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A GIRL WHO FOUND A CAREER—AND A MAN—IN
THE GRAY-FLANNEL WORLD OF NEW YORK

Marcia Blake, PUBLICITY GIRL



NANCY
WEBB

P E R M A N E N T B O O K S

THE
COMPLETE
BOOK

*"I wanted to be alone with you,
Marcy... just a little while."*

Weeks of hurt were stiff in Marcia's voice. "You did? Why?"

Perry murmured warmly, "If you don't know why, you have the shortest memory in the civilized world. You're still the same sweet kid I knew back in Illinois."

She gazed at him coolly. "You're the one who's different, Perry." She thought of these past weeks waiting for his call.

She could reach out now and touch him, to know he still loved her, but suddenly she didn't care.

The handsome man in front of her had become a metallic duplication of a thousand other successful young men who sacrificed scruples for money.

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Marcia Blake

PUBLICITY GIRL

NANCY WEBB

P E R M A  B O O K S
N E W Y O R K

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MARCIA BLAKE, PUBLICITY GIRL

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MARCIA BLAKE

PUBLICITY GIRL

ONE

SHE AWOKE TO THE SAME SOUND that had lulled her, at last, into oblivion—the sleek clicking of Pullman car wheels over their rails.

For a moment, while sleep and its tangle of somehow pleasant and exciting dreams receded, she lay in the intimate green cocoon of the berth and tried—but not too hard—to recall why this feeling of well-being should possess her. Then, as the meaning of what lay ahead seeped back into her conscious awareness, she began to smile to herself; the private, small smile of one still half-committed to her dreams.

Of course! This was the day it was beginning.

Down the corridor outside the faintly swaying green curtains, she could hear the porter coming. The murmur of his repeated warnings, a deep-pitched and mellifluous litany, made the moment somehow more real. Marcia Blake began to struggle into the clothes she had arranged in readiness the night before. Her heart had picked up a quick, light rhythm that sought to outstrip the click of wheels on their south-flowing tracks.

Like others in the car, she had left a call before turning in. Presently, the green curtains were set in motion by a discreet tug. The rich voice with its overlay of Dixie began the repetitious message.

“One hour out of New York, Miss.”

“I’m awake, thank you, porter.”

“Dining car is open for breakfast.”

He moved on, and she could hear him arousing someone else a few places farther along the aisle. It took her only a few minutes to dress, at least to a point of decency. She eased between the curtains and stood up. *New York in an hour*, chuckled the wheels . . . *an hour . . . an hour . . .*

The dressing room, like all its kind, was so inadequate that the three women there ahead of her all but filled it to overflowing.

One of them, seated before the mirror, was coiling up thick white hair into an outmoded but scrupulously tidy bun. On one of her blue-veined hands a wide gold wedding band spoke of orange blossoms half a century faded. The hair with which those stiff-knuckled fingers busied themselves was like duck feathers, snowy and soft. It made Marcia think of Miss Annie Crawford, and she was amazed to feel a definite pang.

She never had been any too fond of Miss Annie, who always had been embarrassingly good to her. Once, the old lady had been engaged to marry her grandfather. That was the bond. But there had been too much of the chronic martyr about Miss Annie, back in Le Seur, Illinois, to appeal to a girl of twenty impatient to be on her own and going places.

In the second seat before the mirror, a redhead who almost undoubtedly had not been born red-headed was improving upon nature in the matter of eyelashes. Despite the swaying of the train, the hand which wielded a tiny mascara brush was expertly steady. The face in the mirror was neither so young as it presently would be made to appear, nor so old as the faint hardness of its mouth and a crepiness around its eyes suggested it soon might become. The fake-leopard dressing gown clutched around the redhead would have profited from a trip to the cleaner's. She worked steadily at what she was doing, giving the chore her unbroken concentration.

The third occupant of the cubicle was much younger; was, in fact, if appearances told anything, within a year one

way or the other of Marcia's own age. She was a dark girl, small-boned, with a skin as smooth as ivory even in the raw light to which it was at present subjected. She was running a comb through Italian-cut hair which seemed to spring into charmingly careless order almost without her ministrations. When she caught Marcia's glance in the mirror, she made a friendly little *moue* to convey the assurance that her limited space before the glass soon would be available.

Since there was nothing to do but wait, Marcia leaned against the wall by the windows and waited.

Outside, just a little westward of the tracks, she could see the river gleaming, polished by a bright morning. April had etched a promise of green not yet achieved among the charcoal branches of trees near the water. Against the opposite shore, an incongruous touch, a line of rusting ship hulks were strung along the base of a rising promontory—dead things, forgotten, ghosts out of some closed maritime chapter downstream. *New York! . . . I'm almost there . . . Tomorrow at this time, I'll be reporting for work at Irby and Yates . . . I'll be part of New York . . .*

The tracks looped a small headland and the ghost fleet was gone. They were gliding past a quarry of some sort, and man-made gashes dug deep into the limestone cliffs. Even so early, the derricks had begun their work. Marcia could see them swinging and swooping, lifting and swinging back, but the sound of them was lost in the sound of the train. Out on the river, a string of barges heaped with cargo was being shunted northward by a panting brace of tug-boats. A local station flickered past, its lettered sign illegible, shed and bare platform of no concern to a fleet streamliner from Chicago.

"Sorry if I've kept you waiting," the dark girl said pleasantly, rising from her place. She had only a purse with her, into which she thrust her comb as she stood up. She was dressed neatly in one of those simple black suits which could have come from a bargain basement or a *couturier*.

"Thank you." Marcia slipped gratefully into the vacant spot.

The synthetic redhead glared at her, although she had been careful not to joggle the elbow wielding the mascara brush. For another moment, while the final lashes were darkened and thickened, hostile silence continued. Then, perhaps to the room at large, the redhead voiced her real complaint:

"How they expect a girl to look anything but a hag, dressing like this? They might as well jam you into the Iron Maiden."

The slim, dark young girl went on her way, purse tidily tucked under one arm. But before she was gone, her eyes met Marcia's in the glass and she shrugged almost imperceptibly—a what-can-you-do-about-this-type? sort of shrug that somehow was fleetingly warming. By now, Marcia was having a small sinking spell; one of those brief and infrequent moments of wondering whether, as Miss Annie had put it back in Le Seur, she weren't biting off more than she could chew by coming to work in New York.

They were alone, the three of them, before the old lady with the white hair vouchsafed an answer that was not really required.

"All railroads are the same way, nowadays," she said. Her voice was thin and whining, and not like Miss Annie's crisp staccato at all. "Raise the fares, cut the service. That's *their* motto."

The redhead was generous. "You can say that again!"

"And all the fancy folders and posters they print up, trying to get you to travel with them," the whine continued. "Making out like they operated a line where the first stop on it was Paradise!"

"That's the publicity geniuses in the Madison Avenue offices. *They* bait the trap." Upon this point the redhead appeared to consider herself a qualified lecturer. She promptly listed her qualifications. "My third husband was one of those. An advertising man. You couldn't believe Herbert on a stack

of Bibles. He'd make black into white and night into day. When he started moving over his talents into our private life, I—"

Marcia had lost track of their conversation. The word *publicity* had drawn an invisible curtain over it, and behind the curtain two of her were carrying on a private interview with herself.

"What would these women say if they knew I was on my way right now to a job in one of those public relations offices? What would they think of the way it all happened—Leo Irby's coming out to Le Seur to lecture to our Lions Club, and having me assigned to show him around because I was so new on the Gazette staff they didn't need me for anything else?"

"Remember, Marcia, how he read some of the pieces you'd done for the Saturday woman's page? And how he thought they showed talent? And how, when the two of you got to talking about your Journalism major at college the year before, he turned out to be an old friend of Professor Gray?"

"It still doesn't seem real that he offered me a job if I ever wanted to come to New York. Or that I'm going to be a publicity writer for Irby and Yates. Or that I'll be leading my own life, away from Miss Annie . . ."

This thought was disloyal. For in her own ways—irritating, unimaginative, demanding, yet well-meant ways—Miss Annie had been a good friend to her girlhood sweetheart's granddaughter. Faintly ashamed of herself, Marcia hurried the business of cold-creaming her face and applying powder and lipstick and fluffing out her sandy-blond hair. Level gray eyes made a swift but detailed examination of the resultant reflection in the mirror, before she rose and left the redhead and the old lady in possession.

The last place in the dining car was at a table for two. The dark girl from the dressing room had already settled into one of its twin chairs. With a murmured request for permission, Marcia sank into the facing seat and picked up the menu propped against a water carafe.

When the white-coated waiter paused beside her presently, pencil poised and gold teeth bared in an encouraging grin, she scarcely knew what she told him. The imminence of New York was between her and such mundane matters as food. Now they were almost upon her, the city and Irby and Yates and one other thing; a glorious but terrifying melange. *I wonder where Perry Cosgrove is eating breakfast this morning*, she thought. *I wonder if I'll see him today—or tomorrow—or when I'll see him . . .*

As she set down the long card, the girl across from her smiled.

"I never have to look at the breakfast menu on a train. I always order toast, coffee and prunes. The Fern Miller Special."

Obliquely, it was an introduction. Marcia returned the smile. "My name is Marcia Blake. You ride this train often, I gather."

"I haven't done much traveling, really." Fern Miller had a pleasant voice, unhurried and softly modulated. "But ever since the first train trip I took with my uncle—when I was just a little girl—I've had a fixation about dining-car prunes. They always seemed so much bigger and juicier than ordinary prunes. I still can't seem to help myself with mere logic."

"I never got more than twenty miles away from Le Seur, Illinois, until I was too old for any such wonderful attachment." Suburbs were flowing past the window flanking their table; open country no longer, but streets and houses. It was possible that Perry lived in some such house as one of these and commuted to his work. But it was ridiculous to study each street with the unspoken question—*Is it, perhaps, this one?* "I never really went away from home until my first year at college."

"I didn't get to college," Fern said, not complaining but wistfully. "My uncle was too old and sick, by then. He needed someone. It wasn't until after his death, late last spring, that I was—free."

"You're an orphan, too?" Briefly, it seemed a bond between them; and Marcia's smile deepened a bit at its corners. "My own parents were killed in an accident six years ago. An old friend of our family—of my grandfather—took me in charge and saw to it that I finished my education. She doesn't much approve of my coming to New York to work."

"Sometimes they don't."

"Miss Annie visits New York twice a year. She comes to heckle the investment men who handle her money, and to buy more of those sensible, expensive navy-blue dresses that all look alike and never wear out. But for a young girl—she still thinks of me as a Sweet Sixteen—she believes Manhattan is a jungle of unscrupulous adventurers waiting to pounce."

Fern lifted her coffee. "You have a job in the city, then?"

"With a public relations firm. Writing copy. You work in New York?"

"I was never trained to do anything useful, except to look after a house." Fern apologized by implication. "I'm only going East to—to see a friend. He wrote me that he wanted me to come, and—well—"

"You'll be in New York long?"

"I don't know, yet." The dark eyes drifted toward the window, and recognized a landmark in the bridge over which they were rolling. "Heavens! We're almost in, and I have my poor dog to redeem from the baggage car before we get to Grand Central." She stood up quickly, scooping her purse from the table. "I hope I'll be seeing you again in the city, Marcia Blake."

