eyes. She tried to maintain her composure, but her face had become a tight mask. Finally she said, "You're marrying her."

"That's it."

Two tears tracked in silver streaks through her make-up. "When I think of all the intimate things that you and I—"

He tasted his drink.

"Love and hate. Do you know how far apart they are?" She pressed a trembling forefinger and thumb together.

"Hardly the time for philosophy."

"That's all you've got to say?"

"We could perhaps say it as the French do."

"How is that?"

"How about *le train vient de partir*?"

"What the hell does that mean?"

"The train just left."

She stood up suddenly, striking the table so that the drinks spilled over. She walked to the door in a swift, blind flight.

THE MEETING with Mr. and Mrs. Mayhew was a smooth success. Initially, they took a dim view of his

position. But he handled himself so carefully that he knew finally that George Mayhew had decided how to improve that position.

The wedding was set for a date two months ahead, in the conservative fashion demanded by the Mayhews.

After they had gone, Wintroath rewarded Eloise with his ardent best.

When he left the office the following Friday, he was carrying his considerably improved check. The raise would help defray the expense of keeping up with Eloise's tastes, at least until the wedding. After that—

He had nearly reached his bank, enjoying the sea smell in the air, when a large man wearing a tattered gray jacket bumped his shoulder. He stopped and turned in indignation, as others passed by hurriedly. The man, whose thick face was weathered and roughly pocked, held his jacket open to reveal a pistol in a shoulder holster. The jacket closed.

Wintroath stared at the man's steady, oddly colored eyes—pink. He said, "What's going on?" He said it with no authority. He was already feeling a strong panic.

"Over there," the man said in a rumbling voice.

"Why?"

"Move!"

He walked with the man to a short alley where a green sedan was parked. The man held the pistol in

his hand now, his back to the busy sidewalk.

Wintroath felt his legs weakening. He had never preferred any sort of danger or violence; he had avoided them all of his life. He looked into the sedan and saw Nina sitting rigidly in the back seat, staring at him with frightened eyes. Beside her was a squat man pressing the muzzle of a gun against her side.

"What—?" Wintroath began.

"Do what I say, you hear?" the large man ordered. "Take this."

He handed him a paper sack.

"Now these."

He was given two pieces of folded yellow paper.

"You give the top one to the first teller in the paying section, along with the sack—she fills the sack up. You come back here."

"I can't do that!"

"If you don't, I blast you, right now! The second note tells you what to do after. If you don't come back, I'll be gunning for you until I get it done. That, and my friend pulls the trigger on the broad. Move!"

Nina stared at him pleadingly. Wintroath felt his stomach turning over. He returned to the sidewalk and moved toward the entrance of the bank, wondering at the preposterousness of it. He stepped into the interior, face white, hands trem-

bling. He did not for one moment consider the safety of Nina—nor what those seven months had meant; he was thinking of himself.

He stopped in front of the teller's window, his body shielding the counter from those who stepped up behind him. He put the sack and note down. The teller was a young woman with a crisp look of efficiency. He waited, legs shaking beneath him, as she read the note and paled.

Her hands moved rapidly, stuffing currency into the sack. She shoved it toward him. He turned hurriedly, bumping into the man behind him. He walked swiftly across the marble floor. When he reached the sidewalk, he began running toward the alley. He would throw the sack into their car. After they'd driven off, he would explain to the police exactly what had actually—

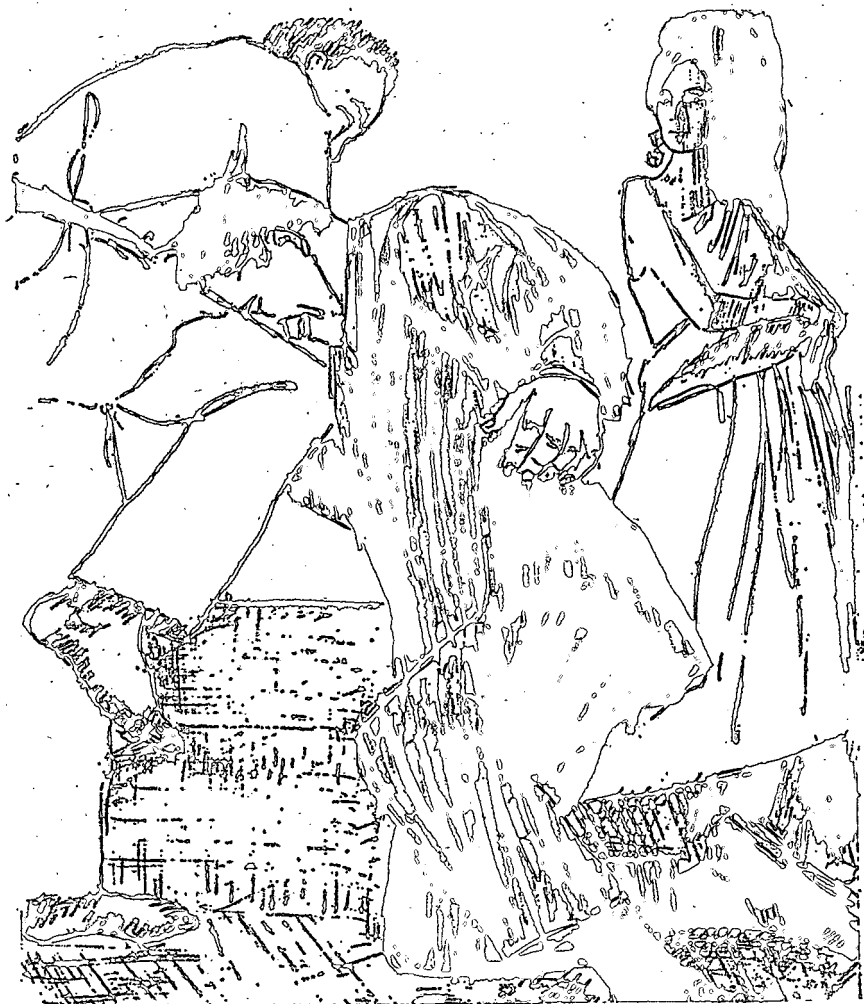
The green sedan was gone. He heard the hard clanging of the bank's alarm. There were running footsteps behind him. Someone shouted, "That's him!"

A police car came hurtling into view, siren sounding, red light flashing. Wintroath dropped the sack. Then he realized that he was still holding the second note. Dazed, he opened it and read what it said:

"Darling—*le train vient de partir.*"

Featuring

KEVIN KAR



SUBMARINE FOR SALE

by MAX VAN DERVEER

*It was a simple assignment they
gave me. Break up a revolution
single-handed—and come back
with what was left of my life!*



WE HURTTLED DOWN out of the star-seined night sky too fast and at too sharp an angle. Ahead were the runway lights, but they were enlarging too swiftly.

"Doll," I yelled from the co-pilot's seat, "ease up!"

"Who's doing the driving, Kevin Kar?" she piped back.

I wasn't sure anyone was. But it was already too late to complain. We hit the ground hard. The light plane bounced. We went so high into the air I figured we almost had

a chance to make another approach, except the motor conked out and we went down.

We bounded along the runway like dice coming out of a cup. And then we were out of the runway. We went through something that looked like a high wire fence. Suddenly our tail was up and our nose was down.

I pitched forward. The top of my skull ran into something solid and there was no more feeling. There was nothing except bright, shoot-

ing lights inside my head and a voice somewhere saying, "Isn't this a helluva way for a secret agent to die?"

All this started with a summons which came to me in my native Texas Panhandle while I was taking an earned sabbatical from an East Berlin kidnaping. It ended the sabbatical and took me to Washington, where I complained.

Holly, my boss, the chief of Washington's most secreted bureau, listened for exactly two minutes then switched me off. "Kar, a guy in New York has a submarine for sale. He's legit. His potential buyer may not be."

I sighed. "Which one is it this time, Chief? Hanoi? Peking? East Berlin? Moscow? Rio?"

"A private citizen."

My interest didn't perk.

"Equator Sales, New York City, dealer in surplus war materials, Donald Equator, president," Holly said. "Equator is supposed to be okay. He cooperates. He's peddling guns, ammo, grenades, bazookas. You name anything the military suddenly doesn't want and Equator has it the next day. It's for sale."

"But Equator is not a fool. He's careful. Somebody comes along and wants a big shipment of machine-guns, somebody comes along and wants a thousand cases of rifle ammo, he calls the police, and he doesn't complete the sale until they give him the A-okay."

"In this instance, it's a submarine. A guy wants to buy a submarine—which Equator just happens to have in stock. And in this instance, too, Equator is suspicious of his potential buyer. Equator smells hanky-panky, so he phones the cops."

"And the cops phone the FBI, and the FBI phone the CIA, and somebody there decides this one is for the Bureau, and—"

"Kar, get up to New York."

I went to New York. It was cold. It was snowing. It was snowing in April in New York.

I wasn't happy. Getting excited over a private citizen who wanted to buy a submarine seemed rather melodramatic. I was a dealer in much larger things. I matched wits, waged private cold and hot wars with the best agents, saboteurs and assassins other unfriendly nations had to offer.

To be relegated to checking out some John who suddenly had gone off his nut and wanted a submarine for a toy seemed almost as if I was being punished for botching my last assignment, which I hadn't.

So I was unhappy. Until I walked into Equator Sales.

She was blonde. She was robust. She could take the misery out of any lousy morning. She had rosy cheeks and very large blue eyes and a run in one hose. She was examining that run when I popped into the office.

She looked up on my whistle,

said, "Oh," and pushed the skirt of a pale blue dress down toward inviting knees.

"Well, hi," I said.

"Well, hi," she said.

"Poor nylon or garters too tight?" I asked politely.

She shrugged philosophically. "Everyone has problems. You are?"

"An Indian. Kiowa blood."

"That much I can see."

"Kevin Kar."

"Oh!"

"Something wrong?"

"No. I—what I mean is—"

"You yelped."

"It's nothing."

"No little green man behind your chair, pinching you?"

"No. Really. I mean—" She stood abruptly and smoothed the blue dress against a flat tummy. "It's just that I didn't expect a secret agent to be—" She cut off the words, danced a little jig without moving her feet, then said, "Mr. Equator is expecting you."

I frowned on her back as she turned from the desk. Obviously people had been talking, and too much. It wasn't good. People aren't supposed to know my racket. People aren't supposed to know about the Bureau. Especially secretaries, even if they are healthy blondes. Anonymity is supposed to be one of our fortes.

Before I could press for this secretary's source of knowledge, she was taking me into another office

and I had learned something else about her. She had savage hips.

Then I had Donald Equator.

He fitted his name. He had to be one of the roundest men I'd ever encountered. I am six-three and weigh in at two hundred and fifteen pounds. Donald Equator was about five-three and carrying at least three hundred and fifteen pounds. He also had a bald dome and freshly-shaved jowels that gleamed, four or five chins, and about forty to forty-five years, I judged.

Heap on more nervous energy than is good for health, put it all inside an expensive brown-tinted suit, white shirt and delicate orange necktie, stand it behind a polished desk in a polished, wood paneled, thickly carpeted office, give it small bright eyes that devoured his secretary as she departed, 'and you had Donald Equator.

He sighed after she was gone. "I don't know what I'd do without Sara."

From the look on his face, I wondered what he did with Sara, and then he was waving me into a chair in front of his desk and he had sat in the chair behind his desk and he got out a fresh handkerchief and dabbed at his wide brow.

"Mr. Kar," he said, "I'm glad you're here."

"I'm not sure I am."

He jerked, frowned.

"Your secretary knows who I am."

He hunched. "Well, she knows you have come here from Washington."

"She shouldn't."

The handkerchief danced across his brow. "My goodness, why not? After all, Sara is my secretary, and Lieutenant Brown—he's an acquaintance on the police force—said you would be in this morning, and I told Sara to be sure and show you in immediately upon your arrival. Mr. Kar, I'm sorry if I have caused you discomfort, but—"

"A secret agent is supposed to be just that, Mr. Equator. Secret."

"Secret agent?" His tiny eyes bugged slightly and he quit dabbing with the handkerchief. Then the eyes narrowed and he put away the handkerchief. He sat back in his chair. He contemplated me.

"Are you some kind of secret agent, Mr. Kar? Brownie didn't tell me that. All I know is he said a man from Washington was coming to see me about Harry Howard and the submarine I have for sale. And that's all Sara knows, too. Now, if she implied—"

"She did more than imply, Mr. Equator."

"Then it is her imagination. Sara has a vivid imagination, among other things."

It was possible. I don't like anything that results from happenstance, circumstance or supposition, but I had to admit that someone with imagination could put together an employer's suspicion

over a potential sale, the relaying of that suspicion to a police lieutenant, the lieutenant later sending back word that a man from Washington was taking over the investigation, and come up with the probability that the man from Washington was a secret agent.

It stank, but it could have happened.

"Okay. For the moment, let's talk about your submarine."

He sighed. "I wish I'd never bought the damned thing. I knew it was trouble from the beginning. I had a feeling in my bones."

"So why did you?"

"I saw a tidy profit in it."

"But not now?"

"Sure, but—" He let the words hang briefly. Then he said, "This man who says he is Harry Howard from Los Angeles just doesn't ring true."

"Why not? You don't think his name is Harry Howard? You don't think he is from Los Angeles?"

"Mr. Kar, the nature of my business makes me a suspicious man. I have to be very careful of the people I deal with. At the present time I have a submarine for sale. I purchased it from the Navy. Surplus. It currently is in dry dock in a Navy yard that is being closed down. The yard is to be empty in six months. That gives me four months to make my sale for a good profit if I can. If I can't make that sale in four months, then I'll have to let the sub go to a salvage

company for what I can get out of it.

"So I've been advertising in the newspapers. And two days ago a man who said he was a Harry Howard from LA walked in here and said he wanted to buy. Fine. Except something about this Howard turned on my caution light."

"Do you advertise nationally?" I asked.

"No."

"Then perhaps it was because Howard said he was from the West Coast."

"He made it sound legitimate, Mr. Kar. He said he was in New York on other business. He said the movie-making firm he represented—"

"Movie firm?"

"That's what made me suspicious. Howard told me he was interested in buying the sub for a motion picture company. If he had said he wanted it for himself, if he had said he was representing a family of wealth and the family had tired of yachts and wanted something a bit more adventurous, like space ships, if he had said he had an idea about converting the sub into some kind of a club, I probably would not have questioned his intention. But when he said it was for a film-making company, I became suspicious. Mr. Kar, don't film companies have their own subs? Replicas? Think about cost alone—a studio-built facsimile against the real item."



Kevin Kar

"They do fake a lot of stuff," I admitted.

Equator nodded. "So I turned to Brownie, but now I'm wondering if I have been overly suspicious. I'd hate to kill a sale if it is legitimate."

"I believe you have an appointment with Howard at eleven o'clock this morning?"

"Yes." He glanced at a wrist watch. "In approximately twenty-five minutes, or perhaps sooner. Harry Howard has been early for his other appointments."

"Okay. I'm going to hang around your outer office."

He looked surprised. "What for?"

"I want to get a look at Howard. I might know him."

"Know him?"

I stood. "You'd be surprised at the number of people I know who would be interested in acquiring a genuine U. S. Navy submarine, Mr. Equator."

He looked confused. It looked real enough.

"Relax. Carry on with Howard as if he is above suspicion. Are you anywhere near completing the sale?"

"I've given him a price. He may come in with a check."

"If he does, go ahead with the sale."

"But—"

"You want your profit, don't you?"

"Well, yes. But—"

"Take Howard's check if he offers it. In the meantime, I'll busy myself with Sara."

That startled him.

"Imaginative blondes intrigue me, but I'll keep it to idle chatter," I assured him.

There was doubt in his tiny eyes, and I suddenly felt as if I were walking on toes. Someone else's.

SARA WAS INTERESTING. She thought men were neat. She thought secret agents were especially neat.

"I bet you've had all kinds of

exciting adventures, Mr. Kar," she purred.

"Nothing quite so exciting as right at this moment, doll," I countered, looking straight at her crossed legs.

I had a strategic vantage in a chair that was against a wall and to the right of her desk. She was half turned toward me and the hem of her skirt had caught far back under her thigh.

She laughed softly and put the legs out of sight under the desk. "Lordy, I do believe you are joshing me now, Mr. Kar."

"A Labor Department man never joshes, honey," I said seriously. "We don't have time. Too many other problems."

"Labor Department?" She looked as if she had been smacked with a wet fish.

"One thing is sure, Sara. There are plenty of pretty girls in Washington, but we sure don't have any like you in the Labor Department."

"Labor Department?" she repeated. She looked totally confused. "But I thought—I. Well, I thought you were a secret agent, or something!"

"Secret agent? Me? Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Well, Donald said—I mean, Mr. Equator said he thinks there is something fishy about Harry—Mr. Howard. Mr. Equator telephoned Lieutenant Brown when Harry—Mr. Howard—wanted to buy the submarine and the lieutenant

ant said later you were coming in from Washington and—oh, I'm all mixed up!"

"Well, there's no need to be, pet. I am from Washington, true enough, and we in the Labor Department are interested in this sale of a submarine to Mr. Howard. We'd like to know just where Mr. Howard expects to find a crew to operate his submarine.

After all, how many people in this country know anything about submarines? Mr. Howard could cause a crisis in some corners. In his search for a crew, he might take key personnel from various industries, various businesses, large and small. He might—well, he might even jeopardize some industries—"

"Mr. Kar," she said in a blue-eyed wonderment, "I didn't realize we had so many thinking people in Washington."

Equator popped from his office before I could comment on that one, and he seemed surprised to find so much distance between his secretary's desk and my chair. Then he said, "It's almost eleven o'clock. I thought Mr. Howard might have arrived. He's always been early. I thought—"

He dived back into his office. Sara said, "Donald—Mr. Equator is very nervous about money, I've discovered."

"It takes money to support a family," I admitted.

"A family? Why, Donald doesn't have a family!"

"Okay, a wife."

"Donald doesn't have a wife, either!"

"How 'bout Harry?"

"No." She shook her head vigorously. "Harry isn't married. Oh!"

"The little green man again?"

"No! Certainly not!" She looked guilty. She wiggled in her chair. She shot a glance over her shoulder. Then she lowered her voice to just above a whisper. "Please, Mr. Kar, don't talk about Harry—Mr. Howard—here. I mean—well, Mr. Equator could get mad or something. Harry is neat, understand. Donald is neat, too. But Harry—well, Donald doesn't know I have had dinner with Harry the last two evenings and it might make him mad if he did know. Business and all, you know? Donald says it isn't good, mixing business and pleasure."

"Where is Harry staying while he's in town, doll?"

"At the Hotel Troy."

"What room?"

"Oh, he has a suite! Suite One-thousand-fourteen!"

"Neato, huh?"

"Neato!"

"Is he in town alone?"

"I told you he isn't married!"

"But is anyone sharing the suite? Another man, perhaps? Maybe a couple of other men."

"Absolutely not! What kind of a girl do you think I am, Mr. Kar? I

wouldn't go up to a hotel room with more than one man!"

"It could be adventure."

"Zowie. You've got funny ideas about adventure!"

"I guess it's because I'm with the Labor Department. I think in terms of masses. Call the Troy for me. See if Harry is on his way."

She hesitated; then she picked up the phone and dialed. She asked for Mr. Harry Howard, Suite One-thousand-fourteen.

Harry Howard had checked out of the hotel. Around three o'clock that morning.

"What time did you leave his suite, Sara?"

"About two-thirty, but—"

"What did you tell him about me?"

"About you? Why, nothing!" She looked as if it was the most incredulous thought a secret agent could have.

"You didn't say anything about a man from Washington coming in to see your Donald this morning?"

"Certainly not!"

"Or Mr. Equator talking to Lieutenant Brown about the sale of the submarine?"