TWO

THE ONLY MANHATTAN HOTEL she knew by name, the one patronized by Miss Annie on those semiannual treks from Le Seur, stood on lower Fifth Avenue, a few blocks north of Washington Square and its arch.

Even before she gave its address to the taxi driver who answered her signal in the low-roofed area off Grand Central's Vanderbilt Avenue balcony, Marcia knew that she could not afford to make it her permanent address. The beginner's salary Leo Irby had mentioned would accommodate itself to few luxuries; and Miss Annie, for all her shrewd respect for money, seldom stinted where her own creature comforts were concerned.

But the Van Tyne would serve as a temporary base of operations, while one looked around. Perhaps some girl at the office where she would be working had an apartment she'd like to share. Or there might be a good furnished room advertised in the papers. With her luggage stowed away in a place she'd at least heard about, with a bed she could depend on at her disposal, she would start following likelier leads.

Almost hypnotized, she watched streets which would become familiar zigzag past the cab window. People always said that New York taxi drivers were characters; a race apart. She hoped, heart in her mouth, that she would meet few duplicates of the present example. He seemed convinced that brakes never failed and that the normal stance for a vehicle writhing in and out of clotted traffic was atilt on two wheels.

They cut over to Fifth Avenue at once, and then veered southward. The Public Library shimmered past, its guardian lions seeming to greet her with a marble purr. The façades of

shops with names she had heard all her life dwindled, once the sky-stabbing Empire State tower was passed, into smaller and less impressive edifices. Madison Square interrupted these, but they immediately began again. And presently she was walking under the marquee of the dignified small hostelry Miss Annie had praised so often, a bellhop trailing her with the bags she had packed in Le Seur in a dream.

The room reserved for her was a single looking out on the sidestreet. Half the building's depth away was a wedge of Fifth Avenue. Across the way, as she discovered after tipping the bellhop and opening the cases he had set down by her bed, stood a row of five almost-identical brick houses, each four stories high, each with its tall front steps, each evidently divided into floor-through apartments. The corner opposite belonged to a hotel in no visible way different from the Van Tyne.

The room itself was medium-large, beige-walled, and outfitted with pseudo-French furniture in cherry. Its decorator had used inoffensive chintz and a framed etching depicting birch trees by a winter brook, believing perhaps in its being better to be safe than sorry. After Marcia had stowed her clothes in an adequate closet, there was nothing here to detain her. She was not expected at Irby and Yates until the following morning. But impatience for at least a glimpse of the office tugged at her.

She went downstairs again and out to the street and walked north, remembering the direction from which her taxi had approached the hotel, until she reached the first bus stop. A sense of adventure possessed her as she rode uptown, swinging from a strap. Now she was part of it. Now she—almost—belonged. Dead ahead, in the upper Forties, lay Mecca—*her* office. And from this bus window she might, just possibly, glimpse Perry Cosgrove in the sidewalk crowd.

Bending down from time to time for better vision, she studied street numbers. At the corner where they were only ten short of the address Leo Irby's agency stationery pro-

claimed, she tugged the green signal cord and climbed down to the sidewalk again. The building—the building—loomed ahead of her, impressively foayed and rearing high. She went inside almost humming aloud. Paused before the bank of elevators with their bronze doors, she crossed and uncrossed slim fingers.

Irby and Yates occupied what appeared to be a considerable suite on the eighteenth floor. As she opened half the double glass panel lettered with the familiar name, a clatter of typewriters struck at her. Three girls at desks stretched along a corridor were attacking their keyboards as if eternal salvation depended upon the immediate completion of whatever work they were engaged in turning out.

Between door and corridor, at a leather-topped receptionist's desk, a fourth girl sat gilding—literally gilding—her mandarin-length fingernails. She had silver-blond hair, cropped in the style Miss Annie spoke of as Medieval Idiot, and her skin was as glowing as a baby's. Its innocent clarity contrasted oddly with eyes so heavily made up that they seemed almost a burlesque of some old-time movie vamp's.

"Yes?" purred this vision throatily. "Could I help you?"

"My name is Marcia Blake. I'm going to start work here tomorrow. Mr. Irby hired me, and I thought—if he isn't too busy right now—"

"Oh, yes. *Miss Marcia Blake.*" The golden girl lifted her voice as she pronounced the name; it seemed to Marcia, deliberately. Not one of the clicking typewriters in the line on beyond missed a beat. Yet three heads lifted, and three pairs of eyes came to rest upon her—appraising, estimating. "We've all been alerted you'd be coming, *Miss Blake.*"

Their curiosity, Marcia had to concede, was natural enough and not intended to be unkind. Inwardly, she shriveled before it. But she kept her voice steady and refused to color. "If Mr. Irby—"

"Mr. Irby's in Philadelphia for the day—I think. They're making up a series of film clips for a television show about

Florida oysters." The girl at the desk seemed to recognize that this might be considered unlikely. "Oysters, that's one of our clients. Mr. Yates, he's out too. I don't know where, I'm sure. But Mrs. Forsythe would want to see you."

"Mrs. Forsythe?" Half Marcia's attention was caught, not by the name but by the change that had come into the golden girl's voice once she realized she was addressing no one of more consequence than a future fellow employee. For one thing, it had warmed considerably. For another, its stilted elegance had been shed like a snake's skin. Underneath lay the vocal quality of an actress playing a Damon Runyon type for television. Too new to pin down specific localities by intonation, Marcia nevertheless realized that this was genuine New York—an authentic golden girl.

"Mrs. Forsythe, that's Isobel. She's our placements woman. That makes her the ranking brass when both bosses are away. Let me ring her."

There was a brief manipulation of switchboard keys, a briefer murmur of explanations, and the girl at the desk lifted her cropped head again.

"She's leaving for lunch right now, but you can go in—*Miss Blake*. It's the right-hand office at the end of the aisle."

Re-alerted, the three graces at the typewriters watched her unblinkingly, as she moved past them. Embarrassed, Marcia looked away from the wall along which their posts were ranged. And here she was lucky; for the second margin of the aisle, the inner wall, offered legitimate reason for preempting her attention. It was a wall of glass, stretching the full length of the hallway. And beyond the glass was a fully equipped and operating kitchen; a dream kitchen, straight from the pages of a magazine.

Two youngish and competent-looking girls in crisp white uniforms much like a nurse's garb were working at one of the shining counters, preparing the ingredients for a casserole. In the dining alcove—that was what it would have been, had the kitchen been in a home where it belonged instead of on the

eighteenth floor of a skyscraper overhanging Fifth Avenue—sat a third figure, neither young nor in uniform.

The face briefly lifted from a clipboard on which some sort of chart was being annotated must have met the world for fifty-odd years. It reminded Marcia oddly of the wooden Indian in front of Pop Bayliss's newspaper store back in Le Seur. It had a hacked-out-with-crude-implements look to it, the resemblance further underscored by high cheekbones and an uncompromising jaw and by the black-streaked-with-gray hair drawn from center part to skewered knot.

The woman at the alcove table favored Marcia with only the briefest of glances; a glance as bleak as a Cape Cod sea in January. But Marcia did not let her progress along the corridor lag until this inspection fell away. She kept resolutely on, toward the spot where three doors opened on three sides of the brief passageway's terminus. The one on her left was lettered MR. IRBY. The one dead ahead was identified as belonging to MR. YATES. But the golden girl had told her she was to turn right.

This third door stood ajar; and as she pushed past it, Marcia could see that it offered admittance to an office shared by two. Twin desks were ranged to either side of a generous window, and twin filing cabinets and bookcases added to the decor of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. The occupants of the two swivel chairs, however, scarcely could have been less similar.

The man did not even glance up as she came in. He hunched above his typewriter, hammering its keys as if he intended to annihilate them. He seemed to be of about medium height, with russet hair cut short as a military brush. Behind tortoise-rimmed spectacles, his eyes probably were blue. The nondescript jacket he wore was faintly rumpled; not at all the crisp turnout that redhead on the train would have expected of a publicity man.

The woman, on the other hand—the woman rising to greet her caller, hand beginning to extend itself, pleasant smile be-

ginning to draw apart her lips—could have been spotted for the successful executive she was if one merely had passed her on some anonymous street.

Her hair was frankly graying, framing her smooth-planed face in salt-and-pepper waves that looked natural and probably demanded weekly hours in an expensive beauty parlor. She wore a practical and unmistakably New York suit of charcoal-gray wool. Not so much as a clip or a frill ornamented it; but its understated severity was completely negated by the absurd feathered trifle of a hat nested into the admirable hair.

“So you’re Leo’s discovery,” she said, and her voice was pure velvet. “I’m Isobel Forsythe. He says he thinks you’ll do good writing for us.”

“I hope so, Mrs. Forsythe,” Marcia said. “I’ll certainly try.”

“Isobel,” the older woman corrected comfortably. “We’re all informal at I. and Y., my dear, except when we’re impressing clients. Flat Top, look up and feast your eyes on Marcia.”

The man glanced upward so perfunctorily that his fingers seemed unaware of an interruption. He said, without interest, “Hello, Marcia.” Then he went back to his writing—stabbing the keys, slapping the carriage.

“The susceptible type,” Isobel Forsythe murmured wryly. “As you can see, beautiful newcomers from outer space absolutely bowl him over. His legal name, by the way, is Joel Hawley. When did you get to New York?”

“Just this morning.” It was impossible not to respond to this easy, gracious person who stood facing her. “I took my bags from the station to the Hotel Van Tyne, and then came on up here. I couldn’t stay away. I—I was too anxious to get a glimpse of the place where—”

“Leo will be sorry he wasn’t here to give you the grand tour in person. He’s as proud of our layout and our new test kitchens as a kid with a Christmas bicycle.” Isobel glanced down, almost as if by accident, at the sparkling diamond watch on her slender wrist. “I’ve got to fly myself, sorry to

say. I'm meeting the fashion gal from *Modern Maidens Magazine* for a nice fat lunch at Toots Shor's—over which I'll jam a color photograph on Fashion Fabrics' new sari cloth into her June issue, or die a-trying. But we mustn't leave a new member at loose ends on her first day."

"I'll be perfectly all right," Marcia assured her quickly. "There's so much to see. I'll just walk around town and look, until—"

"No such nonsense. You'll be properly escorted. And fed. Flat Top, front and center! There isn't another fact you can tell *Plumber's Helper* about our new plastic pipe, and you're needed for convoy duty."

The man whose name was Joel Hawley lurched grudgingly to his feet. Marcia had never considered herself a belle; yet the younger males of Le Seur at least had shown a reasonable enthusiasm for her company. This one seemed vaguely to hope she might drop off the earth as it spun.

"You don't give a man much choice," he growled at Isobel.

Marcia's cheeks were burning. "I'm sure it isn't necessary—"

"This flatterer will grow on you, my dear. Actually, he's the best brain in this office—Irby and Yates included. But he's never learned to sugar-coat the pill. His light adores bushels. You just have to wait, and bit by bit you'll acquire a taste for him."