"No! I'd never do that to Donald! I'd never—"

Color was high in her cheeks. Her blue eyes darted.

"You're lying, Sara. You're part of a plot to throw the entire labor structure of this nation out of whack and now you are lying!"

"I'm what?"

"The labor force! Don't you realize what you are doing to our country if you continue to protect Harry Howard? Harry will wreck our entire labor structure, Harry will—"

"Oh, Mr. Kar, all I wanted was a ride on his submarine!" she wailed, covering her face with her palms. "It sounded so neat!"

"And he was going to give you that ride in return for what?"

She looked up suddenly. "I didn't do anything wrong! Harry said it wasn't wrong! He said all I had to do was tell him if Donald talked to anyone about the sale of the submarine. He said—Oh, I didn't know it was going to be this kind of mess!"

"Sara, honey," I said, softening suddenly. "I want you to think back on the last two nights. I want you to remember every minute you were with Harry Howard. Did Harry ever talk about other people, mention names?"

"N-no. I don't think so."

"Other places? Other cities?"

"No."

"Did he know anyone in New York?"

"No."

"Didn't he talk about Los Angeles, Hollywood, the movie industry?"

"N-no."

"Well, what did he talk about?"

"Me. He liked my legs. He thought they were very good legs, very seaworthy."

"He thought you were built for a submarine."

"Y-yes. And for Sandy."

"Sandy?"

"I didn't understand, Mr. Kar. I still don't. Harry just said—well, he said I was built for Sandy."

"Exactly who or what is Sandy," I asked her.

"I-I—don't know. He got this phone call last night, see? We were sitting on the sofa in the living room . . . when the telephone rang in the bedroom. He excused himself, and he told me not to run away . . . and went to answer it. I became curious. I mean, you know, Harry had told me he didn't know anyone else in New York and here he was getting a phone call.

"So I was—well, curious, and I sort of sneaked to the bedroom door so I could hear him on the phone. I mean, he wasn't doing much talking, you understand. All I heard him say was, 'Tell Darby not to run to the bank yet. There's a hitch here.' And then there was a pause, as if Harry was listening to someone, and then he said, 'Right, right. See you' and I knew he was hanging up, so I popped back on the sofa. And it was when he came back—well, that's when he said I was 'sure built for Sandy.' Those were his exact words, Mr. Kar. Honest. Harry said, 'Baby, you're sure built for Sandy.'"

"Darby. Sandy. Those are names, honey. See? Harry did mention names."

"Well, I don't know what they mean."

"These people probably are friends of his."

"They could be, I suppose. Maybe his friends in Florida."

"Florida?"

"Harry has friends in Florida," she said simply. He was going to Florida when he left New York. He told me."

"And did he also happen to tell you just where in Florida his friends live?" I asked with suddenly forced patience.

"Well, no."

I shot to the street door. Her wail followed me. "Mr. Kar, where are you going?"

"South, where all sane people go this time of year."

THE DESK CLERK at my hotel had a road atlas. I bummed it from him, took it up to my room. Harry Howard had said to someone on the phone: "*Tell Darby not to run to the bank yet.*" That made Darby a person in my book. So I searched for a Sandy in the list of Florida cities and towns in the Atlas. There was Sandstone, Sandville, and Sandy Beach. No more. And Sandstone and Sandville were



inland towns. Sandy Beach was on the Atlantic coastline, population 13,407. It would be natural for people to shorten the name of the town to Sandy instead of calling it Sandy Beach.

And who sails subs on dry land?

I caught a jet to Miami and a hedge-hopper to Sandy Beach. We put down at a small, municipal airfield that fronted on the ocean. It was eight-forty in the morning, eighty-two degrees and the sun was bright. I grabbed a cab. My driver was an old geezer, a Chicago-born, Chicago-reared, retired-from-Chicago taxidermist.

"How long retired?" I asked conversationally.

"Goin' on fourteen years, son."

"Here?"

"Where else?"

"You like Sandy, huh?"

"I like Sandy."

"And that's how the natives refer to the town? Sandy?"

"Would you call it Beach?"

It wasn't entirely out of the realm of possibility, because Sandy Beach stretched along a beach. Any direction you looked, except west, there was beach. I also saw what Harry Howard had meant when he had told Sara she was built for Sandy. These people abhorred conventional clothing. Most dress was made up of much brown skin and a few meager strips of bright-colored cloth.

I asked the old geezer, "You know most of the people in town?"

"Who you lookin' for?"

"Guy named Harry Howard."

"Never heard of him."

"He has a friend named Darby."

"That'd be Darby Line, I 'magine."

"Who's he?"

"Owns most of Sandy, and what he don't own he'll buy if he takes a notion."

"Loaded, huh?"

"Lad, Darby Line could get Uncle Sam out of debt if he had a mind to."

"Take me to the most exclusive club on the beach, Pop."

"To find your friend Howard or to find Line?"

"Howard isn't a friend."

"Darby Line won't be either, if you ever get to know him, and if you've got a lick of sense."

"Ahhh, do I detect animosity?"

"You detect the sentiment of the town."

"Tell me more."

"I'll go you one better. I'll take you to someone who can tell you all. Copper Penny. She's a doll."

"Come again."

"Copper Penny. She used to be Mrs. Darby Line till about a year ago. Now she's Copper Penny again. She divorced Darby. It gave the town chuckles. Darby finally ran into something he couldn't buy. And she took him good, too, the way the town hears it. She took him for plenty of the green stuff, and a few other incidentals, like a couple of cars, a yacht, a club.

Good girl, Copper. Everybody likes her."

"Except Darby Line, perhaps."

"Naw. Even he likes her. Still."

"Hmmm. She sounds fascinating."

"She is, but you should've seen her three years ago. A—as the man says, you could've seen more of her. She was a skin dancer, then. In the club she now owns, the club she took from Darby, The Raven."

"A stripper?"

"Naw. Bumps and grinds are for up north, son. Down here they're exotic dancers."

"I think I'd like to meet Copper Penny."

"Most young fellas think the same thing and a few score have tried. Those who have succeeded number far less. On the other hand, I think you just might make it. You seem to have juice in you, the kind of juice Copper appreciates. You're also wearin' a gun under that coat, ain'tcha?"

"Pop," I grinned, "I could've picked a worse cab."

"Fella doesn't wear a coat 'round here 'less he's hidin' something. Like a hairless chest, or a gun. But I'd stow it, son. You won't scare Copper with it and you could get Jock excited—and from what I hear he's not exactly a one man Chamber of Commerce when he's excited."

"Jock is?"

"Jock was a jockey until a couple of years ago. He got pitched

from a mount in a race. Lost his speech in the spill. Hasn't said a word since. Went to work at The Raven, sort of an odd-job-man-round-the-house. Filled in wherever he was needed. Bartender, waiter, pitcher-outer. They say he's pitched some of the best in town out. Anyway, it was at the club that he hooked up with Copper.

"She was dancin' then, and she took to Jock like Baltimore to Frank Robinson. It was reciprocated. After she divorced Darby she needed a houseboy and overseer of the manor, so to speak. Jock fills those shoes. He oversees. No one gets near Copper without inspection. It's almost no one gets near Copper, period, and that applies especially to a stranger wearin' a rod."

"I'm scared."

"No you ain't, but I hope your head is screwed on tight. They say Jock is especially good at tossin' heads into the sea."

"Ghoulis little devil, isn't he?"

My driver shrugged. "Every man has his tastes. Here we are. You'll find Copper on the top floor, and you'll hafta use the private elevator to get up there."

It was a glossy hotel-apartment building. The beach was across the busy avenue. I winked at my information center, gave him a five dollar bill toward his second retirement and went inside the gloss, where a slick dude at the lobby

desk was reticent about announcing me to Copper Penny until I told him I was a violent man and wouldn't mind in the least shooting up his sleek lobby.

That got him on the house phone. It also tweaked Copper Penny's curiosity. She said to send me up. I was pointed to the private elevator. It should have stopped about halfway up. Someone should have pulled the plug, had me caged for the cops, but no one did. I found out why when the elevator doors opened on a huge, expensive, glassed-in living room.

No one was in sight. I walked out of the elevator. Then there was a flash of movement to my left—an instant to comprehend that I was being attacked by a small Oriental man in a white coat—before I was flipped and went sailing. I landed on my spine. I bounced. My brains seemed to rattle around but I retained enough presence of mind to snatch at my gun.

It was wasted effort. A bare foot slammed down against my Adam's apple, the outer edge of a stiff hand slashed against my wrist, numbing my arm all the way up into the shoulder blade.

I gave up. I remained sprawled, spread and still, and stared up at a brown expressionless face hanging over me while I gasped for breath.

"All right, Jock. I think our friend's passions have been reasonably subdued."

It was a milk and honey voice. It came from behind the top of my head. It had to belong to a doll. A voice like that couldn't belong to anything else. But there were no free peeks. Not yet. The bare foot remained against my Adam's apple and a gun—my gun—came into view. It was held by an Oriental hand.

"Jock?" the milk and honey voice said.

I was released. The Oriental backed off slowly. But he was a distrusting soul. He kept the muzzle of my gun leveled at my skull while I struggled up into a sitting position and made sure all of my bones were still hooked together. I massaged my throat. It felt stuffed with huge rocks. I took a chance and drew a breath. The breath rattled.

And then there was color in the corner of my eye, a brilliant green, and I forgot all about breathing again. She was a vision in the one piece zippered-up-the-front green playsuit. She was browned as if she had been dipped in chocolate. She was tall. She had shiny black hair pulled back from her ears and worn long and curling against a slender neck.

Her figure was absurdly exaggerated, but authentic. Fingernails that were narrow and pointed like daggers looked as if they'd been dipped in silver. Her eyes were green-flecked. She had fine-textured skin, high cheekbones, a

flawless nose and full, faintly-painted red lips. She also was barefooted. Her feet were beautiful. The toes were capped with perfectly-shaped, silver nails.

"You are real?" I managed.

"You are alive?" she shot back.

"I could be in heaven," I admitted.

"Not you," she said somberly. "Not a man who wears a gun. Not a man who invades privacy with a gun. Not a man who threatens to shoot up a hotel lobby. Those kind of men can go to hell. But in your case, I admit I am curious. Men have used all kinds of ruses to enter my boudoir, but shooting up a hotel lobby? That almost sounds desperate."

"Perhaps I am a desperate man."

"What's the pitch, Tiger?"

"An ex-husband."

"Darby? He can be a nice guy or a bastard. Are you from the Internal Revenue Service, perchance?"

"Those people don't need a gun to rob a man, honey."

"Or a woman. All right, who are you? What do you want?"

"To yak."

"About Darby."

"And a guy named Harry Howard."

"Harry Howard?" The vision frowned. "You're out of my range of friends, friend."

"Can I get up now?"

"You've met Jock. Can you get up?"



"He's skilled," I admitted.

"Especially in *shime waza*. That's the art of strangulation, in case you haven't heard."

"I've heard," I said, rolling up to my knees. I belched loud and long. And it got me the advantage I needed. Jock flinched with surprise. I caught his gun wrist, twisted and rolled.

He was an expert. He went up in the air with my twist, attempted to flip, attempted to come down balanced on his feet. But I had another surprise for him. I am an expert, too. I yanked while he still was in the air. It flopped him. He hit the thick carpeting hard. My gun bounced from his grasp.

He started to come up, then he settled back and seethed as I spread two fingers in an inverted V and stuck them against his eyes.

We lay there wheezing at each other.

Copper Penny broke it up.

"I have the gun," she said.

"So shoot," I said.

"Tiger, what in the devil are you trying to prove?"

"That I'm a friendly citizen."

"You arrive here armed and you're a friendly citizen?"

"I'm not restless. It's the natives. Give up, or do I poke Jock's eyes out?"

"I'm not giving up, but here's your gun." She extended the weapon, butt in my palm. "If there was going to be shooting, it'd be finished by now. Allow Jock his eyesight, will you?"

I did, and he bounded. He wasn't happy. He harbored ideas about killing me. He bounced around on his bare feet as if he was standing in a bed of red-hot coals. His eyes glittered, his face muscles were taut, and he made several savage slashes with stiff hands.

"I think I've made an enemy," I conceded.

Copper Penny nodded. "You didn't make Brownie points. Jock, cool it. We have a house guest. I think he might want a drink. Choice, Tiger?"

"Orange juice. I haven't had breakfast, just my morning exercise."

"I'll have vodka, Jock. And no orange juice."

"It's only ten o'clock in the morning, honey."

"Vodka at ten, bourbon at two, scotch at six and gin the rest of the way. That, dear friends, is what's called a well-rounded day," she sing-songed. "My ex-husband taught me that, Tiger. Cute?"

"Intoxicating."

"Moment," she said. She padded on the bare brown feet to a tiny wall phone near the elevator. "Gotta use the hot line," she said over her shoulder. "Gotta stop the invasion of gendarmes." She lifted the receiver. There was no dial.

She spoke into the phone, nodded, put it together, then turned and gave me her first genuine smile. "The cops were on their way up. They were coming after you. I imagine the lobby is in a turmoil. Okay, let's talk about you. Who are you?"

I spoke my name.

"Means nothing," she said. "What's your racket?"

"Mind if we skip that part?"

"Yes, but I've got a hunch you could care less."

"You're not acquainted with a Harry Howard, huh?"

"Nope."

"He might be a friend of your ex."

She shrugged. "People pop into Darby's life every day. It's like that when you have money."

"On the other hand, I understand he isn't going to win any popularity contests around town."

"Would you if you owned most of it?"

Jock floated back into the room with a tiny tray on his palm. I took the orange juice. Copper took the vodka. Jock flashed me a look from eyes that snarled and disappeared again. Copper laughed and folded her long legs to sit yoga

style on a monstrous couch. She waved me into a wing chair.

"Just what is it you want to know about Darby, Mr. Kar?"

"His background, for one thing."

"Well, he's the only son of the late O. B. Line, the newspaper king, and I'd have to say he can be the perfect stereotype of a rich man's son. He never has worked a day in his life and he never will. People sneer at him for taking what he has been handed, but he doesn't give much of a damn about people, or their sneers.

"He can be obnoxious. He can be arrogant. He can grate on your nerves. He can be mean. But he also can be charming, gracious, generous, attractive. He is athletic. He is intelligent. He is well read. He keeps up with current events.

"He draws pretty teen girls, divorcees, young widows, happily and unhappily marrieds, old women, old men, freeloaders, dogooders, con men, beachboys, waiters, other athletes, rich men, not-so-rich men, poor men. Darby has, uses, and attracts, Mr. Kar. But above all other things, Darby Line is bored to hell and gone. Your type man?"

"I'll pass, thanks. Where are the newspapers?"

"Scattered across the country. But they don't belong to Darby. They are controlled by a syndicate, men who were in partnership with O. B. Most of those men are hard-working, dedicated men. There is

no place among them for the Darby Lines.

"So they put Darby out to pasture. They gave him money. They gave him Sandy Beach. Both have pacified him to date. The town keeps the green paper, as Darby likes to call it, rolling in."

"Green paper? Is that contempt?"

"It is. Without the—er, green paper, Darby would kill himself tomorrow, yet he also has a deep contempt for money. It's difficult to understand and impossible to explain."

"How long were you two married?"

"About a year."

"He throw you out?"

"I walked out, Mr. Kar."

"Easy on the steam, honey."

"I used to be a dancer in a club. The Raven. It's where I met Darby. I was a good dancer, an exotic dancer, as I was billed. Then I married Darby. He was crazy about my dancing. I used to dance for him by the hour, until it turned into something else. Darby began to bring in, quote, friends, unquote, and forced me to dance for them. He seemed to find a particular pleasure in studying their faces. I finally got fed up to my bare navel with those private audiences and Darby's private pleasures, so I bailed out."

"And with plenty of loot, I see," I said, taking in the apartment with a wave of my arm.

"You, Mr. Kar, have a particular faculty for being blunt and nasty. But to explain, I took it away from Darby in the divorce. He owns the hotel. And this apartment was his place. His private place. I don't know why, I never asked why, but if there ever was anything Darby loved, it was this place. I took it for spite in the divorce. It was the one thing that made him fight in those days. He fought like a tiger to keep this apartment. He continued to fight until about three months ago. You can bet I enjoyed every minute of those fights.

"But now the fun has gone out of having the apartment. Darby has finally conceded. It isn't like him, but he has admitted he has lost the battle, so he is building another hotel across town and putting a duplicate of this apartment on top."

"It isn't so bad being a loser, huh? If you can afford it, that is. . . .

Copper Penny left the couch. "Come out here."

I trailed her onto a long sun balcony. We stood high above the town and the ocean.

"Nice," I admitted, looking up and down the balcony.

"It's my favorite spot," she said. She looked around and smiled. "It's where I live the hardest. Every morning I lay naked out here and sun. I enjoy sunshine."

Visions cascaded across my

mind. It wasn't called for, perhaps, but I had to ask anyway. "What does Jock do, stumble around in a blindfold?"

"I wouldn't let him hear me say something like that, Mr. Kar. The Japanese appreciate beauty for the beauty, not for use or violation. And Jock is a very sensitive Japanese man."

Yeah, honey, I thought, you just said it. Jock is a man. But I didn't press it, because she suddenly was pointing off into the distance, and there was a cliff out there, a cliff that was out of place. Everywhere else around us there was flatness. The cliff was as incongruous to the rest of the landscape as a pimple on a model's cheekbone.

"See the house on top?" Copper said. "I used to live up there."

"So?"

"It's Darby's house. He wanted a house on a cliff overlooking a beach and the sea so he had both built—the house and the cliff. And the point is, Mr. Kar, Darby Line can afford anything."

"Except you."

"Oh, he can afford me, all right; he just can't have me." She turned from the parapet, sat on the foot end of the sun lounge. Her smile was almost wistful. She finished her vodka drink, put the glass aside.

"That is," she said softly, "he can't have me under the conditions that existed."

"You still in love with the guy, Copper?"

She looked startled. Then suddenly she laughed. It was a soft, bubbly sound that rolled from deep in her throat as she clasped her knees and rocked on her buttocks. "Mr. Kar, I swear, you are something else!"

She shook her head, stopped rocking, released her knees, stood. "Look, Darby Line and I are friends. No more. Once we were married. Then we were divorced. But it doesn't have to mean that we became ferocious enemies. We didn't, and we're not. I still like Darby. He still likes me. But that's where it stops. And if you need proof from my end of the line, try this on for size."

She stepped close to me, she got up on bare toes, she wrapped long, warm arms around my neck, fitted a long, warm body against my front, moved long, warm dancer legs against my thighs, yanked my head down, and kissed me.

A couple of million years later, she released me. Her dark eyes were hot and intense and shiny.

"Wow?" she asked.

"Wow," I gurgled.

"How comes did I do that?"

"How comes you did that."

"I wanted to. The instant you stepped out of my elevator, I wanted to. Crazy?"

"Crazy."

"But okay?"

"Sure, okay."



"Are we finished with Darby?"

"No."

"Not even if I dance for you?"

"No."

"Boy, you sure got a one-track mind." She turned to the parapet, put her elbows on its edge, propped her jaw and stared off toward the cliff. "Okay, why did you come here? What's your real interest in Darby? Is he in some kind of terrible trouble? Why do you wear a gun? Who are you? Why does a man with a gun come around asking questions about my ex-husband?"

"I'm taking the fifth, doll."

"One-way-street game, eh?"

"For the moment."

"Can't you trust me?"

"You don't want to know anything about me."

"I don't frighten very easily, Kevin."

"What you don't know, you can't tell."

"Now you sound spooky."

"You said Darby is a bored young man. How bored?"

"Oh, very bored. He has been most of his life."

"Does he fight it?"

"Constantly."

"Could he be used by other people?"

"Darby sees through most people rather quickly. He has that faculty."

"But if these people promised him relief from his boredom?"