"Like for olives," Joel said. "You'll notice that line was mine, not hers. Those immaculate lips never soil themselves on a cliché. Besides which, we don't have an olive account—so why waste a mention?"

"Why, Flat Top!" Isobel beamed as if he had paid a high compliment. "Why, sweetie! You just turn that charm on Marcia, here. You can't lose."

"Mrs. Public Relations in action." Joel turned slowly—and not by any stretch of the imagination eagerly—in Marcia's direction. "The object so sublime is to create acceptance for merchandise the buyer might prefer to overlook. Isobel is a genius at it. A high-priced genius, I might add. Other P. R.

firms keep trying to hire her away from us, and Leo keeps having to bribe her to stay—practically with his blood.”

“Two pretty speeches in one morning!” marveled Isobel. “And the first two, mark you, that I’ve gotten out of him in the three years we’ve shared this cubbyhole. Well, I’m off. Make our new recruit at home, Flat Top, dear.”

The door closed behind her, and somehow there was the effect of a light’s having been turned off in the office. Joel took off his glasses, which he evidently used only for working, and set them down haphazardly on the little pile of typed pages flanking his Underwood.

“Well,” he said. Not rudely at all, but not encouragingly either.

“Well?”

“Unless you want to linger longer and soak up the atmosphere of your future prison, we might as well follow the Princess down.”

“But your work?” Marcia felt again the sting of resentment at his complete disregard for the conventional pretense that pleasure was involved. “If you want to finish anything, you mustn’t feel obliged—”

“I was at a stopping place.” Somehow Joel conveyed the added impression that, had he not been at a stopping place, a landslide could not have interrupted him, much less an utterly unimportant girl named Marcia Blake. “Have to eat, anyhow. Might as well eat with you. If you don’t insist on one of those tearooms with the whipped cream, that is. There’s a good men’s grill in the next block. They know what goes with a steak.”

THREE

THE GRILL, SHE HAD TO ADMIT ten minutes later, probably was as good as he had said it was. Certainly every table was taken and a line was beginning to queue up in the pseudo-Tudor foyer opening off the street.

The headwaiter seemed to know Joel, however. They were eased through the crowd and settled in a corner for two while a *Reserved* sign was whisked from in front of them. *He probably tips a lot*, Marcia thought ungraciously, loath to admit that this man might be genuinely popular in any quarter.

Having boasted of the Tavern's steaks, Joel, with a cavalier disregard for consistency, proceeded to advise the mixed grill. Too resentful to argue, Marcia let him order for both of them and refused the cigarette he held toward her. She looked around the crowdèd room unhurriedly, at brick-and-timbered walls, at red-checked tablecloths, at framed photographs of people who presumably were celebrities and who presumably regarded the Tavern as their home away from home. Let him start the conversation, or let the silence continue. *She* wasn't going to break her neck.

He was in no hurry. And when he did begin to talk, what he said was the most obvious stab at manufacturing dialogue. "You're living at the Hotel Van Tyne, didn't you tell Isobel?"

"It's not what you think." Marcia detected scorn in his tone and looked back at him quickly. "I do have to work for my living."

"None of my business, of course," Joel said.

"I didn't know the name of any other hotel in New York—except a few of the café-column ones, uptown. A friend from

back home always stops at the Van Tyne. I thought I could afford it for a day or two, until I found something cheaper."

"There are cheaper spots to hole up in." Was he actually sneering?

"And I intend to find one. But until I get oriented, I won't know where to start looking. I've never been in New York before."

For some reason, this admission seemed to snag his attention. He was looking at her almost curiously, as if aware of her for the first time.

"What ever got you started on a public relations kick, anyway? According to office scuttlebutt, you worked for a hometown news rag back in Illinois. What was wrong with reporting the strawberry socials?"

"Nothing was wrong," Marcia answered evenly. "But Mr. Irby came out, last month, to give a lecture. And I talked quite a lot with him about his work, and—well, you see, I'd done some writing in college and then for the *Gazette*, and we thought—he was kind enough to say—"

No, she certainly would *not* mention Perry Cosgrove to this impossible creature. Perry's role in her decision was strictly none of Mr. Hawley's concern. Another sort of man, she might have asked for information. Since they both were in the same business, it wasn't unreasonable to suppose they might be acquainted. But before she would let her present companion guess that a man had anything to do with her wanting to come East—

"So you're going to write for us," Joel Hawley was saying. "Leo does pitch some wild ones, sometimes. But he knows P. R. like a mother knows her baby's bottom. What's he going to have you doing, did he say?"

"Releases, whatever they are. I'm not sure I understand, exactly."

For reasons best known to himself, the man beside her now decided to be helpful. "They're pieces about one or another of our accounts, sent out to a big mailing list of newspapers

and radio and television people all over the country. With them goes a fervent prayer that a decent percentage of those receiving it will like our material well enough to pass it along to their readers or listeners or viewers."

"But how do we know whether or not they—?"

"A few weeks after a mailing, if we're lucky, the clips begin to dribble in. I. and Y. subscribes to a clipping service, of course. Some of the papers send us tear sheets of their stories direct. And we keep what check we can on the stuff that goes out over the air."

"It sounds a lot—oh, bigger and less personal than I'd thought."

"Wholesale information, that's our racket. But there's plenty of personal work in it, at that. Contacts. Like today, for instance. They're Isobel's niche. Mine, too, in a way. She spends most of her time making special placements—dreaming up new angles for stories on our clients' products and then wheedling some particular big shot to use them."

•Marcia had forgotten to be irritated. "That's different from releases?"

"The specials are exclusives. Mostly for media with national circulation figures, you see. Some of the ways the Princess can dream up for getting a mention of a client into a prominent column or magazine, or with one of the big TV homemaking shows, would paralyze you."

"What about the girls I saw working in that big kitchen?"

"You mean, the Indian's two victims? Selma Higgins is our home economist. Unless you happen to hold a Home Ec degree, which I gather you do not, she'll try to wipe her feet on you. So be warned."

"But—why? I haven't done anything to annoy her."

"Home economists—her breed, anyhow—are sort of like those dames who used to parade for equal rights and smash saloon doors with their little hatchets. The mere sight of a non-degree holder working in their field is like a red flag. When Selma and Isobel square off, you'd think it was a Chi-

nese New Year's. Isobel never won the magic accolade, you see."

"But that doesn't seem to hamper her in her work."

"Not a gal like the Princess. All she has to offer, instead, is genius. She just happens to be loaded with ideas and the ability to sell 'em. So she fronts for the office while Selma does a slow burn testing recipes for our food clients, back in the kitchen. Those kids of hers sweat for it."

Already, the office had begun to fall into place a little. Marcia understood that Isobel Forsythe was what all women should be—in Flat Top Hawley's book, at least—and that the Selma Higginses should be repealed by act of Congress. This was odd, considering one thing he had said.

"Didn't you mention, a while back, that placements are your job, too? Doesn't that make you and Mrs. Forsythe sort of rivals? I mean, competing—"

"Same job," her official host admitted. "Different channels. She does our showcase stuff. The stories that get to the public, with pictures in full color, those are hers. My bailiwick is trade papers. Those are the special publications for various industries and labor groups, where one or another of our accounts might pick up wholesale business. You've never laid eye on one of those. The general public doesn't. But it all helps sales."

It had all sounded so simple while Leo Irby talked about it as she chauffeured him about Le Seur. But now there seemed to be ramifications. "You asked me, so I guess you don't know what kind of writing *I'll* be doing?"

"Isobel's department. You'll get the word from her. She'll be your immediate boss, I gather, as much as anybody is anybody's boss at I. and Y. One thing you can count on—once you're in, you'll be in up to your hips. Duties slop over from one to another of us. You'll find out."

"Yes," said Marcia weakly. "Yes, I guess I will."

Joel Hawley finished off his apple pie with a flourish. "And

now about this place for you to hang your hat. Any ideas? Any preferences?"

"I don't wear hats. But if you have any suggestions as to ways I might start cutting down on my rent as quickly as possible—"

"I know one place. A rooming house. Perry Street, in the Village. It's just that. Rooms to let, no meals, nothing fancy. But it's clean and it's respectable and the beds are comfortable. It's handy to transportation, but far enough from the subway so you don't shake all night long."

"It sounds like what I'm looking for. If you'd give me the address—"

"I'll do better than that," he astonished her by volunteering. "I'll take you down there in a taxi. On Irby and Yates, needless to add."

"I couldn't put you out so. You wanted to get back to your—"

"Plastic Pipe can wait. You heard Isobel. I'm supposed to make the new recruit feel at home." Having thus demolished any notion that he might be offering assistance merely to be kind, Joel drew from his pocket an expense-account notebook and jotted into it the amount of their check and tip. No nonsense even now as to this lunch's having been a social outing was to be permitted to cloud his businesslike impersonality.

The cab he whistled up rolled west to the street marked Avenue of the Americas—which Marcia was never in her New York life to hear spoken of as anything but Sixth—and thence to the left, downtown. They passed a park where pigeons strutted and tramps drowsed on benches in the sun, with the rear façade of the Public Library rising beyond them like a marble palace. A few blocks farther on, skirting Herald Square, she glimpsed the giant signs of more stores one heard about even in Le Seur—Macy's, Gimbel's—and then they were gobbled up by the steel and concrete canyon once more. Joel made no try at talk; and neither, staring from her window, did she.

At the triangle gloomily occupied by what she later learned was the Women's House of Detention, the cab bore right, made a full swing into a crosstown avenue, and so presently arrived at Perry Street.

"The Village" Joel had spoken of, she realized, was Greenwich Village—that separate world where art and letters and handicrafts and ruined paving seemed mixed in roughly equal parts. Miss Annie would have regarded it all with acute suspicion. Marcia felt something inside her responding with a lift of recognition. Oddly—for here the houses were smaller and older than those uptown, and an aura of cheerful ruin pervaded the scene—this section of the city had a youthfulness elsewhere in short supply.

"You can stop here," Joel told the driver. "The corner's close enough."

Presently, he was guiding her up the short first block of Perry that cut away from Greenwich Avenue. To the west, in a bulkier building than those it faced, an antique shop offered in its windows refinished pine and primitive gilt eagles, spiced with patchwork quilts and a bonnet-top cradle. The row of houses on the east side where they had debarked were three-story-with-raised-basement affairs. Midway of the block, he turned her toward worn stone steps and an iron railing, and they began to climb.

"Nothing fancy, remember," he warned. "You said you want to keep the rent down. This room has wallpaper that may make you scream, and the decor is a *Monarch of the Glen* engraving. But it's clean and cheap."

"I know I'll like it." Oddly enough, she was quite sure she would.

"The landlady's name is Ruby. Mrs. Ruby Ogden. A decayed Dixie belle right out of *The Glass Menagerie*. You have to put up with sort of pretending you're a charming guest at old White-Pillars-among-the-Magnolias." He jabbed a doorbell marked *Inquiries*. "But if you catch flu, she brings you

in home-cooked soup. And she'll fetch home books from the rental library."

Belatedly, Marcia swung about. "How do *you* happen to know so much—?"