"He'd listen."

"Would he finance the purchase of a submarine?"

Copper remained silent for a few seconds. "He might buy a submarine. For himself."

"If he were interested in the purchase of a sub, would he become involved in the transaction personally or would he deal through an emissary?"

"Oh, personally. Much of the pleasure would be in haggling over the price."

"What if someone came along—a group of people, for instance—and said, 'Hey, Darby, old friend, we've got a revolution in the making, but we need a submarine to help carry it off. Now, we know where there is a sub for sale, but there's a small problem. Money. We need money to buy our sub and to carry out our revolution. We need—'"

"Revolution?" Copper interrupted. "Darby?"

"Let's make it invasion."

"Of what?"

"Cuba, perhaps?"

"My God!" Copper gasped.

"Isn't there plenty of Cuban unrest in these parts?"

"Well, sure, but—Darby!" she said.

"He has the dough to buy the sub. And he's a bored young man."

"Yes, but—"

"A ride with a submarine invasion party might appeal to a bored young man."

"Crazy!"

"Too crazy for Darby?"

She paced the length of the balcony, returned. She looked worried. She turned into the apartment. I went after her. She was lighting a cigarette. Her fingers trembled. She drew smoke deep into her lungs, faced me, exhaled. Her dark eyes bored into mine.

"Are you some kind of a government agent, Kevin?" she asked. "CIA?"

I said nothing.

"Darby might do it," she said simply. "It just might appeal to him. But it would be strictly for kicks. He's not a revolutionary in any sense of the word or idea. He doesn't take up causes of any kind." She drew on the cigarette again. "This man you asked about, this Harry Howard? Where does he fit?"

"He has been in New York the last couple of days, making noises toward buying a submarine that is for sale."

"And he's supposed to be a friend of Darby's?"

"He could be one of the people using Darby. I don't know."

"Is Harry Howard in Sandy now? Did you follow him down here from New York?"

"I didn't follow him. I pieced together a couple of things and the result points to the possibility of him being here."

"At Darby's house?"

I shrugged.

"Do you want to go up there to the house, see if your Harry Howard is there, look around, meet Darby?"

"I will, eventually."

"What's wrong with now?"

I turned away from Copper on the pretext of wanting a cigarette which I seldom use. I took one from her package, kept my back to her, lit the cigarette. Could she have a role in the master plot? Could she now be enticing me into the lion's lair?

"I told you, Kevin," she said from behind me. "Darby and I remain friends. I can still go up to the house."

"When was the last time you were there, doll?"

She remained silent for a few moments, then, "A couple of weeks ago. I don't make it a practice, even though I know the door is open."

"I've known some friendships to run quite a bit deeper than what they appear to be on the surface, honey, even among divorced persons."

"Kevin?"

The softness of her tone forced me to turn. She was shaking her head. "It isn't like that with Darby and I. We are not friends by day and lovers by night. Unfortunately, Darby isn't much of a lover—which may or may not have been part of our trouble while we were married. The lovers were among his friends. It is the reason I have Jock. They don't come around much any more, but they used to. They wanted to see me dance. They wanted their own private shows. Jock has stemmed the flow."

"Does Darby come around?"

"Never."

"But you want him to."

She remained silent, unmoving, beautiful.

"You're waiting, doll. You're waiting for Darby Line to come to his senses."

"Perhaps. Are we going up to the house now?"

"After you kiss me again." I butted the cigarette. "I'm not much of a smoker."

"I know," she said somberly. "I could tell. And I have a much better idea. This time, you kiss me."

WE USED A Bristol. She told me to drive. She sat back in the seat beside me and smiled against the sun and the wind. Her black hair flowed. She looked relaxed, almost sleepy. The expression on her face was half pondering, half satisfied.

It was as if she was musing over an inner secret.

I should have remained alert, but I didn't. Her mood captured me.

I relaxed, too, wondered what it would be like to be married to her and never have to worry about the next dollar.

The highway followed the ocean until we got to Darby's cliff. There it bent inland and curved around the high hump of land. I wondered if Darby had had the highway moved, too, but Copper shook her head. "No, the original highway just happened to curve here." She pointed ahead to a hard surfaced side road that angled up the side of the cliff. "How shall I introduce you to Darby?"

"As a new friend, a writer, down from New York. Will there be others at the house?"

"Butler, maid, cook and friends. There are always friends at Darby's house."

"Quote and unquote?"

She laughed softly. "Yes."

"Tell me if any are strangers. Okay?"

She looked serious, said nothing, nodded. And then we were on top of the cliff and I found the house to be a huge, low, sprawling, glass structure with wings going out from a central area like spokes from the hub of a giant half wheel. The land was a sculptured green.

Far off to the right was an incongruous metal building, glisten-

ing in the sunlight, and what looked like a runway.

"It's Darby's private airstrip," said Copper, following my look. "He has two planes."

I braked the Bristol in a vast turn-around parking area before the house. There were four other parked cars. All bore Florida license plates. We vacated the Bristol.

"Hey—Hi!"

The shouted greeting came from a large, athletic young man who was striding toward us across green grass. He was big-boned and deep-chested with short-cropped black hair, handsome features and a white-toothed grin. He wore colorful swim trunks, a matching jacket open down the front, thongs and had a towel draped around his neck. He seemed genuinely happy to see us after Copper had introduced me. His handshake was firm, his grin one-sided, his inventory quick and decisive.

"You're just in time for a swim," Darby Line said. "We're on our way to the beach. I have some friends visiting. Strangers to you, Copper, but come on. You know where the suits are in the house. Turn out something for yourself and Mr. Kar and join us."

I declined, on the basis of having an appointment at the hotel within the hour. Darby Line's look was quizzical. "You mix business and pleasure, Mr. Kar? What kind of business?"

"Free lance writer. A friend and I collaborate. At present, we're working on a magazine article about the little known fun and sun hamlets in America."

"You're including Sandy in your article?"

"It's fun and sun, isn't it?"

"Nothing but," Darby Line grinned. He turned on his ex-wife. "Got to run, hon. The place is yours. Whatever you want. You know where the bar is. Perhaps you and Mr. Kar have time for a drink at the swimming pool."

"Sounds good," I said.

We shook again and then he was loping off.

"Doll," I said, "that is a spoiled, bored, young man? He looks alive and vital and virile to me."

"Strictly exterior, Kevin. Inside he's deep, moody and unhappy."

We walked across grass. We stopped at a low, white wooden fence at the edge of the cliff. Far out, the sea was gray and calm. Below there was a golden beach that stretched for as far as the eye could see. Off to our left, beyond Darby Line's property, was a group of surfers.

To our right, a white stairway went down to the beach. There were two couples in swim suits going down. They were brown people with black hair. They didn't look up. Behind them, Darby Line was skipping down steps to catch up. He spotted us, waved, and then the group was on the beach.

Copper said, "Let's take Darby up on the drink idea. There's a pool between a pair of the wings on the other side of the house."

The front door of the house opened before we got to it. The butler was a medium-statured, ugly man of perhaps thirty years. He nodded and said, "Mrs. Line. Mr. Line explained when you drove up."

"We're going to the pool," said Copper. "We'd like drinks. Bourbon poured over ice for me."

"Orange juice," I said.

"Juice, sir?"

"I'm a growing boy."

He nodded and disappeared off to our right. I took Copper's arm. She was frowning as we moved through the magnificence of the house.

"The butler is new?" I asked.

"I don't know him," she admitted.

Blue water of the pool gleamed in the sunlight. We were alone on the apron. Copper picked a table near a diving board.

"I don't understand," she mused. "John was with Darby's family for years. Before O. B. died—"

"John, the butler?" I interrupted.

"I wonder what happened to him?"

A maid came onto the apron with our drinks. She was Puerto Rican, trim and young. She placed the glasses properly and asked,

"Is there anything else, ma'am?"

Copper shook her head.

"New, too," I asked when the maid had left us.

"Yes."

"So all we need now is the cook."

"What do you mean?"

"It'd make it a total houseful of newcomers, wouldn't it?"

"Darby could have dismissed all of the old hands, I suppose," she said thoughtfully. "Something could have angered him and he could have—"

"Can you get into the kitchen?" I asked.

"Certainly."

"Check out the cook."

I drank the iced orange juice while she was gone. Her brow was pleated when she returned.

"Same thing," she said. "A new cook. I don't understand, Kevin."

"Let's get out of here, pet."

The butler met us in the central area of the house. "Are you joining Mr. Line?"

"Not today, pal," I told him. "Something else presses."

He raced ahead of us to open the front door and I scowled. Experienced butlers are always where they are supposed to be so they don't have to race.

"Give Mr. Howard our regards," I said as we went outside.

"Who?" frowned the butler.

I kept on going. I took Copper's elbow and piloted her to the Bristol. She had to dance a little to

keep up with my pace. "Kevin, I —" she protested.

"Shut up. Don't you feel those knives in your back?"

She stopped. She gaped. "Knives?"

I pulled her along. "Doll, keep moving. We're under surveillance, and I have a stinking hunch it's from more than one pair of eyes."

"Kevin, you're not making sense," she said as I piloted the Bristol down the road from the cliff. "None of this is making sense."

"Try this, honey. Your ex is a part of, or has been hoodwinked into, a plot of international significance. Let's say there's a group of restless Cubans. Let's say they've organized. Let's say they have some wild idea about invading their former homeland, wiping out the present day rulers. Let's say your Darby has a role in this wild scheme. Let's say he's putting up some dough, let's say he's letting his new friends use his home to—"

"Kevin, Darby wouldn't get involved in anything like that!"

"Earlier you said he might."

"Yes, but—Well, earlier it didn't sound like you are making it sound now."

"It could be voluntary on his part, honey. Or perhaps he is being blackmailed."

"Blackmailed!"

"Don't tell me Darby Line has led a virgin life."

"Well, no."

"The troops have moved in, honey. The two couples on the beach. They were Cubans. The butler is no more a butler than I am, the maid was a Puerto Rican girl, and—what about the cook?"

"She was—she was a Latin American, too."

WE WERE IN the hotel parking lot. I braked, shut off the motor, left the Bristol. Copper sat unmoving.

"I can't believe all of this," she said, shaking her head.

I went around to her side of the car, took her from the seat. "Come on, doll. I may need your influence. I need to get a room in this joint."

"A room?" She looked surprised. "What's the matter with the apartment?"

"Me and you?" I grinned. "That sounds kind of cozy."

"Provincialism went out my window a long time ago, Tiger." She took her arm from my grasp and walked beside me. "There are five bedrooms in the apartment. I really get lost rattling around in them."

"Anyway, I just remember something and it's putting butterflies in my stomach. You said something about Mr. Howard to that—to that butler, or whatever he is. Now, if there is a Mr. Howard, if Mr. Howard is currently taking up space in Darby's home, isn't that going to—" She stopped,

bit her lower lip. "Well, isn't that going to suggest to Mr. Howard that—"

"It is."

"And isn't Mr. Howard going to become curious? I mean, you don't know the man, do you?"

"I've never laid eyes on him to my knowledge."

"Well, there you are! See? You tipped your hand!"

"On purpose, honey."

"On purpose!"

"You've heard of smoking animals out of the woods"

"Tiger," she said, clasping my arm suddenly and turning me into her private elevator, "now I know you're going to occupy one of my bedrooms! No wonder I have butterflies! This Mr. Howard could come looking for you—us! You set us up!"

"I set me up, doll."

"Like hell! Us! I'm with you! I took you to Darby's house! Maybe those people will try to kidnap me! Maybe they'll keep me as a hostage to draw you out! Maybe they'll—"

"Darby can always rescue you."

"Darby Line couldn't rescue a dog from a swarm of invading fleas!"

The elevator doors slid silently open. We stepped into the apartment. Jock, barefooted, stood obediently before us. Obedient to Copper, perhaps. Not to me. He still had daggers in his eyes for me. Copper kicked off her thongs, sent

them flying across the vast room, one after the other.

"Take off your shoes," she snapped.

"In my country, cat, a man dies with his boots on."

"Yes. And that's another thing about you! Just where in hell is your country? It certainly isn't New York!"

"Doll, you're excited."

"You're damn right I'm excited!"

"How about a drink?"

"Bring me the whole damn bottle, Jock! Vodka! I'm reverting!"

Jock wasn't sure, but he disappeared anyway. And then I followed Copper out onto the balcony. She stood at the parapet. She looked off toward the cliff and the house. I took her shoulders, turned her to me. Her lips were a tight line.

"No one is going to hurt you," I said. "I'll see to that."

She crumbled suddenly. She sagged and came against me and put her cheek against mine. I could feel her trembling.

"Damn it, Tiger," she whispered, "go away from me, will you? You've got me scared. You walk in here and quick as a cat's wink flip my entire life out of balance. Who are you? Please tell me. Who are you?"

I told her. It was a cardinal sin in my profession, but I am human, too. And she surprised me all over again. She accepted calmly. She accepted the Bureau, our work,

our aims as if we were a part of the Social Security system. She turned out of my arms. She took a glass from a hovering Jock. She sent him away. She sipped. She looked at me, sipped again.

And then she said softly, "Okay, Tiger, I'm with you. I think my ex has got his hind end in a tight spot. I like Darby. I don't want him in this kind of mess. But he's there, and I'm on your side. What do we do now?"

"We wait. See if they react to the bait."

"How do we wait?"

"Well, I can shave and shower, and then we can have a couple of drinks and maybe dinner this evening, and later we can take a ride along the beach."

"Okay."

The drinks and dinner were perfect. Then I drove the Bristol along the beach, a slow, lazy ride out around and beyond the cliff. I parked the Bristol on a strip of sand, and there was a full moon in a clear sky overhead, and a beautiful girl beside me, her head against the back of the seat, a sleepy relaxed girl, and far-away voices floating to us from Darby's beach, and a couple of tiny lights down there.

Much later I drove back to the hotel, and was pointed into a bedroom that was next door to the beautiful girl's. I had the impression that a silent Japanese man was sitting outside my door all

night long—and finally sleep. Deep, relaxed sleep.

I awoke to sunshine brightness, and I toileted quickly. Then I left the luxurious bedroom and there was no one. No Jock. No Copper. I stood in the vast living room and listened to the silence. I went over to the open french doors, stepped out onto the balcony, stopped and drew a breath.

She was stretched out front side down on the padded sun lounge, her head cradled in her arms. Sun splashed all of her oiled sleekness. She was naked. She was brown. She was flawless.

She murmured, "Kevin?"

"Yeah," I managed.

"Come and sun."

"I'm afraid I'm not a man of limitations, doll."

"Hmm. Then perhaps I should dress."

Unabashed, she rolled up on her side, dropped her feet from the lounge and sat up. She stretched lazily. She put on an elastic bra-top, stood and stepped into bikini bottoms.

Shortly afterwards we ate breakfast at the table on the balcony.

"And today?" she asked.

"We continue to wait."

"Where?"

"How about the beach? Do you remember the surfers yesterday? We could see them from Darby's house. Let's go there. Let's watch them."

We drove out beyond the cliff

that afternoon. The sun was hot. We braked the Bristol among other sports cars and walked down to an umbrella on the sand. There was a boy and a girl under the umbrella. They were asleep. The boy awoke.

"Mind?" Copper asked. "We want to watch."

She pointed out to the tiny dots on the water. The surfers were out there, waiting for the right wave.

The boy returned to sleep.

We moved away from the umbrella. We sat on the sand. It was quiet, hot. The surfers continued to wait. Copper lay back, locked her hands behind her head. I bent over her, kissed her long and slow and savoringly. We kept on kissing even after the surfers had come in.

One of them yelled at us, "Hey, man, bug. You see what's comin'?"

The sky at sea was black and ugly now, roiling. I looked far down the beach. There were people down there, at Darby's place. I saw a cluster leave the beach. Someone remained.

"Squall," Copper said, getting to her feet and looking out on the storm line. "It may be rough. We'd better run."

I caught up with one of the surfers and pointed out the figure on Darby Line's beach. "Someone is going to ride it out."

"Someone is always on that beach, man. It's like that Line man has gold stashed down there. You suppose he has?"

I had what I wanted to know.

The squall hit us on the highway. Its front edge was blustery. Wind whipped the Bristol. Rain slashed against the windshield. But there was light sky at sea again and Copper had settled against her seat. She was wet and laughing.

"We could have rode this one out behind a rock," she said.

We dined on fresh oysters that night in a small place near the hotel. And over cigarettes I made the suggestion. "Copper, you have a yacht."

"I also have a cruiser."

"Can we take one out?"

"Romance at sea, Kevin?" Her laugh was contented.

WE USED THE cruiser. She was an expert at the wheel. And then we drifted. There were stars overhead. We sat side by side in deck chairs and we drifted a long time and stared at the shore lights before she asked, "Why do you want to sit here off Darby's beach?"

"The boy surfer had said there always was someone on Darby's beach. He had jokingly suggested there might be stored gold."

"You don't think—" Copper didn't finish it.

I stared at the beach. There was an occasional tiny red-orange glow there, as if someone was sitting, smoking a cigarette, as if someone was standing watch.

"Do you have swim suits aboard?" I asked.

"Yes." She got them.

We changed quickly. She went over the side of the cruiser in a sleek dive. I went after her.

We inched toward the beach. We didn't talk. We swam side by side, breast-stroked, our fingertips occasionally brushing. My feet found bottom. I touched Copper's shoulder. We stood silent, only our heads out of water. The cigarette continued to flare on the beach. I went under water, stroked forward, keeping one hand in front of me, searching blindly.

The hand found a hard, slick surface. I poked my head up out of water, found Copper's head beside me. We were only about twenty feet off the beach. I went below, found rope, followed it to another box. I finally found a small box and managed to free it. I pointed Copper back to the cruiser. On board, in the light of the cabin, I pried the lid from the box and stared at the neatly packed grenades.

"Those," said a voice behind us suddenly, "are difficult to come by. You will return them, please."

We had Darby Line's butler, but tonight he wore a windbreaker jacket, faded denim pants, sneakers, and he held a .45 in his right hand. A tall, slender Cuban stood behind him and cradled a submachinegun. The Caucasian stepped into the cabin, used the .45 to wave us away from the grenades.

"Who are you, fella?" he asked me.

"Harry Howard, I presume," I returned.

He nodded.

I clamped my lips.

He relieved me of my gun and looked at the Cuban. "Okay, take 'em topside. Let 'em dress."

Howard joined us on deck in a couple of minutes. The .45 was out of sight. He put the box of grenades on the deck, jerked at a rope tied to the railing. I looked over the side, saw the small boat in tow. Harry Howard motioned to the Cuban.

"Take us in to the dock," he said.

They marched us across the beach and up the white steps. We crossed the apron of the swimming pool and entered the house. I expected to be greeted by a smirking Darby Line, but there was no one. We were ushered back into one of the wings and put into a bedroom.

"I don't know who you are, man," Harry Howard said, "but you never should have meddled."

He stepped back out of the room, closed the door and I heard a key snap a lock home. Copper was at a huge window, looking out.

"Forget it," I said. "There's someone out there just waiting for us to try."

"How do you know?" She looked desperate, ready to try anything.

"I know how these kind of people operate."

"Are we in danger, Kevin?"

"We've got a problem," I admitted.

"Darby?" She was frowning heavily, "Where does Darby fit in all of this? And those grenades. What—"

"We found an arms cache, honey. Put it together. The cache, a group of Latin Americans, a couple of soldiers of fortune, an attempt to purchase a submarine. This is Florida. How far away is Cuba? Put it all together, honey."

"These people are crazy!"

"Others have tried."

"But where does Darby fit?" she repeated.

"He could be their leader. He could be a victim of blackmail; he might be going along just for the lark. He could be as innocent as a priest. Take your pick."

"Kevin, how can you remain so nonchalant?"

"Honey, believe me, I'm not. On the other hand, I doubt if they've left an escape hatch open. So we wait. We just sit here and wait for their next move."