"I told you. Or didn't I?" Joel seemed to find the point unimportant. "I room here, too. Third floor rear, right over you. If you take the place."

FOUR

AGAIN, MARCIA STOOD OUTSIDE the double glass panel. It was foolish, she knew, to be trembling. She'd been here before. She had the job. She was expected, and there doubtless was a desk for her. Yet her heart felt the way it used to feel, back in Le Seur, on the first day of school.

She glanced—it had become virtually a nervous mannerism—at the minute gold watch banding her wrist. Miss Annie had given it to her the day she was graduated from college. Three minutes to nine . . .

"Are you looking for someone?" The voice was kind but, somehow, ill at ease and with a hesitant quality, as if its owner were not exactly sure he ought to be asking questions. Marcia turned on slender heels, her sandy hair glistening under the hall's fluorescent lights. She saw sloping shoulders and a middle-aged, sensitive, too-inbred face and an uncertain smile. The impression was that this tall, thinnish, rather stooped stranger had opened the door to a room where he did not belong, and only just now had perceived his error. One wanted, instinctively, to put him at his ease.

"No." She paused. "No, not really. I—I work here." She had the feeling she was making this up; yet it was true. "I was just looking inside and—"

"I know." The face of the tall, stooped man beside her permitted a brief, Puckish grin to break the pattern of its shyness. "I do that myself, almost every morning. I work here, too. My name is Matthew Yates."

Leo Irby's partner. Marcia's face reddened. "I'm afraid I sounded terribly silly, Mr. Yates. I'm Marcia Blake."

"I thought you must be. And you didn't sound silly at all. You sounded—oh, the way I used to feel, years ago, when things sometimes excited and thrilled me like that. Come along!" He linked his arm in hers, with an absurdly daring gesture considering that all they were about to do was open a door. "We'll fight dragons together."

He thrust the glass panel before them with a practiced hand. The golden girl at the receptionist's desk was studiously adding extra allure to her flawless face. Her hand paused, powder puff halfway between nose and elaborate tortoiseshell compact. "O-o-oo-oh! Good *morning*, Mr. Yates! And good morning." The inclusion of Marcia seemed somewhat of an afterthought.

"Morning, Naomi. I see you've met Miss Blake." Yates dropped Marcia's arm. "Good luck to you, child. Naomi will see you find the place to hang your gear." He strode away up the corridor lined on one side with glass windows and on the other with still-empty typewriter desks.

"There's hooks for your things in there." The gilded goddess waved a casual hand toward a coat closet behind her. She made no further physical effort, but again busied herself with her compact—arranging her profile in juxtaposition to the available light so as to reveal, had there been one, the unthinkable blemish.

The closet was small. But it offered a rack for coats, a tiny mirror at which Marcia fluffed her hair briefly, and an open cabinet having nothing to do with "gear" but housing ranks of brown folders labeled in neat typing. *Reprint—LIFE, 1956, FORTUNE, 1954.* She glanced down the row. Here was Irby and Yates's stock in trade. Ignorant though she was

of most of the detail of the public relations field, Marcia knew from Joel Hawley's lunch-table lecture of yesterday, and from the clippings that Leo Irby had shown her back in Le Seur on one of his current campaigns, that such reprints represented achievements to be proud of.

She went out again to where Naomi sat.

"Know where I should go?" Her voice quavered a trifle as she faced the blank, mascaraed eyes behind the desk. But her lips formed a tentative smile.

The golden girl seemed to have decided to be friendly. She smiled back; a gamine smile that might have startled Matthew Yates. "Geel" That accent which was straight New York, as regional as a Georgia drawl, burst through the careful veneer. "Gee, I don't know. Mr. Irby, he ain't back from wherever he went yesterday. Better go see Joel, I guess. Or Isobel." The telephone beside her gave an impatient burr-burrrr. She bent to it. "Irby and Yates, good morning!" Once more the intonation was clotted cream. "I'm sorr-rry. Mr. Irby is out of town. If you wish to speak to anyone else—"

Somewhat dazed by the exhibition of vocal schizophrenia she had just witnessed, Marcia turned away. Two of the typewriter desks along the passageway were occupied. At one, an almost elfin redhead—quite unlike the woman on yesterday's train—was opening a paper bag and lifting from it damp containers of coffee. Her bright hair was bound in tight, unfashionable braids about her head, making her look somewhat like a Heidi grown up. As Marcia moved past her, she lifted her thin face.

"I'm Olga Egloff," she said. "The office manager. We didn't order any coffee for you. Do you want to get on the list?" Even back of owlshly framed spectacles, her eyes were a startling green. Two vertical lines between them deepened now, as though the coffee list were one of the world's most weighty problems. "And if yes—do you take it black, or just sugar, or what?"

Marcia smiled. "Cream and sugar both, please. I should

think with a kitchen so handy, though, it would be much easier—”

The redhead snorted.

“Hal *That* kitchen is here for ‘purely scientific purposes’—and I quote!” The quotes were audible in her voice. “Too much bother for *her* to—”

She was interrupted. From the kitchen they had been discussing, Selma Higgins popped like some gaunt jack-in-the-box. Only too obviously, the Tsarina of the agency’s home economics department had been eavesdropping. But she carried with her a technical exoneration, in the guise of a filled-in paper form. “Olga, here’s a petty-cash slip for three-eighty. The cut flowers in yesterday’s color shot for Speed-Dee’s tea cakes. And it isn’t that we don’t want you girls to make coffee. It’s that the kitchen is too busy.”

Olga opened a desk drawer, took a metal cashbox from it and carefully meted out the sum specified. She handed bills and change to the wooden-faced woman beside her. “Count it and sign the slip.” A pencil was thrust toward the home economist’s masculine hand, with its squarish and unvarnished nails.

Marcia was uncertain whether to move on or stand her ground. Mrs. Higgins had not condescended to glance her way. Olga came to her rescue. “This is our new girl, Marcia Blake, Mrs. Higgins.”

Selma Higgins stiffened, as if she had been dared to continue ignoring an interloper. A frosty smile cut across the thin lips that seemed designed to produce precisely such a harshly nasal sound as was her actual voice. “’Do. Heard Leo’d hired you. A writer? H’m, yes.” She nodded, as New England—as she herself might proudly have pointed out—as baked beans, codfish and brown bread. That she lacked the robust attractions of these fellow down-Easters was another matter. “They always feel we’ve got to pay more writers, when what we really need around this shop is more help in the kitchen.”

There was a pause, and then the grating voice continued. "I don't suppose you have a Home Economics degree?"

Joel Hawley was, at least, a true prophet! Marcia shook her head. "I majored in Journalism at college. My only job's been on a newspaper."

"Might have known as much." Selma's jaw tightened. "Why people feel they're qualified to worm into the food business without—" She stamped away, finishing the sentence under her breath, gaunt shoulders squared.

As Olga turned from glaring after her, the lines between the bespectacled green eyes seemed to smooth away. "Don't mind her. That's just her way. She's all right, really." But it lacked the ring of conviction. "I guess."

The next head in line, bent until now over a silent typewriter into which a recalcitrant ribbon was being inserted, raised suddenly. This head was sleek and dark. "If you like Vermont marble, she's all right."

Olga laughed. It was a warm, insidious sound that carried its own contagion; that made the morning seem sunny, with no regard for the total absence of windows opening to the outer world. "Marcia Blake, Nell Clements. Nell is our public relations trainée, whatever that is. It gives her delusions of grandeur, now and then. But we love her, anyway."

"Hi!" Nell nodded. "Just because old Money Bags Egloff writes the checks and pays the bills and so on, she thinks she has a right to rule our roost. Don't let her intimidate you."

"I won't." Marcia smiled back. "Should I report to Mr. Hawley, do you think? Or to Mrs. Forsythe? Or—or to whom?"

"Flat Top, I guess. Yep, I think Flat Top's your boy. Everything's sort of vague hereabouts, when Leo's not around. Yes, I guess it's Flat Top." Nell stood up, studying inky fingers. "Want me to show you the way?"

"I was here yesterday. I'll find it." Marcia turned on down the hall.

His head in his hands, Joel sat hunched over his typewriter in the office to the right. As she paused inside the door,

Marcia thought for one dismayed instant that he was crying. She stared at the back of the bristling crew-cut head, wondering ineptly if she shouldn't go away.

Head still bowed, Joel said distinctly, "Oysters."

"O—oysters?"

"Fresh Frozen Oysters from Apalachicola. Gourmet account. Needs a push. That's for you this morning. Background memo." Still, his head did not lift.

"All right, Flat Top. You've baffled her. Now speak English."

Marcia heard the velvet voice of Isobel Forsythe behind her, and turned. This morning, just arriving to conquer a new day, Isobel seemed even more arresting to the eye than she had been when Marcia first encountered her. The pepper-and-salt waves of her hair were matched by a pepper-and-salt tweed coat, accented by a crisp bow of aquamarine taffeta tied under her chin. An aquamarine hat like a chic inverted bowl gave depth to the eyes that precisely duplicated its clear color.

Even Joel paid attention when Isobel spoke. He glanced up at last. His eyes with their dark hornrims were not reddened by tears, as Marcia had feared. They glowed with, if anything, impatience. She had not seen him since he had left her yesterday in the fluttery company of Mrs. Ruby Ogden. His joy at this new encounter seemed well under control.

Once having brought her together with his landlady, he had considered his mission accomplished and had promptly departed; presumably to return to this office and to the fascinations of Plastic Pipe. That brief stab of suspicion she had suffered outside the door on Perry Street had died stillborn. It was too ridiculous to imagine he might have had any ulterior motive in bringing her to his own rooming house. His interest in her was, roughly, the same interest he now evinced in Florida oysters. She had been a job requiring his attention, and he had attended to that job in the most efficient manner possible. And that was that.

"It's English, all right. I was merely starting to tell the freshman that her first deathless prose for I. and Y. was a background memo on oysters." He crooked one eyebrow. "Ruby tells me you took the room."

"Yes." Marcia felt humiliatingly inadequate—and a trifle guilty for detesting this man so thoroughly on office time. "Yes, I did. I'm moving over from the hotel tomorrow. About this—background memo?"

"Pull up a chair and I'll translate for our boy." One deft hand twitched off the aquamarine bowl without disturbing a hair among Isobel's curls. She tossed it to the top of a filing cabinet, hung her coat on a rack hidden by a colorful screen, and seated herself behind her own wide desk. "Cigarette while we talk?"

"No, thank you," Marcia declined, with a sick feeling she sounded prim.

Isobel took a deep puff and exhaled. "A background memo, sweetie, is what travels along with every placement that goes out of this office."

"Since you're interpreting my original Hindustani," Joel broke in, "tell her, what's a placement. I did mention them at lunch yesterday, of course. But as you point out, I can't speak English."

Isobel was not annoyed. "I asked somebody that once, years ago—what is a placement? The gentleman in question said that this was something very difficult to define. Then he changed the subject. I've since evolved my own definition, the hard way. A placement, Marcia, is any mention of our client or his product that we can sneak into newspaper, magazine, radio, TV."

"Wouldn't any advertisement be a placement, then?" Marcia looked inquiringly at the other woman, ignoring Joel's small sound of horror.

"An ad," corrected Isobel, "is *paid space*. Someone bought the right to say—within certain limits, of course—what he wanted to say about his product. He bought the space in the

magazine. He hired someone to write the material—copy, it's called, by the way. He hired an artist to do a layout and to draw the illustrations. He pays hard cash for all this. But public relations is getting your product mentioned *for free* in editorial columns. Here, let me show you—”

She ruffled through some papers on her desk and came up with a recent copy of one of the better-known national picture weeklies. She leafed through it and pointed out a full-page color advertisement. “There’s an ad. It cost the company about twenty-five thousand dollars to run that.” Then she smiled proudly. “And *this*—” A slender, crimson nail stabbed at a story on outdoor barbecues. “This is publicity. Pure. Beautiful. *Free*.”

Marcia felt bewildered. “You arranged for that story to appear?”

“That’s right. I convinced the editor that it would be a right smart idea to run a story on outdoor eating, with summer coming on. We gave him the pictures. We worked up the background material for him. We supplied him with recipes developed by Selma’s crew in our own test kitchen.”

“In short,” said Joel hollowly, “the Princess gave him the works.”

“But where does any client benefit from this?” Marcia asked.

“Look.” The slender finger pointed again. “See that grill? It’s ours, a Cook-Out original. Cook-Out is one of our clients, by some strange chance. And look here, on the facing page. A portable model from the same line.”

“I—I see.” Marcia hoped she did. “And—that background memo?”

Isobel took another drag from her cigarette. “Fresh Frozen Oysters from Apalachicola is one of our new accounts. Not a very big one yet, but still a pleasant little thing to have around. I’ve just talked to the food editor of the *Evening Journal*, and she thinks her readers might go for a story on the dainty morsels. We have a black-and-white picture for

her, and some oyster recipes. But she still needs this mysterious background memo. She needs to know the *facts* about these oysters; what makes them different from any other oysters, what size they are, if they're good for growing girls. In short, she's got to have enough material so that she can write her own story about them."

Joel looked up again from his typewriter. "And that's where you come in. Just write a small piece about oysters, girl, and we'll send it off."

"I?" Marcia was aghast. "I don't know one thing about oysters—from Apa-whenever-it-is or anywhere else! I've never even tasted one!"

"You will. Believe me, you will." Joel could not be said to smile on her, precisely; but a hint of compassion did soften his customary dour expression. "You needn't look scared. None of us knew a thing about them, either, until Leo got us to work on the account."

Isobel handed her a fat stack of leaflets and a brace of books. "Dig into these, sweetie. It's the party line. You'll find all the information you'll need right here. Distill it to about two pages and bring it in to Flat Top. He'll make sure you're on the right track."

"Wouldn't the editor rather have these books herself? Then she could find out exactly—"

Joel interrupted. "Heresy! These are the facts, kid, nothing but a mountain of facts. It would take time for an editor to weed out all the information he *didn't* want. The chances are good that time doesn't exist; editors are busy folk, and the story might get shelved. So we earn our pay."

Isobel had picked up a pencil and was scribbling a note on her big desk calendar. "Also, we want to show our product in its very best possible light. We wouldn't want her to mention that there was ever such a thing as a *bad* oyster, would we? Or that people have been known to chip a tooth on a stray fragment of shell? So go to it, little one. And good luck."

"Where—?"

"Joel will show you your desk. Take it away, Flat Top." Her turn toward her typewriter was Isobel's gesture of dismissal. Class was out.

Marcia found that she was to work in a tiny open cubby-hole just outside the office shared by Isobel and Joel. There was room in this alcove for a desk, a chair, a small bookcase filled with cookbooks and odds and ends of reference material on non-food accounts—and nothing more. There was a window, however, which mitigated the cell-like quality of the enclosure. As Marcia glanced outward, after Joel had left her, her heart lurched. Dead ahead—but a mile to the south—the Empire State building cut high into the sky like an arrow. Lesser structures in between vanished into insignificance below that shining pinnacle.

The Empire State tower! The symbol of New York! Something inside her sang suddenly, casting off that pall of—well, the word for what she had been feeling probably was stage fright. She was really a part of New York, now. She had a place to live. And she had been given a job to do . . .

Resolutely, she turned her back to the window—seated thus, she faced down the row of desks where Olga and Nell were busied—and started leafing through the material Isobel had given her. Some of it, she soon discovered, was highly technical. *The iodine content of the oyster . . . The organic phosphorus found in these mollusks . . .* But on the other hand, some of the material leaned toward poetry. It extolled the virtues of the oyster in flowery phrases. *From the still, blue waters of the romantic Gulf of Mexico, ever warmed by the benison of semi-tropical suns . . .*

Marcia read on. As fact after fact was discovered, she found that she was becoming fascinated with a subject which, one hour ago, would have left her unmoved. At last, pushing back her bright hair with impatient fingers, she turned to the typewriter on a movable stand alongside her desk. The clack

of the keys beat a sharp staccato as line followed line in eager succession across the yellow copy paper.

It was a good while before she yanked out the final X'd and interlined sheet. "The end!" She permitted herself a sigh of accomplishment.

Rereading what she had written, she thought without vanity that it sounded good. She made a few quick pencil changes; a word here, a phrase there. Then she stood up, scooped the sheets together, and headed, as Isobel had told her to do, for Joel's office.

Three minutes later, the warm dream lay in shards.

"Thundering catfish!" Joel plunked down the yellow sheets on his desk. "Just what the devil did you think you were writing? A senior theme?"

Marcia looked back at him, stricken. Her heart had stopped beating.

"It isn't—? It isn't right?"

"*'The world is mine oyster . . .'* Shakespeare, yet! Look, Blake, this is a background memo you're supposed to be doing, not deathless prose." His snort was contemptuous. "Heaven deliver me from Bright Young Things! You kids are all alike. You're the ones who try to crash Broadway because all the class agreed you were just wonderful in the Commencement Play. You think you can earn your keep writing because— Heaven alone knows why!"

"Mr. Irby read some of my *Gazette* stories before he—"

But Joel obviously was not listening. He snorted again and grabbed for a thick red pencil. While Marcia looked on with widened eyes, he ruthlessly slashed through her careful copy. Line after line that she had lovingly labored over vanished under the merciless red point, until what she had composed so carefully appeared to be bleeding to death. Reading over his shoulder, she could see what she had considered her most intriguing phrases disappearing into the discard.

"There!" He handed the mutilated sheets back to her. "Now study this. Retype it and bring it back to me. *And*

don't you dare add one purple, pulsating, luscious word." His glare was menacing, actually menacing. "This is going to be a background memo, not a paper to be read at a ladies' tea."

Fighting hard to keep back angry tears, at least until she was out of his sight, Marcia turned wordlessly toward the door. She could take fair criticism, of course. She was humble. She had no overweening pride about her abilities—not yet. But this—this sadistic ruthlessness was altogether unnecessary. She had tried her best, and that—that BRUTE—

As she plunged blindly past the office door, she all but collided head on with a figure emerging from the door directly opposite. At first, the bright haze jittering before her eyes prevented identification of anything before it. Until he spoke, she did not really recognize him.

"Well, welcome to our city!" The voice was Leo Irby's. The voice, she knew. Its under-structure of solidity, of success, of complete confidence, was what she remembered most from her earlier meetings with this man—and now it cut through to her, reassuringly. "How's my new staff member?"

"H-hello, Mr. Irby." She tried to keep her own voice from trembling. Isobel Forsythe, certainly, never wept in public. "How was Ph-Philadelphia?"

"Philadelphia? Oh—Philadelphia." He seemed oddly confused by her surely stock question. "Just about as it always is, I suppose. The City of Brotherly Love never changes much. Well! We'll have time for a real chat tomorrow, I hope. Right now, I've got to check in."

He turned away, leaving behind him a rich smell of cigar smoke and expensive barbering. As he opened the door to Matthew Yates's office, he looked back—she thought—and gave her a friendly wave. But he was really only a vague outline beyond the angry sting in her eyes. She could not be certain. She heard him say, as the panel swung shut again behind him, "Well, Matt, it's almost done. Washington says—"

Marcia only half-caught that final word as she sank into her chair and spread out her mutilated copy before her. It

captured her attention only because in some way it failed to fit what he *should* have been reporting to the partner who had stayed at home.

Washington?

FIVE

THE END OF THE AFTERNOON brought with it a foreshadowing of approaching freedom. Along the row of desks flanking the test kitchen's windows, wads of cotton and bottles of nail polish appeared. Trips to the water cooler became more frequent and Naomi's improbably Theda Bara eyes kept wandering toward the clock midway of the corridor wall.

Resolutely, Marcia kept banging at her typewriter until the very last minute. Grimly bearing in mind Miss Annie's maxims about the sin of vanity and what it was that pride went before, she held to the task of mending the flaws Joel Hawley had pointed out in her background memo.

Naturally, he knew considerably more than any beginner about what such pieces should contain. Naturally, she was grateful to him—*oh, yes, she was!*—for making it so abundantly clear just where she had gone astray. Naturally, it didn't matter in the least that he had made no attempt whatever to temper his advice with encouragement, to mention anything she might have done *right*, or to consider her feelings when faced with a chore she never had attempted before and about which she knew so little.

The door to the right-hand office at the head of the corridor opened. Her back was toward it, but Marcia's slim shoulders stiffened. She knew Isobel Forsythe had been closeted with Mr. Irby, almost since the moment of his late appearance, dis-

curring some facet of a new campaign or an old one. So this could only be one person coming toward her.

The footsteps paused almost directly alongside her chair.

"Quitting time," said Joel Hawley's dry, rough-textured voice.

She did not look up. "Is it? I haven't quite finished."

"Tomorrow," he observed, with no great originality, "is another day. Get your hat and I'll show you the best bus to ride down to our mutual digs."

"Thanks," said Marcia, not exactly injecting into the word a glow of gratitude. "Thanks, but—but I have a date uptown for the evening."

"As you will," said Joel, not noticeably interested one way or the other. He strode on up the corridor, saluted Naomi in passing, and the double door began to close behind him. The moment they were safe, Marcia's eyes had lifted from the keyboard. But she watched the departure of a straight back and a crew-cut head without regret. Nothing in their relationship to date made her want to call him back.

Five minutes later, she was aboard a down-bound elevator herself.

In the marble cavern at street level she waved good night to Naomi and Nell, who had been fellow passengers, and wandered out into the tarnished sunlight of late afternoon. Her date for the evening had been, of course, a fiction; the first evasion that had come to mind on the heels of Joel's unwanted invitation. But she moved with purpose, nevertheless, as she crossed Fifth Avenue toward the setting sun and continued westward.

There was little within reach of the eye to remind one that Manhattan was an island, held in the lover's embrace of harbor and rivers. Yet somehow, as she walked along, Marcia was aware of waters she could not see beyond the solid towers. There was a fresh, intangible saltiness to the air—the almost-May air—and she breathed it deeply. The smells New York was popularly supposed to exude, of humanity and car

exhausts, seemed curiously absent on this prelude to the evening of her first full day in the city.