We didn't have to wait long. The Cuban with the machine-gun returned. He had a partner, also Cuban, also carrying a chopper. They said nothing. They motioned us out of the bedroom. This time they ushered us through the central area of the house. We saw no one. I wondered about Howard and Darby Line. We went outside and the Cubans turned us.

"Walk," said one.

We walked. Far ahead there was light and the throb of an idling engine. The hangar at the airstrip took shape. There was a plane out on the runway. It was being warmed up.

I said over my shoulder, "We're going for a ride?"

"Far to sea," said a voice behind me.

Beside me, Copper whispered, "What does—just what does he mean?"

I went down on my palms, lashed back with my feet in a jack-ass kick. The feet collided and I heard a yelp. The snout of a machine-gun cracked my spine, flattened me. Then I heard another yelp. I rolled, saw one of the Cubans sailing through space. Copper was bent double, and somehow I knew she had pitched him.

I spotted one of the guns, snatched it up and grabbed the seat of Copper's pants and yanked. We turned and sprinted.

"Neat, doll," I yelled.

"I've been learning from Jock!" she gasped.

There was a loud, rattling noise behind us. Slugs churned ground at our feet. Copper went down. I whirled, dropped to my knees and fired a spraying burst from the gun. Suddenly there was silence and darkness. Nothing moved out there. I was conscious of the throb of the plane motor. I poked Copper. She sat up with a jerk.

"You hit?" I rasped.

"He was—was shooting at us!" she gasped.

I yanked her to her feet and we raced toward the plane. We went under it in a pair of flat dives as the gun behind us rattled again.

I squared around, triggered off a pair of bursts at nothing. The Cubans were out there, but I had no idea where. Copper tugged at my arm.

"What were they going to do with us?" she said.

"Drop us like bombs, I have a hunch!"

"At sea?"

"Far at sea!"

The sun out there rattled, I heard slugs spit into the side of the plane. I returned the burst.

Copper was still tugging on my arm. Her eyes were round, her lips pinched. She jabbed a finger upward.

"Drop us like bombs?" she yelped. "Like those?"

There were two of them latched to the bottom side of the plane. They were directly over our heads.

"Isn't this a dangerous place to be?" Copper rattled.

"It's a helluva place in a gun fight," I admitted.

"So let's fly out of here."

"Literally, doll?" I said, taking heart.

"I've had a few lessons. While I was living with Darby, I—"

She snapped off the words as I wiggled backward and took her with me. We scrambled up into the

plane. Slugs whistled through the craft. We wiggled on our bellies up to the controls. Copper got into the pilot's seat, fumbled with things on the panel and the motor roared.

We moved. She threw a harried look at me in the co-pilot's chair, and then we were rolling. I felt the lift. We went back down to the ground, bounced, and finally stayed aloft. We wobbled, climbed, wobbled, climbed.

"Doll," I yelled, "how many lessons have you had?"

"Four! This is—this is my solo!" Copper said.

Great.

But somehow we managed to stay airborne. We continued to climb until I tapped her shoulder. "Leave the moon trip to the astronauts, huh? Level off this buggy if you can."

We made it. We dipped occasionally, but finally we had blackness in front of us instead of stars. We seemed headed straight out across the Atlantic.

"We got enough gas to make London?" I asked.

"Damn you," she hissed. "I'm trying to figure out how to turn back!"

She figured something, all right. Suddenly we dipped and swooped off to the left in a howling glide.

"London!" I yelled. "I'd rather try London!"

She brought the nose of the plane back up. I looked out, saw whitecaps, closed my eyes and

thanked God when I looked again and the whitecaps were gone.

"Now, we're okay," Copper announced.

"Yeah. All you have to do is put us down in a net." There were tiny lights ahead. I jabbed a finger. "What's that?"

"Sandy—I hope."

She got on a radio and started squawking.

"Who are you talking to?" I yelled.

"Municipal Airfield. I need landing instructions."

"Tell 'em to send the sheriff, the Navy, the Coast Guard, everybody, out to Darby's place."

She did.

"Hey!" I jerked with the thought.

The plane nose went down severely, then Copper was leveling us off again.

"Don't yell," she snapped. "You scare me."

I scared her?

"Doll," I managed, "do you think you can find Darby's beach?"

"Why?"

"Find it!"

She found it. I wasn't sure how, but suddenly it was ahead. There was the house, the lights, the landing strip, the hangar.

"Swing along the beach," I said.

She turned us. And then we were wobbling along low over the water just off the beach and I was yanking and pushing at every knob I could find on the panel.

"Kevin—what are you doing?"

I felt the bombs go suddenly and I yelled, just like a junior bombardier: "Bombs away! Give this thing some juice, kid!"

The booms went off with a terrific roar and I felt the plane shoot up into the air. We kept going up for a long time before Copper regained control. We were back at sea again.

"Good God!" she gasped. "Are you that anxious to see London?"

"I blew up an arms cache," I said with a small amount of pride. "Now try to get us to the airfield and down in one piece."

We made it—after a fashion. We managed to run the length of the runway. After I shook the cobwebs out of my skull I pushed Copper on out through the glassless windows in front of us and dropped to the ground beside her. Neither of us moved. She was woozy, but she had her senses. And then we sat there staring at each other while clusters of people swarmed down on us.

SHERIFF'S OFFICERS and cops rounded up the people at Darby Line's house on the cliff. Darby was among them. He readily admitted being involved in Harry Howard's plan to invade Cuba. He was the financier. The plot had appealed to his sense of adventure.

But he disclaimed any role in Howard's plan to dispose of Copper and me. Rather, he stated he

had balked at murder and, as a result, had been made a captive in his own home.

There were those who believed him, those who did not. He was taken into custody with Howard and the others and held in the Sandy Beach jail—which he did not own. The Coast Guard still had plenty of questions to ask.

Copper and I flew to Washington. She wanted to get away from Sandy for a few days, and who was I to object? I put her in a hotel and checked in at the Bureau. Later I went with Holly over to the Pentagon. Donald Equator was there. He had just sold his submarine back to the government.

"And for a tidy profit," he beamed.

"Figures," I nodded, giving Holly a significant look. "But Uncle Sam is used to that kind of thing; Mr. Equator."

We walked him outside to his car. Sara was there. She sat with the front door of the shiny sedan open and her nyloned knees crossed. Across the parking lot two guys were changing a car wheel.

Sara brightened when she saw me. She nodded toward the two men across the lot.

"They must belong to your Labor Department, Mr. Kar," she said enthusiastically. "They're been over there changing that tire for almost an hour."

I shot a look at the two dudes. They were very busy now, chang-

ing the tire that didn't look flat to me. I traced their angle of observation from their squatted position. They had an unobtrusive view of Sara's legs.

"Yeah," I grunted. "They belong to us, okay. You can tell by how fast they're working."

Equator drove away with Sara. Holly poked me. An eyebrow was lifted quizzically.

"Do you mind?" he asked. "The Labor Department? Our men?"

"Secret," I said.

"A secret agent has secrets?"

"We all have our little idiosyncrasies," I shrugged, moving away from him.

"And just where the devil are you going now?" he called.

I moved out of earshot fast. I

didn't want him telling me I had another assignment on tap. At least not until morning. Because downtown there was a hotel, and inside the hotel there was a suite, and in the suite there was an exotic dancer who was practicing her dancing again and waiting for me.

"Darby?" I asked once, peering up at her from my relaxed position on the long couch.

There was a single lamplight. Its glow was dim. She worked just outside the glow and her body oscillated like I'd never seen a body oscillate.

"Oh, I'm going back to him, Kevin," she breathed. "Someday. Darby will grow up someday, but I don't expect it to be overnight. At least, not this night. Do you?"



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A Story of Midnight Murder.



DARK WEEKEND

*They were lost, in deadly peril, the
man who ran away from love and the
girl who was fleeing from—Death!*

by ROBERT COLBY



KAREN SHIPLEY'S husband maneuvered the Buick to the curb in front of United at the Los Angeles International Airport. "You're not about to park here!" she said.

Her voice was shrill, rebuking. Very often, especially in times of stress, she sounded like a walking accusation.

"Why not?" Earl said calmly. He was used to Karen and rarely lost his temper.

"Because it's a loading zone and you'll get a ticket. Of course, if we

can afford ten dollars for a parking—"

"You wanna catch the plane, don't you?"

"Naturally."

Earl braked, cut the motor and doused the lights. He sighed. "Well, you've got about ten minutes to air time and you haven't checked in yet. Any questions? Come on then, let's go."

He scurried around to open the trunk, hoisted Karen's suitcase and slammed the lid. A skycap approached from the shadows but

Earl waved him off. They hustled inside.

"Flight three-seventeen to Denver," said the clerk, glancing at Karen's ticket, then at his watch. "Departs at eight-twenty-five from gate nine. Sorry, baggage for that flight is already aboard. You'll have to take your suitcase on up to the gate. Better hurry."

Under a vivid canopy of light they scampered through a gleaming white tunnel, accelerated by the floating carpet of a conveyer. An escalator carried them aloft.

The attendant at gate 9 inspected Karen's ticket, told her she had five minutes, and took her case. They entered, pausing beside the down ramp to the plane.

"Well—" Earl said. He was a tall, wiry man of thirty-four who had flaxen hair and a lean, deceptively solemn face, his look of gravity cultivated during his years as a loan officer for an Inglewood bank.

Karen said, "I'll phone you tomorrow night—at eight sharp, when the rates change. Don't forget now. Don't run off somewhere and miss my call."

He snorted. "Where would I run off to? A bingo game? A church supper?"

"You might take in a movie."

"Yeah, something exciting like that."

"You'd think it was my fault, leaving you alone for one little weekend. Don't you realize that

this may be the last time I'll ever see my mother?"

Suddenly, when it's near the end, thought Earl, she's mama's devoted little girl.

But he said, "Sure, honey. Just kidding. And give my love to your mother. Tell her I—" What cheering message could you convey to a person dying of Hodgkin's disease? He could think of nothing appropriate.

"Never mind," Karen said shortly. Her eyes darted to the observation window, beyond which the silver-winged cone of the jet hugged the concrete apron, a great shadowy bird preening for flight.

"I should go now," she said anxiously, her cool, brittle features wrenched by some emotion—certainly not the sweet sorrow of parting, Earl decided. Karen was anything but sentimental. She was a practical sort who wasted little time on such silly niceties as affection.

Karen had short, chestnut hair. She was thirty-one, statuesque and handsome. At least that was what some people said of her. And since "handsome" was more a masculine term, Earl thought the word described her aptly. Her haughty features were bold and determined; she always knew which way she was going—her way!

She was striking enough and certain men stared at her hungrily. Earl had once stared at her with the same excitement. Now she was

no more than a habit and not a very good one at that.

"See you Sunday night then," she said. "Just loaf around and relax; try to enjoy yourself."

"I'll do that, honey."

"My plane should get here close to six-thirty," she raced on. "The traffic'll be dreadful on a Sunday evening, so I'll taxi home. Expect me around seven."

"Take care now," he said.

"Bye, darling." Almost as an afterthought, she gave him a quick, perfunctory kiss and fled.

He watched her retreating back. She took long strides, holding herself stiffly erect and moving with decisive grace. Nothing of himself reached out to her. Not love. Not regret. Not even the old resentment she used to arouse in him.

She evoked only a shrug of indifference. If he hadn't shucked her long ago it was purely circumstantial. He couldn't afford to live separately in any style while being cut up by the state law of community property or the demands of alimony. And if it ever came to a divorce, what demands she would make!

Yet she firmly believed that nothing could persuade him to give her up; and this was a testimony to her density, her opaque egotism.

Karen was a cipher. His feeling for her was nearly identical with his feeling for life itself—unspeakable boredom. From Karen to his dull, robot job with its deadend fu-

ture, there was hardly a facet of his total existence which he did not examine with despair. His life was formed into the tight lines of a drab pattern which was absurdly, crushingly predictable.

In short, nothing ever happened! But there was at least the feeble hope of some unexpected good-fortune around the corner of tomorrow.

Indeed, a totally unexpected windfall had just now brightened his future. An uncle, his one surviving blood relative, had recently died and left him what amounted to twenty-seven thousand dollars after taxes, a surprising bonanza, since he hadn't the least idea that the old boy cared that much about him.

The will had not yet been probated, and though there would be no contention, not the least doubt of its validity, there would be a waiting period of several months before the cash would crowd his pockets. But then, oh then! watch him dance! He would buy Karen off with a cash settlement and then he would be gone—next stop Hawaii, on to Tahiti and the Orient, then over to Europe . . .

Meanwhile, he was seething with impatience and bored silly.

When Karen was swallowed by the jet, lost in its sleek belly, Earl turned and moved away to the escalator. As he followed the tunnel to the exit, skirting the anonymous tide of travelers and greeters of

travelers, some embracing, clutching each other along, he was smothered by an unreasonable depression. Despite the first relief at being free from Karen for a weekend, he now felt cast adrift, alone.

He could use a drink. Maybe one or two for the road in the airport bar. On the other hand, he couldn't leave the Buick in that loading zone. Irritated, he quickened his pace and shoved through the glass doors to the outside.

He was too late. A ticket brazenly denounced him from the windshield. Well, Karen was right every now and then. The hell with it! He had bought himself a prime parking space.

He stormed back inside.

The dim bar was crowded. There was only one vacant stool, this beside a raven-haired young woman who had entered just ahead of him. He sat next to her. From the corner of his eye he studied her.

She was in her late twenties, he supposed. Long blue-black hair, smartly gathered in a kind of Polynesian ponytail, descended in glistening strands which were draped across her shoulder. She had finely molded features of extraordinary delicacy and fetchingly slanted eyes.

Her long slender earrings were artfully designed and, he was certain, fashioned from the purest gold. She wore an emerald wool jersey dress, chic, expensive. A large diamond ring of high bril-

liance and sparkling clarity graced a finger of her right hand.

Everything about her was elegant, he decided. And she was one of the few women he had even seen who could be classed as an authentic beauty.

It was a meaningless observation. He might as well have been examining some priceless jewel in the showcase of a museum—she was that unobtainable. Certainly she was unaware of him. In fact, she appeared to be gazing intently at a man who stood waiting for a place at the other end of the bar.

The man was tall and had the lithe, coiled-steel physique of an athlete. He had dark hair and a strong, pushy-arrogant face. His eyes guaranteed trouble and his jaw backed them up. He returned the young woman's gaze coldly, without a spark of interest. After a beat or two, the girl lowered her eyes, became studiously absorbed with her glass.

It was an odd little tableau and Earl was mildly curious. But he soon forgot the pair, withdrawing into himself, nursing a mood of deepening gloom. He had ordered a second drink and was taking the first sip when he felt a gentle pressure against his arm.

He turned his head and found himself staring directly into the gem-clear eyes of the raven-haired girl beside him.

"Excuse me," she said nervously, moistening her lips, "but could

"I speak with you for a moment?" She made this overture in a near whisper. She was obviously embarrassed and extremely taut.

"Why certainly," he answered with a dignity which denied his quick excitement. "Something wrong?"

"Yes, I'm in a bit of trouble," she replied in the same softly turbulent voice. "I need help, but I—I don't know quite how to begin. It's rather complicated, you see." She had a sound of culture, polished by finishing schools, opulence, and native good-breeding.

"Begin anywhere," he told her. "Just relax and consider me a friend."

She exhaled a tremulous breath. "How very kind of you. Well, the immediate problem is that man over there. The one with the mean eyes and the nasty face, standing at the end of the bar."

Earl nodded. "Yes, I became aware of him a few minutes ago. Something about him bothers you—right?"

"Exactly!"

"Know him?"

"Not at all. He's a complete stranger. But he's following me. I first saw him standing outside. He pretended not to notice me, then he came into the bar right after me. He's been watching me ever since. Not openly, but slyly, when he thinks I'm preoccupied."

"Well, I wouldn't take it too seriously. You must be very mod-

est if you don't realize that you're a stunning attraction and certain aggressive types like that one will chase after you, go to any lengths to make contact with you."

She smiled without joy. "Thank you. That's a sweet compliment. But no, I'm an old hand at dealing with the sort you mean. I've defended the goal post in that game a hundred, a thousand times. This one is quite different. He doesn't even recognize me as a female. He's simply a hunter, one who's paid to capture—or kill."

"You must be kidding," Earl said in amazement. "Who would want you captured or killed?"

"My husband."

"Your husband?"

"Yes. And don't think for a minute that I've escaped from some mental institution. I've been through this before and I know what I'm talking about. I've escaped from my husband and he's the one who belongs in a mental institution."

"You left him, ran away. Then he sent someone after you. That it?"

She took a long swallow of her drink, flamed a cigarette with a gold, diamond-studded lighter.

"This afternoon," she said, "I was at lunch with my husband and some friends at the Waldorf in New York. I excused myself on the pretext of going to the powder room. Then I ducked out a side door and took a cab to Grand Cen-

tral, where I had checked a suitcase.

"I bought a ticket to Chicago and got aboard the train. But I sneaked off at the first station and took another cab to a hotel. I went in one door and out the other, the back door: My last ride was to the airport. I thought I was so terribly clever that no one could trace me. But here I am—and there *he* is.

"Every time I run, no matter where I go, my husband finds me. Some tough character like that one over there tails me. There are usually two men, one relieving the other. He never uses the same people twice, because I would spot them."

"So when they have you cornered, what then?"

"They wait until I've settled some place, certain I'm in the clear. Then they call Floyd, my husband, and he comes and brings me back—with force if I resist."

"Ever think of going to the police?"

"Of course. And I have. But they can never catch Floyd or his hired thugs in the act. Anyway, the police don't seem to take me very seriously. Either they think I'm a nut, or my husband is paying them off. He's one of the wealthiest men in the world. He could buy the whole police force in any city and it wouldn't so much as irritate his bank account."

"May I ask your name?"

"Myra."

"Myra—"

She hesitated. "Would you tell me your line of work?"

He smiled. "I don't have money but I'm well acquainted with it. I'm a loan officer for a bank. My name is Earl Shipley."

"Well," she said, "I can't see what harm it will do. My husband is Floyd Vanderpool of the Vanderpool Shipping Company."

"Wow! I know the name very well. And I see what you mean—about oceans of money, that is. Since he can provide you with a mighty regal life, I gather you don't like him very much."

"I absolutely despise him! He's a cruel, lecherous old man. I doubt if I'll ever get to know anyone well enough to tell it all."

"But surely he's not dangerous. That bit about killing you—"

"Oh no, he would never dream of killing me himself. But he told me that if I ran again, it would be for the last time. He would be convinced that I was finished with him; he would have no further interest in me, except to have me killed so that no one else could ever touch me."

"You believe that?"

"Strongly. It's typical of Floyd. He has always destroyed anything or anyone he couldn't possess completely."

Earl gulped his drink and took a furious puff on his cigarette. "All right. What is it you want me to do?"



"If you'll keep that man occupied long enough for me to escape, I'll meet you somewhere later and I'll make it very worth your while. I didn't come empty handed. I brought a large slice of the Vanderpool pie along with me."

Earl glanced down the bar at the "enemy." Of necessity, the man was still standing, though now he had a drink in his hand. Earl was not afraid. In his time he had punched, kicked and battered his way out of some ugly brawls, though only in defense.

But this guy had the physical equipment and the cool air of a real pro. It would take a lot of doing, it would be no minor risk. Still, the excitement and adventure, this startling woman, pounded his blood. In a lifetime of droning monotony, such a chance might never come again.

"I'll do it," he said. "And not for the dough either. I have my own personal reasons—one of them is an easy guess."

For the first time her smile was all woman, her eyes whispered of other rewards than money.

"We'll need a little plan," said Earl. "And I've got one. While I keep our boy busy, you slink away, fast. Fade out to the front of the building and look for a white sedan, a new Buick. You can't miss it, I left it right at the curb in a loading zone. There's a ticket on the windshield."