It was too early to think about dinner. She moved along slowly, pausing to gaze into almost every shop window she passed—not with any longing for possession of the varied miracles they contained, but simply because window-shopping in this place of famous stores was in itself a heady thrill, quite unrelated to the compulsion to acquire.

Above the sunken rectangle in front of Radio City, where the statue of Prometheus soared forever and the flags of the United Nations stirred atop their flagpoles, she sat for a while enjoying the riot of tulip and jonquil in the long flower beds—mildly wishing there might be pigeons to feed. But all the pigeons were strutting on the steps of St. Patrick's, a block away, or else consorting with the Library lions half a mile downtown.

Gradually, Marcia abandoned the fiction that she was waiting for birds to flutter down out of a sky still cloudless but not so bright as it had been at midafternoon. It was the passing crowd she was watching. Watching it, absurdly, for one familiar figure to pass her bench. How many people were there in this monster city? The chances were about eight million to one against his going by just this spot, and at just this hour.

Yet she found it easy to lower the odds against her. Cosgrove Associates, where he worked, had offices only a few blocks away. And this was the time when people were on the streets, homeward bound, grasping what still could be grasped of the warm sun wine on their way to busses or subways or commuter trains.

Almost a year since she had seen him. Eleven months and a handful of days since Perry Cosgrove had packed his bags and quit Le Seur for his older brother's public relations office in the unknown city.

The first month, there had been three letters. The second month, one. At Christmas, not even a greeting card. Perry

and New York had recognized kindred spirits in each other, it appeared, and for him the past and the Middle West had receded into the shadows. But he couldn't have forgotten *everything* in so short a while? Not Observatory Hill, nor the dances after basketball games, nor the summer week-ends Miss Annie had let Marcia invite him to her place on Indian Bonnet Lake? And not—?

Remembering! The thing to do now was to watch the passing stream of faces, so that if one face did pass she would not miss it.

Before she could admit that Perry would have to be working very late indeed to be coming by the bench where she sat, it was time for dinner. The plaza had faded into purple shadow and the last sunlight was no longer a golden wash down the ribs of the great towers. The only eating place she knew nearby was the grill to which Joel had taken her for lunch the day before—and Marcia most certainly had no intention of letting *him* intrude upon her night on the town, even as an irritating recollection.

She got to her feet and started off, unhurriedly, in the westerly direction of Broadway. Somewhere she would pass a restaurant that looked like fun and not too expensive. Even her brief sojourn at the Van Tyne had cut somewhat alarmingly into her funds, and she'd have to be careful until—the thought made her tingle—Irby and Yates's next payday.

A modest but somehow attractive Chinese place on the sidestreet she was following, a few doors west of Sixth Avenue, offered eggdrop soup, shrimp with beansprouts and fortune cookies for eight-five cents, and she took the plunge. It was pleasant to sit in her dragon-backed booth and watch people come and go, while she ate a leisurely meal and sipped hot tea from a small, handleless cup. And now, of course, she was not looking for Perry's narrow, dark, attractive face among them. Now she could relax.

Daylight was gone before she wandered out into the street again.

Only a block to the west, Times Square had bloomed into a cavern of enchantments that hid its daytime tawdriness. Vast electric signs jittered before her, beckoning. They poured waterfalls of color. They puffed perfect smoke rings. They spun and winked and danced, the fairytale of advertising come alive in the night. Marcia walked to meet them, delighted and impressed—and despite all this, in one corner of her being, almost patronizing. The faint condescension in Isobel Forsythe's voice—“*An ad is paid space. Someone bought the right to say what he wanted to say . . .*”—seemed to have rubbed off on her. As recently as yesterday, she might have given herself without reservation to this famous spectacle. Tonight, she already had begun to adopt a public relations point of view.

It was startling to be able to *see* such a change in one's self.

She paid no particular attention to time. Carried along like a leaf on a brook by the movement of the crowd, she strayed up and down the garish sidewalks. Movie marquees glared their jeweled enticements. Around the *Times* Building, the headlines of the world pursued one another. Occasional spurts of gunfire peppered the canned music of the shooting galleries. Busses and taxis converged upon the white lights of the crossroads and separated again, lumbering or darting according to their natures.

When she found herself in front of the theatre, half the long block between Seventh Avenue and Eighth, she was startled to realize that it must be getting on for curtain time. A sidewalk crowd had gathered, and dangling directly over their heads was a small sign lettered OPENING TONIGHT. The vastly larger letters in lights, higher up, spelled out the name of a new comedy Marcia remembered having read about in the morning paper.

The sidewalk crowd blocked her way. But her footsteps would have slackened to a standstill in any case. A Broadway first night! The implication of glamour, of something exciting

about to unfold, held her as spellbound as any of the others in the gaping throng.

They were craning their necks to inspect the occupants of arriving cabs and town cars, and Marcia happily craned with them. That looked like—that *was!*—Danny Kaye just crossing toward the lobby. And the tall woman in the pale fur stole certainly must be that English star who had made the Hollywood musical last season. And in this limousine just arriving—

Marcia felt an impulse to pinch herself. For she knew—not merely recognized, but knew—one of the two figures emerging on the curb.

First came a medium-tall, emaciated-looking man with an aristocratic beak of a nose and black, brilliant eyes that gave him the look of an eagle; an eagle with silver hair and jutting, black-as-ink eyebrows. He turned with an Old World gallantry to hand out his companion. She was much younger than her escort. Dark-haired. Graceful. Dressed beautifully but simply, in an evening cousin to the neat black suit she had worn on the train.

“Fern Miller!” Marcia heard herself exclaiming, aloud.

She could not be certain whether or not the girl with the gray-haired man had heard her. It seemed to Marcia that the dark head did half turn toward her. But by then her companion was guiding Fern into the lighted pool of the lobby, and the limousine was easing away to make room for an arriving taxi. The lobby’s plate-glass door had begun to swing shut.

“—gold-diggers like *that* little piece!” a strident voice almost at Marcia’s elbow blasted suddenly. “Going around with rich fools old enough to be their fathers! You’d think anybody as big as Andrew McCory wouldn’t want to be seen in public with some little tramp like that!”

There could be no question as to whom the big, red-faced female in tweed meant. Marcia turned and saw the popping eyes and the angry mouth, glimpsed vaguely the wisp of a

man on beyond to whom the remark had been addressed, and—to her horror—heard herself answering.

“The girl you’re speaking of doesn’t happen to be any of those things.” Alas—that firm, indignant young voice *was* her own. “You’ve no right to talk that way about someone you don’t even know by name.”

“Well!” The bleak eyes swiveled toward her, and suddenly she knew what it was they reminded her of. Oysters. Two oysters from Apalachicola. “Well! I’m sure I don’t know what concern it is of yours—”

“She happens to be”—and it was, surprisingly enough, the actual truth, now Marcia thought about it—“a friend of mine.”

“You’d know a girl Andrew McCorry was taking around town?” There was scornful disbelief in the strident voice.

“She’s my friend,” persisted Marcia. “And there isn’t the slightest thing wrong in her going to the theatre with a—with a business associate of her uncle’s!” It was the first connection that came to mind. For all she knew, it might be true.

But her mind could not hold upon such a matter just now. With horror, she realized that people standing near them in the crowd had turned to kibitz her exchange with this formidable Amazon in tweed. A few of them were laughing. Bright interest showed in all their eyes.

As she turned and hurried from the scene, leaving the field to a snorting enemy, one single thought overrode all the confusion of others. She was deeply grateful that Joel Hawley’s level blue eyes had not borne witness to the absurd way in which she had made a spectacle of herself. She could well imagine what Joel and his big red pencil would have to say about such unprofessional behavior.

SIX

"WELL—" JOEL SET DOWN a final yellow sheet on top of the others he had stacked neatly as he finished reading them. "This isn't too bad."

Marcia turned toward him, wresting her gaze from the view outside his window; the same view of the Empire State that her own cubbyhole commanded. She had been looking out that window, twisting and clenching the hands thrust into fortunately deep pockets to hide their apprehension, while Joel perused her first attempt at writing a food release.

She remembered the explanations he and Isobel had given her, both talking practically in unison. A release was a periodic mailing which went out from the office, in this case, to a selected list of food editors on newspapers all across the country. Each release was a story in itself. Appended to it were kitchen-tested recipes, developed by Selma Higgins and her staff. With the recipes was a photograph of one of the more succulent dishes, picked for eye appeal; in this case, one featuring oysters. The attendant copy was made up of brief filler paragraphs—each one, in terse, to-the-point words, telling something of interest about what Marcia had come to refer to, even in her thoughts, as THOSE oysters.

"A release," Isobel had instructed, "gives you the chance to tell your story in several different ways. If we're lucky, the food editors will use the whole works. The story. The picture. The recipes. If we're *very* lucky, or play our cards exceptionally well, we'll get a food page headline, too. Something like FRESH FROZEN OYSTERS FROM APALACHICOLA

BRIGHTEN LENTEN MEALS—except, of course, it's too late now for Lent. A headline makes the client very, very happy."

"You always make the client sound as if he were spelled in capital letters," Marcia had commented.

"He is, believe you me." Joel had sounded funereal. "Him as pays the bills gets the billing, hereabouts."

"Or in any other public relations outfit," Isobel had added. "Now go and do your darnedest to satisfy the CLIENT, sweetie."

Evidently, from Joel's present grudging approval, he felt that Marcia had done just that. She looked at him tentatively, ready to duck.

"You've managed to write an acceptable article on our little bivalve friends. And you've done something else."

Evidently he intended to deliver no verbal Sunday punch. "W-what?"

"One of the secrets of writing a good release is to keep your own personality out of it. When this story is used—and it's good enough, it'll be used—it will see print under a line reading 'by Mary Doakes' or 'by Susie Glutz.' Whatever the name of the paper's good gal happens to be. It's got to sound as though Mary or Susie might have written it. Lots of the releases coming out of P. R. outfits are so burbling with personality and girlish charm that no self-respecting newspaperwoman would put her name to them. They get filed in the wastebasket. *Hic jacet.*"

"Professor Joel Hawley's famous lecture on Down with Personality in Release Writing." Isobel Forsythe had entered the office unnoticed. "Flat Top, you will never win a Pulitzer on that one."

"You've been forced to admit I'm right, Princess," he glowered. "Remember the time we hired that Famous Lady Author to do our food releases? Because *somebody* around here decided she had The Magic Touch? And remember the month we didn't get back one clip—not one little tiny, weeny

clip? Remember how the clients howled? These walls still echo."

"I know, I know. Her releases were horrible. And what was worse, unreadable." Isobel giggled. "Marcia, you may not believe this, but she actually referred to eggplant as an 'amethyst orb of goodness.' Oh, my!" The mirth ran out. The contest of theories continued. "Joel, though you'll never admit it, there *is* a time and place for what you dub arty writing."

"I know," Joel agreed. "I know. But it has to be done so skillfully. And never for releases. That is one principle I will die for."

"What brought out the speech this morning, Flat Top?"

"The kid just wrote her first release." He seemed to search for an adequate description. "I only had to cut about four lines from the thing."

"Praise from Sir Hubert, Marcia. Let me see it." Isobel reached out a commanding hand. Joel handed her the papers he had gathered together and watched while she slid tiptilted glasses with gray-black frames onto the bridge of her almost-classic nose. She read with professional rapidity.

A few minutes later, putting the yellow sheets aside, she took off the glasses and smiled up at Marcia. "He's right. This *is* good. He couldn't have done much better himself. There's only one point I question—here." Her finger pointed to a phrase. "Here, when you say that 'the fresh sea tang of oysters can be sharpened with the addition of a dash of celery salt'—have you checked that?"

"Checked it? It seemed to me common knowledge that—"

"Every mention of food that goes out of this office"—Marcia noted that Isobel had assumed an exaggeratedly pious way of speaking, an almost mincing exactitude of phrase—"must be checked by our Home Economics Department. That is absolutely essential, Miss Blake."

"That is absolutely essential if you wish to avoid riots, Miss Blake," said Joel. "And I do mean riots. That is also

The Word from on High—meaning the offices of Messrs. Irby and Yates their very selves.”

“Who strive to avoid riots,” said Isobel dryly, “even as thee and me. Eh, Flat Top?”

Marcia asked carefully, “How do I go about checking a thing like this? I looked in dozens of cookbooks before I wrote my copy. A lot of the recipes called for celery salt. So it seemed to me—”

“A normal deduction. Basically sound.” Joel’s clipped head nodded almost benignly. “But have you a Home Economics degree, my girl? What hallowed university has informed you that you are among the Lord’s Anointed?”

“I don’t see what my having studied Journalism instead—”

“Don’t you? Don’t you, indeed? Then, just as a matter of blind obedience, gird up your pretty loins and go pay a visit on our Mrs. Higgins.”

“Joell!” Isobel’s voice was suddenly sharp. “That’s enough. No backstairs knifing. Don’t prejudice poor Marcia, just because *you* happen to think Selma’s a witch. She has very high culinary standards.”

“As she has, from time to time,” said Joel, “pointed out.”

“*And* she is highly thought of—so I’m told—in Home Ec circles.”

“The girls in the Union all think highly of one another. If you’re a sister, there’s no sin in you. That little closed shop of dull, dreary females is still fighting a battle for recognition that—”

Isobel cut in again, and even more sternly. “There are a great many very brilliant—yes, I said *very* brilliant, and very imaginative, too—women who have earned Home Economics degrees. It’s a respected field, and one in which a lot of fine people have made important careers. Just because you have been exposed to some unfortunate examples—”

“Who shall, of course, be nameless. No backstairs knifing, Joel. All right, all right, *let* Little Blossom go and beard the dragon without being forewarned. But don’t blame me when

she comes back with her petals dragging." He swung toward his typewriter and set it to clacking, slamming out lines of copy angrily. "Plastic Pipe . . ." he muttered under his breath.

Marcia stood irresolutely at the door which led into that incongruous kitchen high over Fifth Avenue. She had entered here before, more than once, during the past week; but it still seemed utterly out of place, straight *Alice in Wonderland*. Except for the fact that there were two girls in crisp, starched uniforms hovering over one or the other of its two stoves, it might have been any particularly efficient kitchen back in Le Seur.

The walls were a sunny yellow, the curtains a brightly flowered chintz. From where she hesitated now, Marcia could see an electric stove—one of the new counter types—and a gas stove. A huge freezer and a roomy refrigerator had been minimized by being painted the same bright yellow. Whoever had decorated this kitchen had done his job well. A feeling of sunlight infused the room, even though its windows looked out upon the area where Olga and the other girls had their desks, and not into the cottage garden that would have been so much more appropriate.

"Can I help you, Miss—er—Blake, is it?" Selma Higgins knew well enough, of course, what it was. She looked up from a businesslike desk to the left of the door where Marcia had been standing. Looked up and scowled.

"I wonder if I might check something with you, Mrs. Higgins." Marcia abruptly felt as though she were still in the second grade and had been sent to the principal for running in the halls. "I've just done an oyster release, and Mrs. Forsythe—"

"A *food* release?" Selma made the word sound like an accusation of felony. "But you're not a Home Economist. I believe you admitted as much."

The red lights in Marcia's hair were not there for nothing.

Her level eyes met the cold blue ones at the desk. "As I told you, I'm a writer."

"This is something I will *never* understand. Why men persist in putting women without degrees into responsible positions in the food field is beyond me. It requires years of concentrated study to learn—"

Marcia could feel the anger mounting in her. She fought for control of the emotion, knowing well enough that in order to make a success of her new job she would have to come to some sort of terms with this woman. But it was not easy.

"I have a degree, Mrs. Higgins. I majored in Journalism." Her words were quiet enough, but Miss Annie Crawford—and perhaps others who knew her well—might have recognized the stillness before storm. "I wouldn't dream of setting up as an expert in your field. That is why I'm at a typewriter, and you have this lovely kitchen to work in."

"Work! Even with my two girls here, now—I'm called on to watch them every minute, too. Standards aren't what they were when I was in college. I have to work at home every night. And all day Saturdays and Sundays. Just to get done what must be done." But the olive branch seemed to have achieved its end. The nasal New England voice seemed mollified.

"You must get terribly tired." Marcia attempted a sympathy she could not genuinely feel. Self-pity had never moved her to any particular compassion. "About this release. I do need your help, Mrs. Higgins."

"Everyone here is always needing help. Why, in the first place, we don't hire qualified personnel with proper background—"

One of her uniformed girls, the attractive dark-eyed one, came up to the desk as one approaching a throne. "Mrs. Higgins?"

"I'm engaged at the moment, Beverly."

"But *could* you taste the bouillabaisse? It's ready now, I think."

Selma Higgins rose to her feet with a thin-lipped sigh and glanced toward Marcia as though to say, *You see what I mean?* "I'll be back, Miss—er—as soon as I've attended to this." She marched toward the stove.

Marcia watched, fascinated, as the stark New England widow and her two assistants bent their heads above a steaming pot; rather, she thought, like Macbeth's convention of witches circling their cauldron. They tasted and savored and sipped and exchanged comments. "A little more salt?" . . . "The basil is hidden by the garlic, girls . . ." "I hate to even suggest more saffron, it's so expensive, but the color . . ."

The girl called Beverly was of a timid opinion that they might introduce just a *pinch* of turmeric to give a more richly golden tint to their fish stew. To this, Selma reacted as though someone had shot her.

"Beverly! This is an *authentic* dish. The fishermen along the wharves in Marseille would *never* have used turmeric. I have told you many times that when we make authentic dishes, they must *be* authentic. There are times when adaptations are called for, but in an authentic recipe—never!"

To her delight, Marcia heard the girl mutter, "Those fishermen in Marseille never heard of oysters from Apalachicola, either."

Unfortunately, Selma heard it, too. Her reply was coated in ice.

"You are correct there, of course, Beverly. Technically correct. But oysters are The Client. Here we must adapt, although when a dish is authentic—" The ethics of atomic warfare could have received no more minute an analysis. Eventually, wiping her hands on a spotless towel, Selma Higgins came back to her desk. The brief bustle of activity—and an awareness that now this new little person, this non-Home Economist, would respect the true importance of

her position—had further mellowed the rawboned woman into whom backstairs knives were not to be sunk.

“And now, how can I help *you*?”

Ten minutes later, a ten-second, one-sentence decision had been handed down. The world-shattering question of whether or not to combine celery salt with oysters finally settled, Marcia reappeared at the door to Joel’s and Isobel’s office to report a check and double check.

“. . . the whole McCory situation up in the air,” Isobel was saying, in earnest conversation with Leo Irby and Joel. “If the rumor’s true and McCory *is* going to step down, the Consolidated Chemical account will be anybody’s baby.”

“Anybody’s baby *if*. And there’s a big IF.” Leo Irby was answering her. He broke off at Marcia’s hesitant knock on the half-open door. “Come on in. How’s our Bright Young Thing?” Without waiting for her answer, he went on with his original thought. “McCory has been carrying Roger Van Doren on Con Chem’s public relations these last few years out of old-time loyalty. They sweated out World War One together, and it’s a bond of iron. Van hasn’t drawn a sober breath since the Hoover administration.”

Joel said, “I hear he’s on the wagon these days, though.”

“On again, off again. You know Van Doren. He’s a lush and always will be. McCory—that is, Consolidated Chemical—is the only account he’s got left. Not that he needs more than one, while he’s still got them. The billing on that account alone darn near equals everything we’ve got in this shop combined. It buys all the Scotch one man can assimilate.”

Isobel said, in a voice determinedly casual, “Is there a prayer we might try for Consolidated, Leo? It would be a very pleasant thing to warm one’s feet on, during the long winter evenings.”

“You know the answer to that. Not a prayer, so long as Andy McCory’s at the helm. Van is his boy and no other

firm could wrench that account from him. If Andy steps down, now, that would be something else again."

"Which the grapevine says just may happen." Joel glanced at Marcia. "You don't know what we're talking about, do you, freshman?"

Marcia said thoughtfully, "Are you talking about *Andrew McCory*? I—I think I know him—by sight, that is. An oldish sort of man? Gray hair? Distinguished looking, but—well, sad? Is that the one?"

"You've listed just about the whole inventory—except that he's rich as all get-out." Joel nodded. "He's got Consolidated Chemical tucked into his personal breast pocket like I might tuck a handkerchief into mine."

"What is Consolidated Chemical?"

"Just about the biggest trade association in the country. All the top chemical outfits belong to it. Their public relations billing alone, rumor has it, runs well over a million." Irby pulled on his cigar.

Joel said wistfully, "If McCory steps down—if Van Doren ever gets the skids shoved under him, as I guess he deserves—"

"I'd give up Wash—a lot of things," said Irby, "to land that baby."

"Do you think there's anything to this retirement rumor?"

It was Isobel's turn to speak. "It could very well be. There's supposed to be a lady in the case. Young enough to be his daughter, too. If this gal is the gold-digger they say she is—"

The gold-digger story again! Somehow, these cynical estimates simply didn't fit the friendly, poised girl Marcia had met on the train. Fern Miller had been too—well, *nice* was the only word.

"Maybe she—this girl—is really in love with Mr. McCory," she offered tentatively. "Maybe she just wants him to be happy."

"And maybe I'm a monkey's uncle!" hooted Joel. "Let the

'love' stand. But delete 'McCory' and replace with 'mink' and 'diamonds.'"

"I still don't believe it." Marcia spoke hotly, in her mind continuing that argument begun under a theatre marquee. "Here's your release. Mrs. Higgins says okay on celery salt." She placed the paper on his desk, turned on her heel and marched from the room—so obviously an army of one that the three people left behind her stared at an empty doorway in single astonishment.

SEVEN

IT DIDN'T REALLY make any sense at all, taking up cudgels, as she seemed to have done, in defense of Fern Miller's motives.

Actually, of course, Marcia knew almost nothing of what those motives might be. Her guesses on the subject were every bit as uninformed as the guesses of that woman outside the theatre lobby; of Joel, or Isobel Forsythe. Yet her conviction that Fern was not basically a shabby little opportunist, after a rich older man's money, stubbornly endured.