"Climb in back, close the windows, lock the doors. Then get down on the floor and stay out of sight. I'll be along in good time, when I shake this guy. If he's got a friend, that's bad; we could be followed. But once we get wheeling, I'll lose him too. Okay?"

"Are you sure you don't want to back out? This could be a rough time for you. You could get hurt. You could even be—"

"Killed?"

She nodded. "I won't lie to you. It could happen."

"There have been days when I would have welcomed it," he said with a twist of smile. He stood, left money for the drinks beside his glass. "Don't make your move until I get him talking," he murmured, and stepped toward the end of the bar.

The man watched his approach with a blank expression. Earl went on past him a pace, then tapped his shoulder. As expected, the man turned, was baited to withdraw his attention from Myra's direction.

"Hey, buddy," Earl said quietly, "the lady asked me to give you a message—lay off!"

The man was tall, perhaps an inch or so taller than Earl. He had weight-lifter's shoulders, a barrel chest. The girth of his arms beneath a dark blue jacket suggested thick bands of muscle.

Poker-faced, he said, "What lady, pal?"

"Don't gimme that. Just lay off!" Over the man's shoulder, Earl saw Myra breezing out the door.

"Look, wise guy," said the man, tapping a finger against Earl's chest, "if there's a lady in this bar, she's no friend of mine. Now beat it, while you still got your health!"

Earl chopped down on the finger pressing his chest. "Don't threaten me, buddy-boy," he growled. "You hard guys come apart just like all the rest."

A muscle twitched at one side of the man's thrusting jaw. He set down his drink and shoved his face close to Earl's.

"If I ever see you again," he hissed, "I'm gonna spread you around this town in sections!"

His dark, slitted eyes stabbed Earl with chilling malice. Then he turned abruptly and marched from the room.

The guy had truly wanted to kill him, Earl decided. Only the time and place had prevented him from trying.

When he hurried out to his car, the man had vanished. After scooping the ticket from the windshield he had to unlock the door—so Myra was there, though he could-

n't see her. A suitcase rested on the floorboards in front. She must have snatched it from the baggage room enroute.

He turned the key and gunned off into the heavy traffic exiting from the port. Century was jammed so he took Sepulveda north toward the San Diego Freeway. Half a dozen cars were behind him. No way to tell if there was a tail among them.

"So far so good," he told Myra without pivoting his head. "You okay?"

"Can I sit up now?" Her voice came muffled from the darkness at his back.

"Not yet, but in a couple of minutes when we hit the freeway. Hold on. I'm going to make a little test."

He cut right sharply into a side street and flew east, checking his mirror. The rear view was dark for a quarter of a mile; then he saw headlights flare up as someone made the turn. But when there was no effort to close the distance, Earl figured it could be a coincidence.

He swung left for a block, then left again. He returned to Sepulveda Boulevard and sped north, weaving through traffic at twenty miles above the speed limit, not caring if some squad car came hurtling after him.

He wound up the ramp to the freeway and eased cautiously into the swirling, mile-a-minute torrent of metal, taking the left lane and holding steady at seventy. Behind

him a thousand yellow eyes chased him. There wasn't fifty feet between cars. Up ahead, across the wire mesh divider fence, another thousand or more bleaming eyes rushed to meet him in three tight ribbons of rocketing steel.

"All right," he said, "if we've got a tail at this point, he knows you're in the car. Because logically, he would have no reason to follow me alone. Your boy was mad enough to maul me to death but not crazy enough to take time out from the job to do it. So you might as well sit up and take notice."

He put the suitcase in back and she climbed over to sit beside him, chuckling good-naturedly when it proved to be an awkward exercise. In the closed car the fragile perfume fragrance of her excited the air.

Earl had come alive. In ten years he could not remember feeling so vital, so aware of joy in each pulsing moment of life.

When he had related his verbal contest with the man at the bar she said, "There! Is that the reaction of an innocent bystander? Put yourself in the same position. You might be puzzled or annoyed, but you wouldn't go ape and then dash out of the room."

She turned, searching the trailing vehicles.

"Don't bother," he said. "You couldn't tell friend from enemy in that crush. Way people drive on the freeways they're all enemies."

Now she gazed out to the horizon at the measureless blanket of lights which spangled the most sprawling, complex city in the world.

"All those lights," she mused, "each marking a possible hiding place, miles and endless miles of them. It's the perfect spot to get lost." She sighed. "And where are you taking me?"

"Malibu," he told her. "Motel on a cliff overlooking the ocean. It's well off the highway, a beautifully cloistered spot. Unless you have a better idea?"

"I was going to the new Century Plaza, that enormous pile of glass in Beverly Hills. But now that I have a shadow, your motel sounds much better."

"Know people in town?" Earl asked.

"Oh yes, quite a few. But Floyd knows the same people." She was silent for a space. "Are you married, Earl?"

"Not really."

She lit two cigarettes and passed him one. "Not really? What does that mean?"

"Married in fact but not in spirit." He swerved around a slow mover and back into lane again. "I'm busting out, going over the wall in a few months when I come into some money."

"Does she know?"

"She's in for a surprise. But believe me, she's got it coming. I just waved her off to Denver for the

weekend, that's why I was at the port."

At that instant he was attracted by a splash of light in the mirror. A car in the same lane was overtaking him in a burst of speed. A few yards back it veered as if to pass. Instead, it straddled the line between lanes and rammed the right side of his rear bumper with such force that the Buick was wrenched violently to the left.

It was a clever stratagem because only the narrow emergency strip separated the Buick from the divider fence; and if Earl had not tightened his grip on the wheel at the last second, they would have been hurled through the slim barrier of the fence directly into the path of several onrushing cars. As it was, the left front of the Buick grooved the fence for twenty feet before Earl was able to whip back into lane.

What happened next came so fast that there was little time for more than reflex action. A long black sedan, an aging Chrysler, roared up on the left side and cut sharply right, slamming into the Buick and smashing it into the middle lane as Earl fought the wheel and hit the brake.

They began to skid sideways, the howl of tortured rubber slashing the air as tagging drivers braked wildly.

A car ripped past, tearing the Buick's front fender with a thunder of metal and a sickening jar which

caused the Buick to rock dangerously.

"We're going over!" Earl shouted. "Brace! Brace!"

But the car did not roll after all. It spun in a complete revolution, slid broadside into the fence, bounced off and came to a jolting, screaming halt on the emergency strip as the motor died.

Earl was dazed. Blood trickled down the left side of his face from his head but he was not aware of the cut. Myra straightened up, her eyes wide in shock, her face pale. But apparently she was unhurt. Traffic swished by as if nothing had happened, though people turned to stare; and up the road a guy inspected the front of his shouldered blue Pontiac, climbed back in with a grim shake of his head and drove away.

"You all right?" Earl asked, squeezing her arm.

Nodding, she offered him a game smile. "I seem to be alive," she said, "but I'm not too sure about you."

She lifted the handkerchief from his breast pocket and mopped the blood from his face. Leaning closer, she parted his hair and studied the cut.

"It's not deep," she observed. "Just a scratch, really." She heaved a sigh. "Oh my God, I thought that was the end for us."

"It was meant to be," Earl said. "But somebody up there is saving us for something better—or worse."

"You ought to dump me and run for your life," she warned him.

He knew she was right but he said, "Hell no, I'm going the whole route. Let's take a look at the damage."

They circled the car, bending to appraise its wounds. The two front fenders were torn and twisted, the left door and panels were scraped and dented, the rear bumper sagged. One tail-light had been smashed; at the base of the rear deck there was a deep gouge.

Earl groaned, gave a shrug of despair. The new Wild Cat was a rare indulgence, one of the few luxuries of his life.

Myra chewed her lip, sent him a sympathetic glance. They climbed back in; Earl spun the motor.

"It runs, at least," he said.

Myra opened her purse, produced a thick wad of hundreds. She peeled off ten of these and slipped them casually into his pocket. Earl tried to give them back, telling her the insurance would cover all but the first hundred. Myra insisted.

"I owe you my life," she said. "You could have ten times that much, just for the asking."

They left the freeway at the next exit, made their way to the ocean by a devious route, then followed the coast highway to Malibu. Though they were unable to spot a tail, the constant flow of traffic strung behind them was not reassuring.

Earl turned off the highway and

skimmed over a narrow road which carried them almost to the brink of a cliff before it curved abruptly and dipped to the entrance of a motel. It was a unique structure, for the greater part of it stepped down the face of a cliff to a broad expanse of beach. The arrangement gave every room a panoramic view of the winding Pacific coastline.

From the highway, the motel was nearly invisible; the cars of the guests could not be seen at all. Thus it had become a place of assignation, the rendezvous of secret lovers, including some whose names could make headlines. Since it was a plush, expensive hideout, Earl knew it by reputation, not by experience.

"I've never seen anything quite like it," said Myra, who obviously had seen plenty.

"I think you'll like it," said Earl. "And I hope you'll be safe here." Having parked, he now felt awkward, unsure of himself. He simply sat and waited for her to take the lead. She did so promptly.

"Is this a sign-off?" she questioned. "You're not going to desert me now, are you?"

He grinned at her in the darkness. "If you want a bodyguard, I have no plans for the weekend," he replied. "I'm free until Sunday evening."

Impulsively, she kissed him, her moist, pillowing lips erasing the night's terror, enfolding him in the velvet clutch of tenderness.

Then she said, "Why don't we use phony names and get a couple of rooms close by?"

"Like—adjoining?"

"Mmm."

"With a connecting door?"

She sent him a look.

He chuckled. "I was only half kidding. Unless I'm close as a whistle, you might as well be alone for all the help you'll get if trouble comes."

"That's true," she said. "Besides, connecting doors have locks. I'll use the name of a girl I knew years ago—Alice Lindeman."

"You don't look very much like Alice Lindeman. Do I look like Chuck Wagner?"

"Only when you smile."

"Let's go," he said, reaching in back for her suitcase.

They were given huge connecting rooms on the second level, each with a king-sized bed. The decor, the whole atmosphere was charming, exotic. Great sections of the rooms were draped walls of glass from which one could view the ocean and the glittering lights of the entire shoreline.

Dressed, but for coat, tie and shoes, he lay supine, smoking in the darkness, absently gazing out to sea from his propped up position on the giant bed.

He heard the key turn to unlock the connecting door. She knocked, and when he called out, entered, bringing with her a splay of light from the other room.

She had changed into a gold lamé Capri suit. Her ebony hair had been released so that it fell in casual waves across her slender shoulders. She was breathtaking. But he saw this at a glance while his attention was riveted to the gun in her hand, a snub-nosed revolver.

She approached to sit on the edge of the bed.

"I brought you a friend," she said, reversing the gun and extending it toward him. "I swore that I'd use it on anyone Floyd sent after me, but I doubt if I'd have the nerve unless I were being attacked."

He examined the gun. It was a .38, fully loaded. She asked if he knew how to use it.

"Of course. First you aim and then you pull the trigger," he needed. "This is a big toy for a little girl."

"I'm a little girl with big trouble."

He slipped the gun beneath his pillow.

"I'm still trembling," she said. "I'm certain they meant to kill me and make it look like an accident."

"They?"

"The one in the bar couldn't have known that I was hiding in your car unless he was tipped off by a partner watching outside. It didn't take me ten seconds to grab my suitcase, because I had bribed a sky-cap to keep it handy by the door."

Earl said, "There was only one man visible in the Chrysler. I couldn't make him out, but I think you're

right; there might have been two guys backing each other up. Would they have been on the plane, all the way from New York?"

"No. They would've phoned ahead to have a couple of men meet the plane. Contract killers, isn't that what they're called?"

"Yes. You can buy anyone dead for a few thousand if you have the right contacts."

"How brutal, how merciless they are!" she exclaimed. "To kill me they were perfectly willing to murder you in the bargain." She leaned toward him, her eyes searching his face. "Really, I'm dreadfully selfish and callous to involve you in this. Earl, won't you please get out and go home while you can!"

He shook his head. "No, I think we're in the clear now. In any case, I'm staying. Because in my whole life I'll never meet anyone like you. And when you're gone, one day will be like the next, just grains of sand in an empty desert of time."

"Oh, you're beautiful," she murmured. "And real. No one ever said anything like that to me before."

She sank down across his chest and when they kissed her lips told him that all the creeping years of his existence had moved him inexorably toward this one weekend of violence and passion.

SATURDAY afternoon. On the crowded public beach below the motel, where they lay side-by-side,

chatting with the easy familiarity of new lovers exploring each other's depths.

They had shopped for bathing suits and a beach towel in Malibu. She had not wanted Earl to leave her long enough to go home, so she had bought him pajamas, a regal silk robe and slippers. Also toilet articles and an electric shaver. She had insisted on paying for these from a seemingly inexhaustible supply of cash, supported by yards and yards of American Express traveler's checks.

"Why did you come here to L.A.?" he asked her.

"I was enroute to Hawaii," she answered, dabbing her dainty, flaring nose with suntan lotion. Squeezing more into the palm of her hand she began to rub his back delightfully. "I was planning to stop here only a couple of days," she continued, "just to make sure I wasn't being followed before I took another plane."

"Why to Hawaii?"

"Why not? If you don't stay there forever, it's great. You can hole-up in places like Kona on the Big Island. Kona—yes, I'm definitely going to Kona. It's a soft, gentle place of languid palms, tropic flowers and sweet balmy winds. So quiet, so immensely silent. You see, I need a place like that. To think, to sort myself out before I move on to whatever life is right for me."

"I don't know Hawaii," he told her, "except in my imagination."

But I've always wanted to go there."

"Do it then! Come along—with me."

"You don't mean that."

"Oh yes, I do." She removed her sun glasses and stared at him earnestly, squinting in the glare. "I mean it, Earl, sincerely."

"Maybe now," he answered. "Under stress, in the emotion of fear and desperation. Anyway, at the moment I could barely afford to get there, let alone hang on for any period."

"Be my guest," she said lightly. Then, seriously, reaching for his hand, "Don't misunderstand. I have a different concept of money, perhaps. But I have more than enough for a lifetime and I want to share it—no strings in either direction, no strangle holds of obligation. Just pick up and fly off if the spirit moves."

"How you tempt me!" he said, caught up in her dream of paradise. Paradise with Eve in a tropic garden—until the day of the apple, and the awakening. "Later, in a few months, when I have my own money, I'll join you. Listen, nothing could hold me back when that time comes. You must know that, my darling."

"But until then, I don't think it would work. Picking up the tab might not destroy me in your eyes, but it would wreck my own image of myself. And then there's Karen. I can't just vanish. I'll have to break the news and satisfy her demands

for a divorce. So it's a date—but later. Okay?"

"Later never comes in my life," she said, studying him with a curious look of sadness. "But you're a very wonderful guy—and more."

Her face brightened, dismissing the whole business. "Anyone for a swim?" She leapt up and raced for the water. A bit reluctantly, he followed.

As always the Pacific was cold, at first numbing, then merely bearable as the body became adjusted to it. Cold or not, a great many people, mostly the younger crowd, speckled the gray-blue water, knitting through the crumbling hills to swim beyond, surfboarding, skin diving or just floating indolently on rubber rafts.

Myra was an excellent swimmer. She dove through the breakers, then swam with such swift grace that Earl was hard put to catch and pass her. At last she tired and they floated on their backs for a few minutes before simply treading water.

"Isn't it marvelous!" Myra said, knuckling the water from her eyes, then smoothing a frilly bathing cap which seemed smart enough to wear to church.

"Great," he said derisively. "Next summer, when the ice thaws, I'd like to try it again."

Grinning, Earl peered across her shoulder to the shore. The sands were sprinkled with sun bathers, ball tossers and kids shuttling

about, the grown-ups grabbing a small slice of joy from the weekend before the tired routine began again on Monday.

What's it all for? he was thinking. Why can't I just chuck the whole bit and—

Myra's mouth gaped suddenly. "Look out!" she cried, then spun around and swam frantically for shore.

Astonished, Earl turned about. There was nothing, just the bland, vacant face of the water. But then, too late, he caught the flash of something white scissoring beneath him, and in that same instant he was grabbed roughly by the ankles and yanked downward.

Vaguely, Earl was aware that the man wore the mask and gear of the skin diver, that his body was flat and hard and corded with muscle. But he was too busy to care, for now he was pinned to the bottom by the huge bulk of the man, fighting his weight and tireless strength, fighting his own involuntary panic which had already cost him precious breathing time, filling his bursting lungs with life-choking water.

It seemed obvious, almost from the beginning, that he was not going to make it back to the surface alive. His attacker had the advantage of surprise, if not physical superiority, plus the breathing equipment to carry the struggle without being tortured for air.

Sensing this, Earl relaxed, mak-



ing his body limp, faking unconsciousness just long enough to stay the attack. Then he reached up swiftly and grasped the killer's throat, squeezing mightily with the last of his ebbing strength.

Released for a second or two, he doubled up and shoved the man off with his feet, then shot to the surface.

He spat water, gulped air and swam madly for shore.

Myra stood waiting at the edge of the surf, her expression at once fearful and relieved. Earl sank to the sand, gasping and retching.

"I saw him coming and I knew what was going to happen," Myra explained. "He was sneaking his head up to the surface off to the left of us. He was wearing that diver's mask and I didn't recognize him, but I could tell that he was sizing up the best way to approach and pull me under.

"I deserted you. I feel like an awful coward: I was so scared, I just panicked and—"

"Natural enough," said Earl with a wan smile. "Panicked myself." He gobbled air. "Couldn't hold on down there another second or I might have choked him to death. Lucky to escape at all." Shading his eyes, he scanned the water outside the breakers. Nowhere in the area was there a ripple of life.

Myra said, "Why don't we call the police and have them watch for him to come ashore?"

Earl shook his head gravely. "A waste of time. He'll swim under water and surface far from here. Then, if he decides to dump that gear on the bottom, he could mix with any bunch in the surf and come in like a lamb."

Myra frowned. "Where did he get that equipment and how did he know we'd be in swimming, I wonder?"

"Simple. He was watching. We were on the beach a long time and he figured that sooner or later we'd take the plunge. So he got ready. You can rent that diving stuff at a couple of places just minutes from here. With luck, you could steal it off the beach and that wouldn't bother him in the least."

He stood.

"I need a drink," he announced.

"Let's go in," Myra suggested.

"We can phone a liquor store and order something."

As they climbed steps to the motel, Earl said, "He's alone. I'm pretty sure of that now. If I remem-

ber the old pro's technique, a contract killer operates solo. If there had been two guys, both would have attacked us from different directions. And if you got away, the second creep would have come in to finish me when he saw his pal in trouble."

"Same man you tangled with in the bar?"

"Probably. Same sort of build. By this time he hates my guts. You'd be an easy target if he could just get me out of the way."

After they had showered and dressed, Myra came to his room and asked why they didn't just check out and run while they could. Earl told her the guy would guess that was the next move and likely he was already watching. They had a gun and they would be much less vulnerable if they kept to their rooms.

In truth, though he didn't tell Myra, he could not picture himself ducking out with his tail between his legs. It was a matter of pride.

They ordered liquor and had a couple of drinks, then had dinner sent in from a nearby restaurant. They ate little and spoke hardly at all. Myra was nervous and depressed. She said Floyd's hired killer was trying to make her death seem an accident, first by auto wreck and then by drowning. But having failed, she thought his next attack would be direct and final.

Earl assured her that he would sit up all night, guarding with gun

in hand, and in the morning he would see her safely on a plane to Hawaii. But Myra could not be soothed.

Earl had not forgotten that he was to be at home by eight o'clock to receive a phone call from Karen. She was not a person to understand his more-or-less innocent involvement in such a fantastic situation and her accusations would follow him to the end of their marriage, at which time her vindictive nature would shoot him down in court.

It seemed best to forestall Karen by phoning her first, from a booth in the lobby. Myra would not remain alone in her room, even for that short a period, so he brought her along. Seating her on a sofa in view of the booth, he got change from the desk and placed the call to Denver.

"I thought you understood that I was to call you," Karen said peevishly after an opening exchange in which she was terse and withdrawn while gathering her forces to do battle. "Didn't I make it clear," she continued, "that I would call you just after eight when the rates came down?"

Disgusted with Karen's pinch-penny attitude, her inability to adapt gracefully to any little change, Earl told her angrily that he had been in no mood to hang around the house waiting for her call. And while he was bringing home the bacon he'd damn well do what he pleased! Which might in-

clude, he thought rashly, taking off for Hawaii with Myra in the morning.

Compared to Myra, Karen was a tiny little person with a tiny little soul. And for once he actively resented her very existence.

Unexpectedly, she put her mother on the phone. He didn't want to talk with his mother-in-law because imminent death dismayed him and embarrassed him for words. But there was no escape.

Karen's mother came on dimly, as if from the moon. She sounded vague, incoherent, already on the wing.

Karen returned, said she'd be seeing him about seven Sunday evening. Don't be too sure, he told her without sound.

Coming out of the booth, crossing to Myra, it occurred to him that in the end, people like Karen were doomed, not by their obvious faults and cruelties, but by the little drops of acid they poured once too often on old wounds. For just now her cold, querulous manner, her petty rebuking, had almost convinced him.

Perhaps he could just vanish with Myra after all. And think of himself as guiltless, justified.

They had a nightcap in Myra's room, which had now become his room. Earl had suggested that they switch rooms—just in case. Myra was amused. She said she thought her "executioner" would be sophisticated enough to assume the worst,

and therefore it wouldn't matter which room he came to. Nevertheless, she agreed.

Wearing her gold lamé outfit, Myra was gazing pensively out to sea as she downed the last of her drink. Abruptly she stood and announced that she was going to bed.

"I'm absolutely beat," she said. "It's emotional. I just feel drained to the dregs of myself."

"Sure. Who wouldn't be?"

"I don't think I'll be able to sleep, but I'm going to try." She stretched, yawned. "You must think I'm spoiled and selfish, letting you sit up guarding me while I—"

"Forget it, honey." He waved her off. "I'm wide awake, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Fact is, I'm keyed up. There are things I want to think about carefully. It may take all night."

"I hope so." She laced slender fingers behind her neck. "Isn't that mean?"

"No. There's nothing mean about you, Myra."

"That's nice." She fluffed her hair. "You have a way of saying just the right thing." Her face closed. "He couldn't break in here, could he?"

"I think he'd be a bit more subtle. That's why I'm going to sit up with a gun in my hand."

Her dark eyebrows took flight. "You really think he'll try?"

"No. I don't think a pro would risk it," he soothed.

"Mind if I leave the connecting door open?"

He smiled. "Of course not. Isn't that a silly question? If you can't sleep, come back in. I'll be up."

She crossed to kiss him in a way that was not sensual but affectionate.

He was touched. "How different you are, Myra. In the years I've been married to Karen, if she ever kissed me good night it was only in the beginning; and then it was meaningless as a handshake with a stranger."

"Floyd was something like that. Lots of fire but no warmth. How can you live with such a person?"

He shrugged and she moved off with a little wave.

"Myra?"

She paused in the doorway.

"What if I changed my mind and decided to go along with you to Hawaii?"

She gleamed. "I was hoping you'd say that!"

"We'll talk about it in the morning."

"Night, then."

She left the door open. Shortly her light winked out.

He got the gun and doused all but one light. He sat so that he could watch the door and still glance out to the moon-dappled ocean.

He had locked the doors; the windows were also sealed, the air-conditioners whirring softly. To get in would be no small task, nearly

impossible without a complicated, noisy operation.

Soon after three in the morning he became drowsy, at rest because his thoughts were no longer wound tight by indecision. He had just made up his mind to do what he had wanted to do all along—go off with Myra, and the hell with it!

Happier than he had been in half a lifetime, despite the possibility that he might not live to enjoy his freedom, he erased the light and lay back on the bed, fully dressed. He was now willing to admit that he was in love with Myra, as much as you could be in love over one startling weekend. Certainly nothing less than love could have held him after the events of Friday night and Saturday afternoon.

He did not exactly fall asleep but he was hovering near the edge of sleep's chasm when he heard the sound, a distant metallic whisper.

The sound had come from Myra's room, of that he was sure. He played it back in his mind and identified it at once. The turning of a lock, the thin snap of a bolt retracting.

On his toes, he went bounding to the connecting doorway. Her drapes were parted, the faint radiance of moonlight lifted the room from total darkness so that he could just make out the shadowy design of her body beneath a blanket.

The man was already inside the room, crouching toward her, when she sat bolt upright and made a



gasping kind of wail, grabbed a shuddering breath, and screamed.

The scream set the man off like a bomb. He sprang up, scooped a knife from his belt.

In that split second when he paused for the downward thrust, Earl fired, sent a bullet crashing through the easy target of his massive back.

Reflexively, his body continued on course and, slow-motion, fell sprawling across Myra.

As if embraced by a monstrous spider, she whimpered in revulsion and slithered out from under him as Earl found the light switch.

While Myra sat petrified in a chair, Earl turned the man over on his back. As in the airport bar, they stared at each other. There was a difference. Wall-eyed, the man returned his gaze without malice.

A hunting knife had fallen from his hand to the floor.

Myra said, "Is he—"

"Yes, he's dead." Earl made his voice cool and detached in defense of being visibly sick.

"Is he the same—"

"Yes, the same."

"What will we do now?" Myra spoke as if her voice had been dredged up from dark depths.

"We should call the police."

That was cold water dashed in her face. She looked up sharply. "Call the police? No, I don't want you to call the police!"

"Why not?" His eyes slid toward the body as he lit a cigarette with a trembling hand.

"Because it would make headlines, a nationwide scandal. Like it or not, I'm still married to Floyd Vanderpool. This wouldn't do you any good either."

"I guess we'll have to stand it, baby." His fingers reached down to caress her cheek.

"Yes, we could endure it, I suppose. But until they checked and sorted all the facts, I'd be a kind of prisoner. I wouldn't be allowed to leave town and Floyd's spies would find me easily. Floyd would be running scared. He'd be afraid that I would expose him and make it stick."

"Naturally, he'd have me killed an hour after he read the papers, even if it cost him a million."

Earl nodded. "You're right. That's exactly what he'd do. Okay, I'll pack you off to Hawaii and hold the fort here until I see which way the wind blows."

"You're not coming?"

He shook his head sadly. "Baby, I can't. Not now anyway. If they tied me to this, I'd be a hunted criminal, a fugitive. Don't you see?"

"They'll find he's a hood and perhaps they'll think it's a gang killing," Myra pleaded. "Anyhow, the police won't make much effort for someone like him. They would just go through the motions."

"I agree," said Earl, crossing to listen a moment at the door. "Windows closed; thick walls—I don't think anyone heard the shot." He came back to her. "Well, if they don't come looking for me after a time, then I'll be free. My God, it's not as if I did any more than keep him from— But listen. Whatever happens, they'll never know that you were involved, not from me, anyway."

He turned again to the body. "We ought to find out the guy's name, clean up our prints—and beat it fast."

He stepped over to the body. "I need to look inside his wallet without touching it. You got a pair of gloves?"

She nodded. "Yes, but I'm afraid to—"

He smiled narrowly. "You'll just have to, honey. Your gloves won't fit me."

She produced gloves from her suitcase and pulled them on. He turned the body face down.

"Right here," he said. "I just felt it in his hip pocket."

Gingerly, she withdrew the wallet and searched it. "Owen Krasner," she read from his driver's license. "He's thirty-six, lives in Culver City."

"Owen Krasner, Culver City," he repeated. "That doesn't tell us much. What else has he got in there?"

She fingered the compartments. "Auto registration for a fifty-nine Chrysler," she reported. "An auto club card, couple of credit cards and—here's a library card. Funny, you wouldn't think that he—" She clamped down on her lip. "Then there's some cash, looks about two hundred dollars—and that's all." She returned the wallet to his pocket.

"Anything in his coat pockets?"

She explored, came up with a key which she held toward him. It was labeled: *MASTER*.

"Now we know how he got in," Earl declared, "And that's bad. He must've knocked out the desk clerk or killed him. If they find him, the police will be swarming all over this place. Leave the key in his pocket and get dressed. Hurry! Don't touch anything, either. I'll wipe our prints and get rid of any other clues."

In ten minutes they had cleaned up and were out of the room, leaving nothing of themselves behind, not so much as a scrap of paper in a waste basket.

They found the clerk lying behind the desk in the lobby. There was a brutal swelling on his right temple but he was breathing steadily enough. They went out to the car and drove away.

"What about your license num-

ber?" asked Myra as they turned onto the coast highway. "Did you write it on the card when you signed in?"

"No. There was a space for it but I left it blank. The clerk didn't mention it."

They stopped for coffee in Santa Monica, then went on to the airport, arriving close to five in the morning. There was an eight o'clock flight to Hawaii; Myra bought her ticket and the clerk took her suitcase for loading.

Earl parked the Buick in the terminal lot and they sat talking until nearly plane time, making brave but hollow-sounding plans for the future, skirting the subject of the dead man but inevitably coming back to it.

At the gate, Myra said, "Again, I feel like a coward, leaving you here to hold the bag."

He shrugged. "My idea, remember?"

"If anything goes wrong, if you *really* need me to bail you out of a jam," she said, "I'll be at the Kona Inn. And I'll come the minute you send for me."

"I know you will, Myra. How long will you be in Hawaii?"

"That depends. If they find me again, I'll have to keep running."

"And of course you couldn't leave a forwarding."

With a bitter-sweet smile she said, "My forwarding address is—the world."

They announced the last call for

boarding, he kissed her, clung to her desperately, told her he loved her.

Then she was gone.

And a voice whispered to him:
You'll never see her again.

KAREN WAS delivered by taxi a few minutes after seven that evening. Earl was in the living room behind a magazine. Karen put down her bag and removed her coat in silence. Then she stared at him with an oddly reflective expression on her face.

"Have a good weekend, dear?" she said.

"So-so."

"Pretty dull, I imagine." She sat facing him from the edge of a chair.

"Nothing ever happens to me, you know that, honey." He put the magazine aside and lighted a cigarette.

"True," she said. "But of course that doesn't include the car."

"The car?"

"Yes, the car. A car is a four-wheeled vehicle which has a metal body and—"

"Okay." He held up his hand. "So you saw it."

"How could I miss it! It's just right for the junk yard."

"I was going to tell you, Karen, if you'd just given me a chance. Some weaving drunk on the freeway smashed into me, playing crumple fender. I nearly flipped over, but he got away."

"Earl, how stupid of you! It'll

cost us at least four or five hundred dollars!"

"Insurance covers all but the first hundred. What about me? I could've been killed. Don't you care?"

"Yes," she said flatly, "I care. Now, would you mind taking my suitcase into the bedroom before you sit down?"

"Sure," said Earl, rising. "Say, how's your mother?"

Earl could not keep his eyes open, Karen noticed as they watched television. He seemed unusually tired, positively drugged. He fell asleep in his chair and was snoring with his head drooping against his chest by nine o'clock. Not like him at all.

Karen turned the television sound up slightly and tip-toed out. She closed the bedroom door behind her and locked it. She reached for the phone and nervously dialed the number of an apartment hotel in Culver City. She had placed four other calls to the same number, three from Denver, all of them fruitless.

A switchboard girl answered in a bored monotone.

"I'm trying to reach Mr. Owen Krasner!" she told the girl sharply. "I keep calling but he doesn't answer and he was due there long ago."

"I told you, ma'm," the girl said waspishly, "Mr. Krasner has not been in all day." She sighed. "I'll ring him anyway."

There was a click and then the determined brrrrr of the signal being repeated in an empty apartment.

How *could* he do this to me? thought Karen. Says he loves me, says I'll be a widow with Earl's twenty-seven thousand inheritance and then we can get married. What

a joke, oh what a rotten filthy joke!

Never mind, Owen. It just didn't work this time, maybe the next. But darling, please answer! Owen, Owen, won't you *please* answer me!

"Sorry, ma'm," said the operator with sing-song finality, "Mr. Krasner does not answer."

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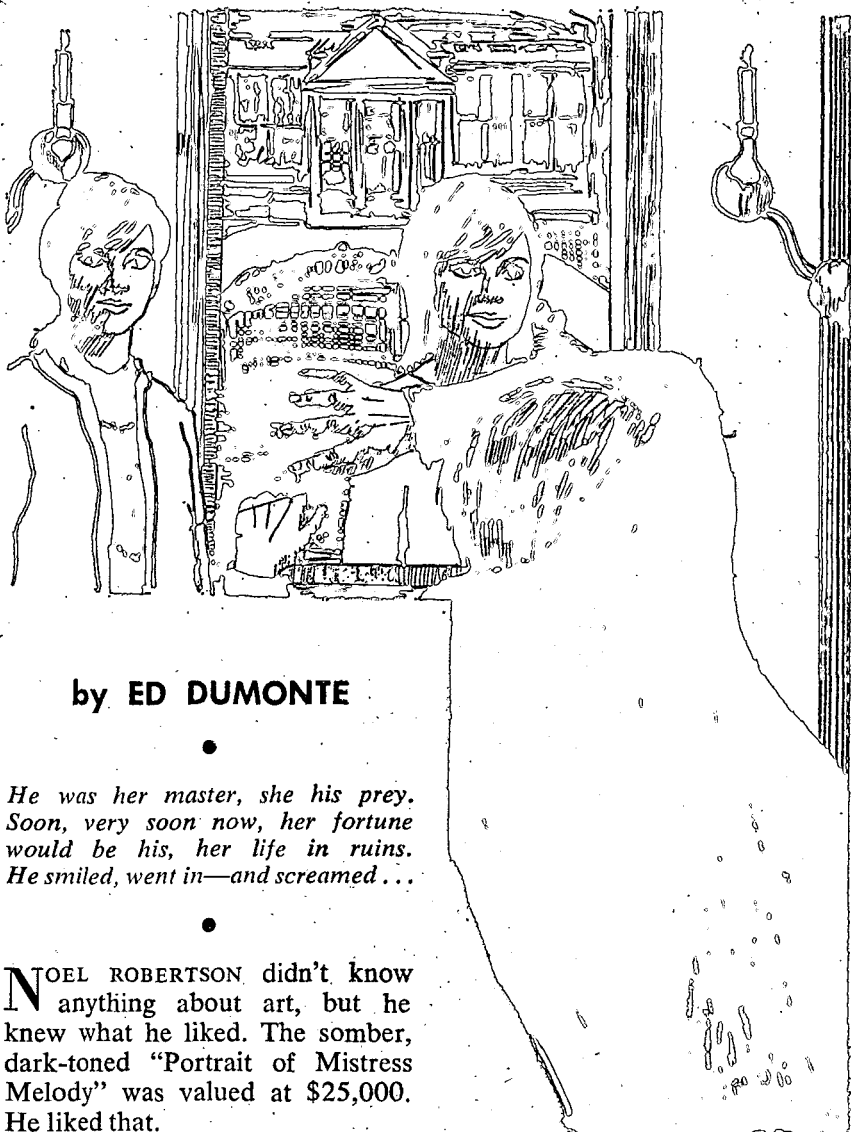
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PORTRAIT OF MISTRESS MELODY



by ED DUMONTE

*He was her master, she his prey.
Soon, very soon now, her fortune
would be his, her life in ruins.
He smiled, went in—and screamed...*

NOEL ROBERTSON didn't know anything about art, but he knew what he liked. The somber, dark-toned "Portrait of Mistress Melody" was valued at \$25,000. He liked that.

He stripped the canvas from its ornate frame and gazed at it with appreciative, mercenary eyes. It was a gloomy thing. In the background the century old mansion, painted in hues of gray and purple, was set in a sere and barren landscape reminiscent of Poe's eternal October. It was an accurate picture of the home of the Mistress Melody of a hundred years ago. It was an accurate picture of the home of the present Mistress Melody.

In the foreground, lower right, was a young girl. Her skin was alabaster white, her hair raven black. Her dark, deep set eyes sparkled with life that was more than mortal. Her lips curved in a gentle, enigmatic smile. It was an accurate picture of the Mistress Melody of a hundred years ago. By some trick of eugenics, some atavism of genes, it was quite remarkably an accurate picture of the present Mistress Melody.

Robertson rolled the canvas into a tube, patted it affectionately, and placed it behind the door of the study.

The "Portrait of Mistress Melody" was soon to begin a long journey. Its first stop would be the studio of the copyist who had been working from photographs and needed only a few hours with the original to capture tones and colors.

Its next stop would be the back room of an art gallery Robertson had come to know, and from there it would probably wind up in the

hands of some unscrupulous, but very wealthy collector.

Robertson had already started his lunch when Melody came into the dining room. She wore a dressing gown, and the lovely face of the portrait was now marred by the dull eyes and lackluster hair that indicated a long siege of severe illness.

"Good afternoon, Melly," Robertson said solicitously. "Coming down to lunch alone, eh?"

"I've been coming down to meals alone for weeks now, Uncle."

"Yes, of course, and it's a very good sign. Perhaps soon we can get rid of that grubby nurse. Then we can dispense with the so called services of that vile little man with the goatee."

"Doctor Bertrand has been very helpful to me. He helped me understand many things."

"How could that man ever understand the unfortunate strain that runs through your family? The circumstances that led up to your—accident?"

"It was suicide, Uncle. Attempted suicide. And Doctor Bertrand knows. I've told him everything."

"But could even you explain the long, dreary years of being hidden away in this gloomy house and watched because of some quirk of birth? Of the horror of having to see every day a face that so resembled your own and knowing that behind that face lay a tragic, homicidal insanity that very nearly de-

stroyed everything around it before it destroyed itself?"

"Please, Uncle. No more." Melody was close to tears.

Robertson left his place at the table and came to stand beside the girl. Her eyes were brimming with moisture, her hands clenched in her lap.

"Of course, my dear, I didn't mean to upset you," Robertson said, placing his hand on the girl's shoulder. "But in your condition, perhaps you'd better stay out of the study today. You know how that terrible picture always disturbs you, even on your best days. And this certainly isn't—"

Melody fled from the room, weeping. Robertson watched the girl run upstairs, then retrieved the rolled painting from the study and donned his hat and coat.

In the cab on the way downtown, he hummed softly and very happily, not at all displeased with himself. It was still quite a few months until that unfortunate day when Melody would turn twenty-one. Another suicide attempt, another nervous breakdown, another six months—or more, with luck—in that institution—No judge in the world would ever be convinced that the girl was competent to administer the considerable estate that had been left her.

And in that case, Noel Robertson beamed happily to himself in the back of the cab, things could go on just as they always had.

Those pesky auditors could be kept away from the estate account books. He turned to look out the window and saw that it was, indeed, a truly lovely day.

Robertson returned from the copyist's studio late that evening with two rolled canvases beneath his arm. He sighed deeply as he placed his hat and coat in the hall



closet. It had been tiring work, watching that incompetent scribbler attempt to duplicate the lines and colors of a \$25,000 masterpiece. He put the pictures behind the door in the dark study and went to his room to make a drink and prepare for bed.

In the morning, Robertson woke with the feeling that this was to be an auspicious day. He breakfasted in bed, savoring the delights that lay ahead. He hummed to himself while he shaved, dressed with particular care and walked downstairs with a step that was light as air.

In the study, Robertson walked across the floor with a firm step and removed the "Portrait of Mistress Melody" from the wall. He stripped the canvas from its ornate

frame and stopped abruptly. This part of the operation had been completed yesterday.

Robertson whirled around and there, in the corner of the study behind the door, were two neatly rolled canvases. He examined the thing in his hand—it was certainly the "Portrait of Mistress Melody"—and dropped it as though it burned him. He ran to the corner and opened the first canvas. It was the "Portrait of Mistress Melody." He opened the second canvas. It, too, was the "Portrait of Mistress Melody."

Robertson brought the first two canvases over to where he had dropped the third and threw them on the floor side by side. Then, on hands and knees, he minutely examined each of the pictures. To his experienced eyes they were all identical.

"But it can't be," he moaned. "There was one picture, the original, and I had it duplicated. That makes two pictures. There can't be three."

But it didn't even take a serious recount to convince him that there were, in fact, three portraits. Sitting on the floor in front of the pictures, Noel Robertson thought furiously.

"The artist, of course! He'll certainly be able to recognize his own work, and he'll be able to tell me which picture he copied from. Maybe he'll be able to tell me something about the third picture."

Robertson rolled up the three

canvases and rushed from the house.

He returned after an hour and a half with a look of numbed shock on his face. The artist had, of course, recognized his own work. The other two pictures, he said, were identical. That would seem to indicate that there was one copy and two originals. Robertson shook his head in disbelief. There had to be something wrong somewhere.

He walked into the study, dropped his hat and coat on a chair and put the pictures on the desk. Then he looked up and gasped. There, in its accustomed place upon the wall, was the "Portrait of Mistress Melody."

He gazed stupidly at the picture for a moment, then took it down from the wall and stripped the canvas from its ornate frame. He retrieved the other canvases from the desk and ordered lunch sent to his room.

Inside the room, with a tray on the bureau and the door locked behind him, Robertson laid the pictures out on his bed and got out a magnifying glass.

He could now recognize the copy he had authorized to be painted. There were slight differences of form and hue. The other three, so far as he could tell, were as alike as photographs printed from the same negative. After an hour of detailed study, Robertson's head buzzed and he couldn't continue any longer.

There was only one thing left to do. He would have to bundle up the pictures and take them all down to the art gallery. Surely the director of the gallery, a man whose whole life was devoted to art, would be able to pick the genuine portrait from among the phonies.

Robertson walked into the study to pick up his coat and shrieked. There, in its accustomed place upon the wall, was the "Portrait of Mistress Melody." He tore the picture from the wall and stripped the canvas from its ornate frame.

It was another of the portraits. Or perhaps it was the original and all the rest had been his imagination. No, he told himself, the insanity was on Melody's side of the family, not his. He compared the new picture with others and they were all the same. Quickly, he rolled them all together and ran from the house.

When Robertson returned, his step was heavy and his head hung in despair and resignation. The director had quickly picked out one of the paintings as a copy. As for the others, though he was impressed by them, he refused to declare that any particular one of them either was or was not the original.

Therefore, there would be no sale until he could get the opinion of an outside expert, an authority on the artist who painted the picture. That might be a matter of days or weeks or months.

Noel Robertson sighed wearily. He would have to replace one of the pictures in the frame before the servants or somebody else noticed it was gone.

He walked into the study—and screamed. And this time the screaming didn't stop.

MELODY AND Dr. Bertrand sat together, looking at the blank, staring eyes of the creature strapped to the bed.

"Perhaps when you can get through to him, Doctor," Melody said, "you might try the same therapy with him that you used with me. Remember how long it took you to convince me that the picture was nothing to be afraid of? How many months you had me painting and repainting that scene just to show me it was only canvas and oil? As you said, I had some talent and many years of art study to help me.

"I actually got to like that picture. The study wall looks blank without it. That's why, whenever I found the frame empty, I put one of my copies in and hung it up again.

"I first felt that Melody's portrait really belongs on that wall soon after I began painting it. I took the original upstairs to work with and the study looked so bare I had to put one of my copies in the frame and hang it. I haven't looked since I've been well, but the original is probably still rolled up in a corner of my room somewhere."

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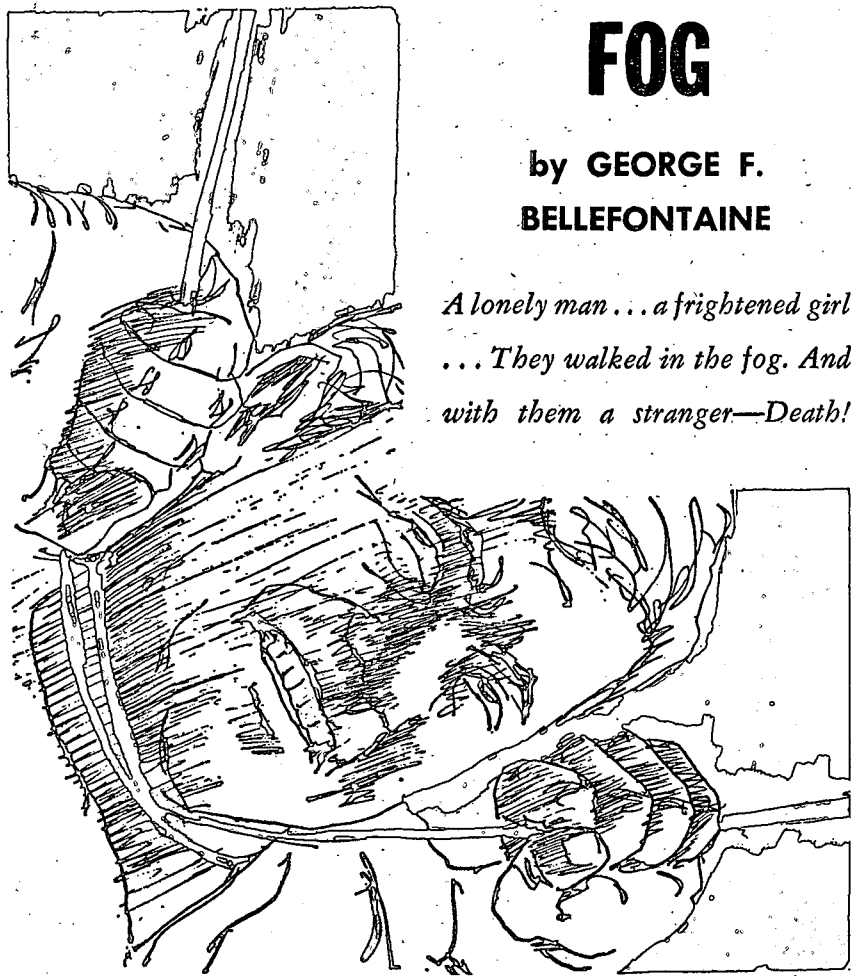
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October—1967

FOG

by **GEORGE F.
BELLEFONTAINE**

*A lonely man . . . a frightened girl
... They walked in the fog. And
with them a stranger—Death!*



AFTER PACING THE floor and chain-smoking cigarettes, Fowler decided to try the bed. He stretched out, his heels hanging over the end, and reached for the final edition of the local newspaper.

FOG TONIGHT—WILL THE STRANGLER STRIKE?—the headlines screamed.

Fowler tossed the newspaper aside and began to pace the small hotel room once more. He stopped

at the window and peered out, but all he could see was a nearby street light; even the park across the street had been swallowed up by this thick gray mass. He started toward the closet, stopped.

I won't do it, he thought. Not tonight. Not ever again.

He lit a fresh cigarette and tried to read a pocket novel he had purchased earlier that evening. It was no use. The walls closed in. The air was suffocating him, the cigarette smoke searing his throat. Now his head began to ache terribly and he knew he would have to go to the bar across the park. He would drink and after that—

"No!" he cried.

The loudness of his voice startled him. And suddenly it was as if he had awakened from a hopeful dream and he realized that such a dream was utter nonsense. He made several excuses in his favor and after that it was easy to convince himself that he had to leave this room or go mad.

He went to the closet, slipped into his suit coat, left the room hurriedly and took the elevator to the main floor. The desk clerk nodded and smiled as Fowler crossed the empty lobby and stepped into the close dampness of the night air.

When he entered the park, he quickened his pace. He almost collided with a young policeman.

"You shouldn't be here," the policeman said. "Don't you read the papers?"

Fowler disliked all policemen. There had been many of them in the tenement district where he had been born. Little tin gods, they were.

"No, I don't read the papers."

Fowler's sarcasm didn't seem to bother the policeman.

"You a visitor, sir?"

"Yeah. A salesman," Fowler said impatiently.

"Afraid I'll have to ask you for some identification."

"For cryin' out—" Fowler reached inside his coat and handed his wallet to the policeman.

The policeman studied the contents, then took out his note pad and made a notation.

"Thank you, sir," he said as he handed the wallet back to Fowler.

"Do you mind if I go now?"

"I'd stick to the streets if I were you, sir. We have a maniac on the loose here. Three of his victims were found strangled to death right here in this park."

"Oh?" was all Fowler could manage.

"Yes. Ten victims so far. He doesn't seem to be particular; male or female suits him just fine. And it always happens when there's fog. He's a strange one."

"Do you mind, officer? I'm in a—"

He stopped abruptly when he realized the policeman was eyeing him carefully, perhaps suspiciously. Finally he nodded and continued on his way. Fowler sighed.

One of these days he would be too flippant with the law.

Fowler stepped inside the crowded, smoke-filled bar and his eyes began a slow search. Then he saw her, a slim brunette, sitting alone in the far corner. He made his way across the room and stood at her table.

"Do you mind?" he asked. "It's pretty crowded."

The girl lifted her head slowly and her dark brown eyes seemed distant for a brief moment. She wasn't beautiful and the fact that she wore no make-up didn't help, but he didn't care. One thing did attract him, her long graceful neck. It was without an imperfection and it immediately reminded him of Mary.

The girl seemed annoyed at his presence. She looked around, saw that all the other tables and the bar was filled. Reluctantly, she made room for him at the table.

"Thanks," he said.

She remained quiet, her head turned away, that distant look in her eyes again.

The waiter came and Fowler, when he saw that the girl's glass was empty, ordered a rye for himself and told the waiter to refill the girl's glass. As the waiter returned with the drinks, the girl accepted hers as if it had been owed to her. Fowler shrugged it off and lit a cigarette, then he lifted his glass and offered a toast to her. She looked away and remained silent.

"Don't you talk?" he asked.

She glanced at him briefly and slipped her drink.

"Look, I'm just a lonely guy looking for some company. If I'm bothering you I'll leave." He started to get up.

"No," she said quickly. "You—you don't have to leave. I'm lonely too."

From then on she began to warm up and with each new drink he began to discover a little more about her.

Her name was Lila and she was a secretary for a local psychiatrist. She made it quite clear that hanging out in bars was not a habit with her. She was shy, he discovered, but he figured her shyness was a cover for something else. He really didn't care. She had problems. So did he.

She was talking about mental disorders now. He was getting sick of this bar, and her chatter.

"Let's get a breath of air," he suggested.

"I—I don't know. It's getting late."

"Would you rather go home and stare at the walls?"

"No," she replied.

"C'mon, then."

She was reluctant but he took her arm and led her out of the bar.

"It's damp," she said.

"My car's at the hotel just across the park. Why don't we go for a spin?"

Her eyes said no, but he took



her hand and pulled her behind him. As he started to enter the park she pulled him to a violent stop.

"What's wrong?"

"Let's not go in there."

"It's a short-cut," he protested.

"I don't care."

"Are you afraid of me, Lila?"

"I—I'm just afraid."

"Okay," he said. "We'll take the long way."

She talked about her boss' patients as they walked toward the hotel, but he wasn't listening. He was feeling his liquor and he was looking forward to the bottle he always kept in the car's glove compartment.

They reached the hotel and he led her around to the parking lot. The car was nothing fancy, just a current model Ford. He unlocked the door on the passenger side and helped her in. He circled the car and climbed in behind the steering wheel.

He drove through the police-infested city and headed in the gen-

eral direction of the waterfront. He parked on a pier beneath a beacon and reached inside the glove compartment for the bottle.

He offered her a drink. She declined. He shrugged and took a long hard drink. After that he turned toward her and took her hand. It was trembling.

"You're really afraid of me, aren't you?"

"No."

He didn't believe her, and he didn't care. He just wanted to look at her now. His staring must have made her uncomfortable. She turned away from him.

"Did you see all those police?"

He said, "So what?"

"They're expecting the strangler to strike again."

It made him think of her slender neck, so creamy smooth. Her neck made him think of Mary. He cursed silently.

"Dr. Grant says the strangler is mentally ill."

"Dr. Grant?"

"My boss," Lila said.

Fowler's hand crept along the top of the car seat and came to a halt inches away from her neck. He wanted to touch it.

"He said the fog may have something to do with the pattern, but I think the strangler uses the fog to advantage."

He could no longer restrain himself. His long fingers moved and touched the warmth of her flesh at the base of her skull. She stiffened.

He bent forward and kissed the back of her neck.

She turned, her eyes flaming. "Don't do that."

He held her gaze for a moment and during that moment he found strength. He turned away from her completely and gazed out the window on his side of the car. He could see nothing, only the fog, and somewhere in the harbour he heard a fog horn.

It's just as well she did that, he thought. I have control now. I won't do it. Not this night. Not ever again. Do you hear that, Mary?

He heard a snapping sound, glanced over his shoulder and saw Lila fishing for something in her handbag.

"Do you want a cigarette or something?" he asked.

"I'm looking for my hanky."

He shrugged and turned his face back to the fog, to his thoughts of Mary.

"I was talking about the stranger," Lila went on. "I think it's revenge. Dr. Grant said so, too. I can understand revenge. Has someone ever been cruel to you? They have to me.

"I was just a little girl. We lived in a second story apartment, my mother and me. But Mother was always working and I had this awful housekeeper. I knew she didn't like me, but I didn't care because I had Trump, a beautiful cat. How we played together! Then that ter-

rrible day the housekeeper let Trump out of the apartment and I wasn't allowed to look for her.

"I went to the balcony and called her name and that's when I saw the kids in the courtyard below. Two boys and a girl. They were laughing because they had my Trump. They had tied a rope around her fluffy little neck and they—"

Fowler hadn't heard a word she said. He was still thinking about Mary.

Never again, he thought silently. It was the job's fault. All those trips away from Mary, those lonely nights in cheap hotel rooms. How could any one know how he felt in those rooms? He would always have to get out and there was only the bars. Liquor was the real weakness. After that there was always the women. No. He was all right now. Soon as he got back he was going to see his boss and demand a territory closer to home.

"You don't know what it's like," Lila said. "But they paid for what they did to Trump. They'll go on paying."

What the hell was she talking about? Fowler wondered. He glanced over his shoulder and that's when he saw it. Lila had taken something out of her handbag and was holding it in her hand. It was a thin cord.

It happened so fast he had no time to think or react. She slipped the cord over his head and around his neck. He felt himself being

jerked backward on the seat, the cord cutting his flesh. He tried to get his fingers beneath the cord, but already his strength was draining as he fought for breath. He tried to reach her behind him but she merely applied more pressure. He tried to scream but nothing came out.

"I'm so glad you listened to me. I—I've never told anyone before. And I am glad it's a man this time. I much prefer a man—much more satisfying."

Everything was getting darker, his struggling weaker.

"I—I didn't want to do it tonight, but you came to my table, just like

those other men had and I knew it would happen. It always does. Or sometimes when I would see a woman walking alone, I would think of that little girl in the courtyard and I—"

Her voice trailed off, and even then, in his final, agonizing moments, he didn't know who she really was or what she had been saying.

Fowler only knew he had been unfaithful to Mary most of their married life and now, by some quirk in fate, he was paying for that with his life.

Then the fog closed in, suddenly and completely.

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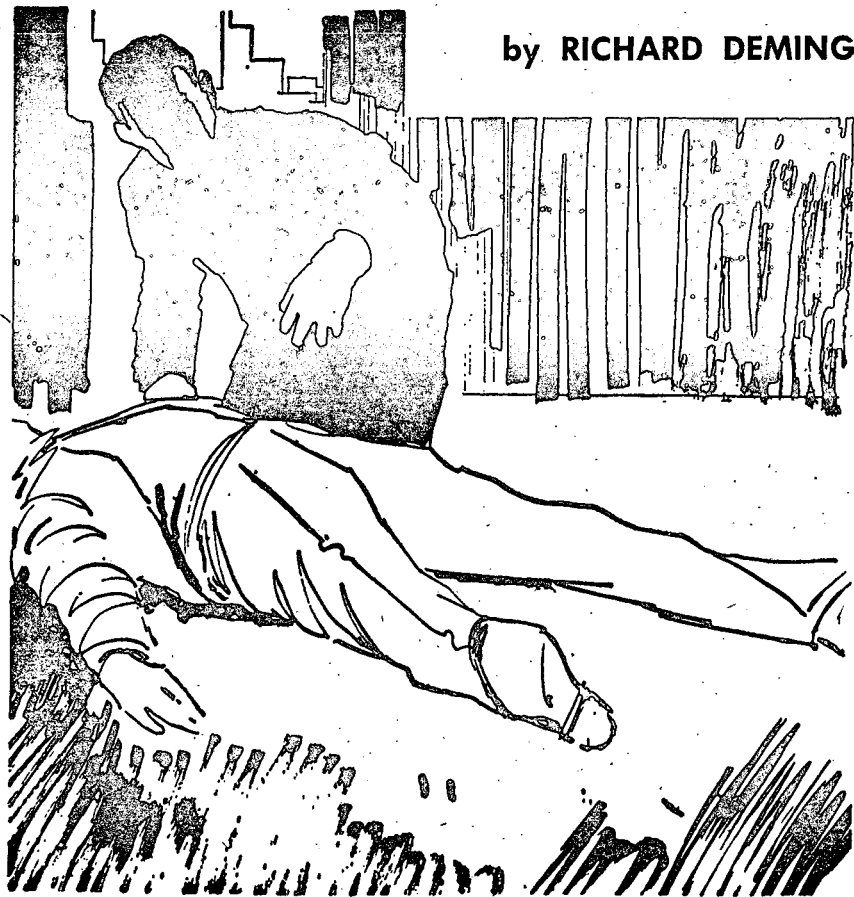
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THE HOUR OF THE MAN by NORMAN DANIELS

Mugger Murder

*There's never a good answer to murder. But
a good cop will never stop trying to find it.*

by **RICHARD DEMING**



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I WAS SURPRISED to see Sergeant Nels Parker in the Coroner's Court audience, for homicide detectives spend too much of their time there on official business to develop any morbid curiosity about cases not assigned to them. I was in the audience myself, of course, but as a police reporter this was my regular beat on Friday mornings, and after five years of similar Friday mornings, nothing but the continued necessity of making a living could have gotten me within miles of the place.

When I spotted him two rows ahead of me, I moved up and slid into the vacant seat next to him.

"Busman's holiday, Sergeant?" I asked.

His long face turned and he cocked one dull eye at me. For so many years Nels had practiced looking dull in order to throw homicide witnesses off guard, the expression had become habitual.

"How are you, Sam?" he said.

"You haven't got a case today, have you?" I persisted.

His head gave a small shake and he turned his eyes front again. Since he seemed to have no desire to explain his presence, I let the matter drop. But as the only inquest scheduled was on the body of a Joseph Garcia, age twenty-one and of no known address, I at least knew what case interested him.

The first witness was a patrolman named Donald Lutz, a thick

bodied and round-faced young fellow who looked as though he, like the dead man, was no more than twenty-one.

In response to the deputy coroner's request to describe the circumstances of Joseph Garcia's death as he knew them, the youthful patrolman said; "Well, it was Wednesday . . . night before last . . . about eleven-thirty, and I was walking my beat along Broadway just south of Market. As I passed this alley mouth, I heard a scuffling sound in the alley and flashed my light down it. I saw these two guys struggling, one with a hammerlock on the other guy's head, and just as my light touched them, the guy with the hammerlock gave a hard twist, the other guy went sort of limp, and the first guy let him drop to the alley floor.

"I moved in with my night stick ready, but the guy stood still and made no move either to run or come at me. He just stood there with his hands at his sides and said, 'Officer, this man tried to rob me.'

"I told him to stand back, and knelt to look at the man lying down. Near as I could tell, he was dead, but in the dark with just a flashlight I couldn't be sure, and I didn't want to take a chance on him waking up and running away while I went to the nearest call box. So I stayed right there and used my stick on the concrete to bring the cop from the next beat.

That was Patrolman George Mason.

"Mason went to call for a patrol car and a doctor while I stayed with the two guys. That's about all I know about things except when the doctor got there, he said the guy lying down was dead."

The deputy coroner said, "And the dead man was later identified as Joseph Garcia?"

Patrolman Lutz nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And the man Garcia was struggling with. Will you identify him, please?"

The policeman pointed his finger at a short, plump man of about fifty seated in a chair apart from the audience and within a few feet of where the jury was lined up along the left wall. He was a quietly dressed man with a bland, faintly vacuous smile and an appearance of softness about him until you examined him closely. Then you suspected that a good deal of his plumpness was muscle rather than fat, and you noticed his shoulders were unnaturally wide.

"That's him there," the young patrolman said. "Robert Hummel."

Just in front of the platform containing the deputy coroner's bench was a long table, one end pointing toward the platform and the other end toward the audience. On the right side of this table, seated side-wise to it with his back to the audience, sat the assistant circuit at-

torney in charge of the case. On its left side sat Marcus Prout, one of St. Louis's most prominent criminal lawyers.

Now the assistant C.A. said, "Patrolman Lutz, I understand Robert Hummel had in his possession a .38 caliber pistol at the time of the incident you just described. Is that right?"

"Well, not exactly in his possession, sir. It was lying in the alley nearby, where he'd dropped it. It turned out he had a permit to carry it."

Marcus Prout put in, "Officer, was there any other weapon in sight?"

"Yes, sir. An open clasp knife lay in the alley. This was later established as belonging to the deceased. Robert Hummel claimed Garcia drew it on him, he in turn drew his gun to defend himself, and ordered the deceased to drop the knife. However, the deceased continued to come at him. Hummel said he didn't want to shoot the man, so he used the gun to knock the knife from Garcia's hand, then dropped the gun and grappled with him."

The lawyer asked, "Was there any mark on the deceased's wrist to support that statement?"

"The post mortem report notes a bruise," the deputy coroner interrupted, and glanced over at the jury.

Marcus Prout rose from his chair and strolled toward the pa-

trolman. "Officer, did the deceased . . . this Joseph Garcia . . . have a police record?"

"Yes, sir. One arrest and a suspended sentence for mugging."

"Mugging is a slang term for robbery with force, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. Generally without a weapon. You get a guy around the neck from behind and go through his pockets with your free hand. There's other methods classified as mugging, but that's the way Garcia did it the time he was convicted."

The lawyer said, "Did you draw any inference from the fact that Robert Hummel, with a gun against a knife, used the gun merely to disarm his opponent and then grappled with him with his bare hands?"

The policeman said, "I don't exactly know what you mean."

"I mean, did it not occur to you as obvious Robert Hummel's statement that he did not wish to shoot his opponent was true, and that he went out of his way to avoid seriously injuring Garcia, when under the circumstances he would have been fully justified in shooting the man through the heart? And that Garcia's subsequent death, in spite of Mr. Hummel's precaution, must have been an accident resulting from Robert Hummel exerting more strength than he intended in the excitement of the moment?"

This leading question would have been stricken from the record in a regular court, of course, for



not only was it deliberately slanted at the jury rather than to the witness, it asked for an opinion on a matter of which the witness could not possibly have had actual knowledge.

But in Coroner's Court the legal formalities of a court of law are almost entirely lacking inasmuch as no one is on trial for anything, the jury's sole duty being to determine how the deceased met death. I was therefore not surprised when neither the assistant circuit attorney nor the deputy coroner made any objection to the question.

Patrolman Lutz said he had not thought about the matter, which seemed to satisfy Marcus Prout, as he had asked the question only to implant it in the jury's mind anyway. The lawyer went back to his seat.

When the deputy coroner asked if there were any more questions,

both Prout and the assistant C.A. shook their heads. The patrolman was dismissed and Norman Paisley was called as a witness.

Norman Paisley was a thin, dried up man of middle age who looked like a school janitor. To the deputy coroner's first question he gave his address as a rooming house on South Broadway two blocks south of Market.

"Were you a customer at Stoye's Tavern on Sixth near Olive this past Wednesday night?" the deputy coroner asked.

"Yes, sir. All evening from seven till they closed at one-thirty in the morning."

"Did you know the deceased Joseph Garcia?"

"To talk to, yes, sir. I used to run into him at Stoye's Tavern off and on. I didn't know where he lived or what he did, or nothing like that, though."

"I see. Was the deceased a customer at Stoye's that night?"

"Yes, sir. He come in several times during the evening. I guess he was bar cruising all up and down Sixth Street."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, sir."

The deputy coroner said, "Do you recognize any other person now present as a customer at Stoye's the night before last?"

Norman Paisley pointed at Robert Hummel. "Him. He come in about a quarter of eleven and left at eleven-fifteen. I noticed him

particular because he bought the house a couple of drinks."

The assistant C.A. cut in: "Was Joseph Garcia present during this period?"

"Yes, sir. He even remarked about it. When Mr. Hummel bought a drink, Joe said to me, 'That damn fool must be made of money. He just bought the house a drink at a place I was in up the street.'"

Marcus Prout asked, "Did you get the impression Garcia was following Hummel?"

"No, sir. Joe come in first, as a matter of fact, and Mr. Hummel come in right after him."

The lawyer looked surprised. He started to ask another question, changed his mind and waved his hand dismissingly. The assistant C.A. stepped into the breach.

"Mr. Paisley, did you get the impression the deceased was particularly interested in Robert Hummel?"

"Not right at first. But when Hummel bought the second drink, he happened to be standing close to Joe at the bar, and when he opened his wallet to pay, Joe looked kind of startled. I was standing the other side of Joe, but even from there I could see there was a lot of bills in it. After that Joe couldn't seem to keep his eyes off Hummel."

Marcus Prout spoke again. "When Hummel finally left the bar, did Garcia follow him?"

"Yes, sir. He went right out after him."

The assistant C.A. said, "Did you get the impression Garcia left because Hummel did? That is, that the deceased was actually following Mr. Hummel? Or that he just happened to leave about the same time?"

"Why, I don't know," Paisley said. "I never thought about it at the time. I guess Joe must of followed him out figuring to roll him."

Marcus Prout smiled at this answer and the assistant C.A. grunted. When both indicated they had no further questions, the witness was dismissed.

Shuffling the papers in front of him, the deputy coroner located the post mortem report, cleared his throat and said, "The autopsy shows death by suffocation due to a crushed larynx."

Following this announcement, he rose from his bench, advanced to the edge of the platform and asked in a loud voice. "Are any relatives of the deceased present?"

When there was no reply to this routine question, he turned to the jury and signified they were to go out.

While the six-man jury was out, I tried to figure what Nels Parker's interest in the case could be. On the surface it was simply a case of a mugger being killed in self-defense by his intended victim, and the inquest was obviously a rou-

tine affair designed to clear the intended victim of any blame.

The slant of the questions, not only of Robert Hummel's lawyer, but those of the assistant circuit attorney and the deputy coroner as well, indicated no one expected or wanted any verdict other than justifiable homicide.

Ordinarily, beyond noting down his name, age and address for my news item, I would have paid no further attention to the man who had just been cleared of homicide, for he was not a particularly impressive person. Nels Parker's unexplained interest in the case intrigued me though, and noting the sergeant continued to linger in the courtroom until Robert Hummel finished shaking hands with his lawyer and finally moved toward the door, I lingered beside him.

When Robert Hummel was erect, you were less conscious of his unusually broad shoulders and the muscle underlying his fat than you were when he was seated. He looked like a well fed businessman who had reached the age when he ought to start watching his blood pressure. He also looked like the last person in the world you would expect to resist a professional mugger so successfully and so violently that the mugger ended up dead.

As the man passed from the courtroom, Nels continued to watch his back through the open door until he reached the stairs at the end of the hall and started

down. Then the sergeant gave his head a slight shake and moved toward the stairs himself.

Falling in beside him, I said, "Buy you a drink, Sergeant?"

His dull eyes flicked at me. "One beer maybe. I got to get back to Homicide."

The nearest tavern to the Corner's Court building was a half block west. I waited until we were standing at the bar with a pair of draft beers in front of us before I asked any questions.

Then I said, "A story hidden here somewhere, Sergeant?"

He shook his head, tapped his glass once on the bar to indicate luck and sipped at his beer. "No story, Sam."

"Not even off the record?"

"Just a pipe dream I had, Sam. You couldn't print it without risking a libel suit."

"Then I won't print it. But I got curiosity. Whose case was this Garcia's? On Homicide, I mean."

"Corporal Brady," Nels said. "He wasn't there because the thing was so routine, all they needed was the beat cop's testimony. Probably I ought to have my head examined for wasting my time on a case I wasn't even assigned to."

When he lapsed into silence I asked, "What's the story?"

He drank half his beer before he answered. Then he said, "I was just interested because this guy Hummel killed a guy once before."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Almost the same circumstances too," the sergeant said. "A mugger down along Commercial Alley. Only that time the guy's larynx wasn't crushed. Hummel just choked him to death."

"Judas Priest!" I said. "Was there an inquest?"

Nels nodded. "Routine. Happened about twelve years ago. There's no doubt it was on the up and up. The mugger had a record as long as your arm and it was pretty well established Hummel never saw the guy before he was suddenly waylaid by him. Apparently the mugger had been loitering in a doorway for some time waiting for a likely victim to pass, for they turned up a witness placing him there a full hour before he tangled with Hummel. Picking Hummel was pure accident, and the mugger was just unlucky to jump a guy who looked soft, but turned out to have the strength of a gorilla."

The sergeant paused, then added reflectively. "There wasn't any of this flashing a roll in dives then."

His tone as he made the last statement struck me as odd. "What do you mean by that?" I asked.

But the sergeant ignored my question. "Hummel didn't carry a gun then either. Matter of fact, it was as a result of the incident that he applied for a permit. He didn't have trouble getting one, because

he's an antique and rare coin buyer and carries large amounts of cash."

"You've been doing some detailed checking on the man," I remarked.

"Yeah. But it doesn't add up."

I eyed him narrowly for a moment, then signaled the bartender for two more beers. I said, "Now give me the pipe dream."

"Pipe dream?" he asked.

"You mentioned your interest in the case was a kind of pipe dream. You think there's some connection between the two cases?"

Nels took a sip of his fresh beer and shook his head. "I'm sure there isn't. Not between the two muggers anyway. Maybe a kind of psychological connection."

"What does that mean?"

"Well," the sergeant said slowly, "I figure the case twelve years ago was just what it seemed to be. A guy unexpectedly jumped Hummel and Hummel killed him defending himself. So was the case today, I guess. With a slight difference. Maybe this time Hummel killed deliberately when he was jumped."

"You mean he deliberately lured Garcia into attacking him?"

"Think back over the testimony," Nels said. "Remember how surprised the great lawyer looked when the witness said Hummel had followed *Joe* in?"

"There was even something about Garcia remarking he had

run into Hummel in another tavern. But why? What would be Hummel's motive?"

Nels was silent for a moment. Finally he said, "I checked back over unsolved homicides for the past twelve years, and seven of them were guys with records as muggers. They were found dead in alleys, some strangled, some broken necks."

"My God!" I said.

"That makes nine he could have killed."

For a moment I couldn't speak. "But why, for God's sake?"

Without inflection Nels said, "Twelve years ago I imagine Robert Hummel was just a normal guy. Or at least I imagine any abnormal urges he had were merely latent. Then he killed in self-defense. My pipe dream is that maybe he discovered he enjoyed it. You've heard of psychopathic killers."

"But . . . but . . ." I could only stutter.

"But what? A guy flashes a roll in dives. There any law to stop him? A mugger tails him for an easy roll. The guy kills the mugger, and if nobody sees it, he just walks away. If he gets caught in the act, he merely tells the truth and the law gives him a pat on the back for defending himself against attack by a criminal. It's a psychopath's dream. He's figured a way to kill legally."

"But . . ." I whispered. "But

... he just couldn't possibly again ..."

"The law says you can use whatever force is necessary to resist attack on your person or property. If you use more than necessary, theoretically you're guilty of manslaughter. In the case of a farmer shooting a kid stealing watermelons, we can prove unnecessary force, but how do you prove it in a case like today's?"

"And even if we establish beyond reasonable doubt that Hummel deliberately enticed a robbery attempt ... which we couldn't do without a confession, no matter what we suspect ... he still has a legal right to defend himself."

"You mean you intend to do nothing about a homicidal maniac?"

The big man nodded.

"Sure," Nels said calmly. "Next time we'll put a white light in his face and hammer questions at him until Marcus Prout walks in with a writ of habeas corpus. But unless we get a confession that he used more force than necessary to protect himself, he's safe, even if he kills a man every week. And he may well do so."

He laughed without any humor whatever. "Beyond picking him up and questioning him every time he kills, there isn't one damned thing in the world we can do to stop him."



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THE GREAT TYPEWRITER ROBBERY

It was an easy caper. No one would ever know. That's what we figured, until . . .

by **LARRY MADDOCK**

IT STARTED THE day Eddie O'Gorman showed up at my pad carrying a laundry bundle. "You need some bread, man?" he asked.
"Always," I told him.



"All right," he said, tossing the package at me. We ought to make two or three bills each out of what's in there."

I opened it up. Inside were a couple of gray workmen's uniforms, like guys at gas stations wear. There were names embroidered over the shirt pockets: "Bud" on one and "Steve" on the other.

"I don't want no job pumping gas," I told him.

"Look at the backs of them, stupid."

It said *Federal Typewriter Service* in big letters across the back of each shirt.

"Fill me in," I invited. The shirts weren't new so I knew they were genuine; Eddie'd grabbed them off a laundry truck. He does things like that on impulse sometimes.

Eddie held up a finger. "First, do you know where we can swipe an unmarked panel truck?"

I grinned. That was why he needed me. Wheels are my specialty.

"I think it can be arranged," I said cautiously.

"Good. I've found a repair shop that can handle up to twenty typers, immediate delivery. We'll get thirty to forty bucks per machine."

"Don't they have burglar alarms on warehouses anymore?" I asked.

"Who needs warehouses? We've got uniforms. We walk into office buildings, look around until we see a typer that's not being used, and walk out with it. We put it in the

truck and drive to another office building. Ten stops and we've got us twenty typers."

"I don't know," I said. "Think of the risk."

"What risk? As long as we're dressed for the part, who's to stop us?"

"Cops," I said.

Eddie laughed. "Listen, you know how cops disguise themselves as electricians and telephone repairmen when they're staking out a joint? I guarantee there won't be any trouble. Have I ever let you down yet?"

"No," I admitted.

"How soon can you get the truck?"

There was a green panel job with no markings on it that was always parked in an alley behind a warehouse I'd worked in a few months earlier. I'd quit as soon as I managed to get a duplicate set of keys made. I picked it up at five the next morning and met Eddie two hours later at a pancake house.

At nine we changed into our uniforms and drove downtown to the first of a series of office buildings we hit that morning.

By the time we got there, Eddie had convinced himself that he actually was a typewriter repairman, but I didn't have that kind of confidence. The plan worked like a charm, though. Nobody suspected a thing; nobody challenged us. We just walked through the buildings, looking into one office after another

until we found an empty one, and swiped the typer.

We carried 'em out as bold as brass. I got worried at our third stop when Eddie tried to make a date with a cute receptionist. I felt better each time we got away clean.

It was eleven-thirty and we had sixteen stolen machines in the back of the truck.

"Why don't we quit now, Eddie?" I suggested. "We could unload 'em, ditch the truck and split. How about it?"

"You nervous?"

"I'm getting that way," I admitted.

"Relax. We've just got four more to go. Two stops: There's a likely looking building now. I bet they got nothing but electrics."

"Great," I said. I scanned the scene for fuzz but didn't see any. Unless the guy loitering in the alley where we had parked the truck was fuzz in mufti.

He looked like a bum, but you never can tell.

We walked into the building and right off a tall, balding gent in a fancy vest and steel-rimmed glasses came towards us.

"You're the men from Federal Typewriter?" he asked.

"That's right," Eddie replied quickly.

The man held out his hand. "I'm Milt Schnepf, office manager here. Follow me, gentlemen. We've got them all ready for you."

I shot Eddie a worried glance but

he ignored me. I had no choice but to tag along.

"Five of them in all," Schnepf said, showing us into a small office where five electric typers sat in a row. "Did you bring the loaners?"

"No," Eddie replied, just like he knew what he was talking about. "We were on another call when we got the word to come after these. We'll bring the loaners right after lunch."

"Fine. Need some help carrying them out?"

"No, thanks. We'll take care of it." Eddie grabbed one machine and I glommed onto another and we walked out to the truck.

"All we need," I wheezed, "is for some jerk like that to see sixteen other typers back here. He'd blow the whistle for sure."

Eddie laughed. "You worry too much. Wasn't it nice of the man to have five of them ready and waiting?"

"Let's forget the other three," I urged, looking for the bum at the other end of the alley. He was still there.

"If we don't take the rest he'll blow the whistle for sure. Come on."

Still feeling uneasy, I followed him back into the building.

As we started down the corridor towards the room where the typers waited, a small, cute brunette bounced up to us. "You're the typewriter men, aren't you?" she said, sort of breathless.

"Yes," we admitted.

"I'm trying to change a ribbon and I'm getting all fouled up," the doll explained. "Do you suppose one of you could be a real dear and take time out to teach me how to do it right?" She batted her eyelashes and I was afraid Eddie'd volunteer on the spot.

But he just smiled and said, "Miss, I'd love to, but right now we've got to get these typewriters loaded so we can get back to the shop in time for lunch. But when we come back this afternoon I'll personally teach you everything I know."

"And that's quite a bit," I put in.

"I'll sure appreciate it," she said, smiling and looking helpless and taking a deep breath all at once.

"Let's get moving," I prompted.

"Just ask for Irma," the chick said.

We grabbed the next two typers and carried them out.

The minute we got in the alley we froze.

There was a cop car parked right behind our truck. The back of the panel job was standing open and two harness bulls were looking inside. With them was the "bum" I'd seen earlier.

We didn't have time for a conference. We dropped our machines and took off at a dead run.

"I knew that bum was fuzz," I panted as we rounded the corner.

"Shut up," replied Eddie.

Footsteps pounded behind us

and a voice shouted for us to stop.

"Don't even look back," Eddie wheezed. He was running out of steam already and so was I. That's what happens when you let yourself get out of shape. But those harness bulls kept on coming like they were working out at a gym or something.

The next thing I knew a hand grabbed my collar.

About twenty feet further the other cop got Eddie.

"Okay, boys. Let's go back to the truck and you can explain things."

"Go to hell," Eddie said.

They handcuffed us together and led us back to the alley.

"You sure tumbled fast to this hustle," Eddie complained.

"Yeah," I added. "It isn't fair to plant a plain-clothes man in an alley like that."

The cops looked at each other and started to laugh. We were approaching the truck now and they took us around to the back of it.

"Oh, no!" Eddie moaned as we saw the bum handcuffed to the door handle.

"Oh, yes," the cop chuckled. "We saw him coming out of the other end of the alley carrying a typewriter. He looked suspicious so we stopped him."

"That's right," chimed in his partner. "We were going to warn you that you should keep your truck locked, but all of a sudden you started running. You guys will never learn, will you?"

"Go to hell," said Eddie.

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