Perhaps, she reflected, seated before her office typewriter on the morning after she had heard her three superiors discussing the rumored love life of Andrew McCory, she was a trifle too naïve about romance. Certainly, what she once had thought of as her own love story didn't seem to be turning out the way such stories did in books and movies.

She had been in New York more evenings than she cared to count in this connection. Even if nobody back home had written him about her coming East, Perry must have learned it by now through the columns of the *Gazette*, to which she

knew he still subscribed. Yet there'd been no phone call to the office, or to Mrs. Ogden's brownstone; and the *Gazette*, forwarded dutifully by Miss Annie, had reported her connection with both.

It was unthinkable that he didn't know she was here, and how to reach her. The only possible deduction, all too painfully easy to draw, was that the younger Cosgrove brother was no longer interested. In the year he had been working in New York, Perry must have—almost inevitably, *had*—changed. The girl who had intrigued him back on Observatory Hill—who had shared those moonlit canoe rides on Indian Bonnet Lake—hadn't stood up as a memory. Whomever he had met in the interim, whatever girls had been part of these more immediate days and evenings, there wasn't enough left of Marcia Blake to make him lift a telephone receiver.

The thought of him, now, ran under other thoughts that commanded the surface of her mind. On one level, her attention held dutifully upon the concerns of Irby and Yates. Her fingers flickered, typing words that Joel could not resent too acidly while red-penciling them into final copy.

This newest addition to the line of Fashion Fabrics much resembles the flocked wallpapers so popular in current interior decoration. Velvety and handsome designs, worked against mat satin and similar fabrics, produce an intriguing three-dimensional effect . . .

But beneath the professional deftness she was beginning to acquire, the other thing—the less urgent but also less escapable sense of loss—ran on. These days, it had no sharp edges. She had lived with it too long, waiting back home for letters that never came; waiting, here in New York, for a telephone that never rang. Realization of the change in him had come slowly. There had been nothing at all dramatic about it; no one grand, eruptive moment of disillusion or heartbreak.

Even now, it was possible that Perry meant to call. He

could, conceivably, be out of town. Or tied up with some rush of business at his brother's office. Or even in the hospital with a broken leg. But she did not actually believe any of these things. The truth she had tried to accustom herself to she could endure. But she fervently hoped that it did not have to be true.

Down the corridor she saw Naomi rise from the receptionist's desk, gather compact and lipstick and washroom key, and drift toward the public hallway. Words continued to march across the paper before her. . . . *most exciting innovations of the autumn season. The trend toward greater elegance in the fabrics of which even daytime outfits are to be made. . . .*

The outer door opened, swinging soundlessly on its pneumatic arm.

The man who came in from the outer corridor was gray and shrunken, wearing a grease-spotted overcoat. He carried a manuscript-size envelope in his stubby fingers, but he did not need this added property to proclaim his business here. He was one of those plodding, anonymous phantoms who appeared whenever Isobel or Joel or one of the partners told Naomi to send for a "boy." He was, despite a staggering surface disparity, a Mercury of the business world. He was a messenger.

Briefly, the old man paused before the desk and eyed its emptiness. Then his bleary gaze shifted toward Marcia, already moving to greet him.

"Bon Ton Service," the gray voice intoned. "Sign here, please."

Marcia signed and accepted what he had brought and watched the door sigh shut behind him. Then she turned the envelope over, and very nearly dropped it. The imprinted return address, done in a smartly stylized adaptation of Spencerian flourishes, read COSGROVE ASSOCIATES.

For a moment, while she stood there, she thought her eyes had played a trick on her. The red letters seemed to ripple.

She drew in her breath, deeply and slowly. The name on the envelope did not change. But now she saw the typed address under it. Mrs. Isobel Forsyth, c/o Irby and Yates—and the street number, the floor number, the suite number.

Marcia turned quickly and walked back past the plate-glass windows of the kitchen. Leo Irby's door stood open; he was absent on one of his frequent brief trips that office gossip seldom could account for. Matthew Yates's door was closed, and behind it the voice of the dilettante second partner rose and fell agreeably in the pattern of a telephone conversation. But it was toward the third door Marcia turned.

As usual, Joel did not glance up from his desk as she entered. He was checking some production figures for a trade-paper story, and his gaze held steady on the printed columns from which he was mining information. But Isobel Forsythe lifted her elegant head from the sheaf of press clips that occupied her, and smiled her usual warm encouragement.

"A messenger just brought this." Still dazed, Marcia held out the Cosgrove envelope. "Naomi was off duty, so I—so I—"

Very little escaped the woman who sat behind the desk. The flustered uncertainty of the younger voice did not escape her now. She barely glanced at what had been brought her, and then looked back at Marcia—not quite questioningly, but with a new alertness to her expression. "Cosgrove Associates. You've heard of them?"

"I—knew Perry Cosgrove, back home," said Marcia with difficulty.

"Perry? That would be the younger brother." Isobel nodded slowly. "Roy Cosgrove is one of our up-and-coming colleagues—meaning rivals—in the P. R. rat race. This is probably material on the new tie-in."

Marcia had only half heard. "Tie-in, Mrs. Forsythe?"

"Isobel."

"Isobel." The mild correction was accepted automatically.

"A tie-in," explained Isobel Forsythe, still studying her, "is a campaign launched by one agency in which another agency, or agencies, furnish background support. Naturally, there's a reason. Some client of the secondary agency will reap a benefit. In this particular instance, Roy Cosgrove's big condiment account is about to foist a new bottled cocktail sauce on an unsuspecting world."

Despite her preoccupation, Marcia was listening. "And Irby and Yates?"

"What's a prime underpinning for any mixture of tomatoes and spices and horseradish? Why, succulent little Florida oysters, of course. There's to be a luncheon for food editors at the Plaza, to acquaint them with this gastronomic H-Bomb. I. and Y. will fly up oysters for the first course—in exchange, naturally, for proper mention in all publicity broadsides. We also secretly hope that our oysters will make a pretty impression in influential circles, despite the goo dumped over them."

"So we'll be working with Cosgrove Associates," Marcia murmured.

"You'll probably be writing copy within a day or two on our end of the tie-in. After I've had a peek at this stuff they've sent us, you'd better thumb it through. But they'll plug sauce. Our copy must plug oysters."

Back at her typewriter, trying once again to concentrate on Fashion Fabrics, Marcia let the world slowly settle back to normal. Now there was a perfectly legitimate excuse for her to telephone Perry's office. Now she need only invent some question about the tie-in campaign that needed answering. She could reach out for her telephone, and in two minutes' time—

"No!" she said, reining in the thought, fighting down the temptation. "I won't do it that way. If he didn't even look me up—"

Behind her, someone cleared his throat tentatively. She spun her swivel chair around quickly to find Matthew Yates

there near the open door to his office, regarding her with amusement and—perhaps—confusion.

"You sound so belligerent." He smiled, his thin face seeming to light from within as she had seen it do before. Even expensive tailoring did not build the breadth of his shoulders into proportion with the length of him. He looked rather like a charming skeleton.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Yates. I hadn't realized I was talking out loud."

"I hope whatever chip was on your shoulder doesn't apply to me," he said, almost diffidently. "I was about to ask you to eat lunch with me. While the cat's away—" He glanced toward Leo Irby's empty office and back again. It was a gallant remark, but it somehow managed to avoid any wolfish implication. Marcia knew he only intended to be kind.

"Thank you. I'd like that very much."

Ten minutes later they were walking together into a lobby in the East Fifties that Marcia had read of all her adult life. A maître d' was making respectful noises and bowing them to a choice table for two, where reflections from a fabulous crystal chandelier fell like oblique confetti over snowy damask. Despite his air of shyness, Matthew Yates was a man to whom headwaiters deferred. One felt wrapped in an invisible cocoon.

Yates considered the menu and the wine card, ordering for them both and seeming to know by osmosis exactly what combination of dishes would please her most. Bowing anew, the waiter departed. And Yates turned to her.

"How is it? The big-city scramble, I mean?" He seemed really to want to know. He was not merely making conversation, as she suspected that many of the well-dressed men at the tables around them were doing. "Are you liking it as well as you must have thought you would, back in the country?"

"Small town, not country." Marcia met smile with smile.

"I do get a little homesick sometimes, I guess. A little blue for trees and spaces."

"But not for long? Not for long enough to make you want to chuck it all and go back to—to wherever it was?"

"Le Seul, Illinois. I love my job, Mr. Yates. It's exciting and a challenge. Something new comes along every day, and—and—"

"And you're going to stick." He sounded pleased, if perhaps a bit puzzled. "I'm glad. Just so long as you're happy. That speech you were addressing to your typewriter made me wonder if possibly— Sometimes, you know, work like ours can be rather confusing. Anyway, I find it so."

There was something she had wondered about more than once, seeing him puttering about the office; coming and going on errands which never seemed to have any bearing on the work being turned out for the clients, filling in time, trying to look busy. Suddenly she knew it would be all right to ask.

"I'm not snooping, Mr. Yates, but how did you get into public relations work? Somehow you're not like Mr. Irby. Or even Joel Or—Isobel."

"You mean, I'm not aggressive? I'm not a go-getter?" He spoke sadly, but entirely without resentment. "That's true. Between the two of us, I'm quite often rather appalled at the confidence that goes into some of our office promotions. I do tend to shrink. Yes, that's quite true."

"Then why—? I mean, in a business where most men *push* so—"

"It's simple, really." He permitted the waiter to set pheasant and a crisp salad before them. "My sister Fancy—Francesca's her proper name, Francesca Hammond—has been interested in one particular public relations chap for years. Not enough to toss her cap over the moon, you understand. Not enough to junk Bert Hammond's alimony and marry the man. Still, she's fond of him. He's always underfoot at her place in Connecticut."

"And this man persuaded you to go into the same sort of work?"

Yates stabbed lightly at his endive. "Not intentionally. Merely listening to him talk about his work—that excitement, that something new every day that you were speaking of earlier—well, it intrigued me. I was bored, I suppose. It sounded so wonderfully different from, to be blunt, doing nothing."

"This man," she asked, "he wasn't, I gather, Mr. Irby?"

"Leo? Goodness, no! He's what I guess you'd call a rival, now. Leo was just reopening his office at the time. He'd been off on a stint for the Government in Europe and Asia, binding up war wounds and so on. And his old clients had drifted away. He was looking for some financing, and I had plenty of money, and it seemed—well, rather an idea."

He set down his fork abruptly and beamed at her.

"I've just had a sensational idea. Next time you're blue for those trees, I'm going to take you up with me for a week-end at Fancy's."

"At your sister's? But I've never even met—"

"She'd love it. So would I. It's a monster of a house. Room for everyone. Half of it's mine, but I go up very seldom. There doesn't seem to be much reason." With the moving bits of light from the chandelier astir on his thin face, Yates looked absurdly boyish for—forty-five? Fifty? "Is it a deal? Will you go with me one Friday soon, if the city closes in?"

Marcia thought with surprise, Why, he's asking me to be friends with him! He knows I was really interested in the questions I was asking, and—and he wants a friend. I don't suppose he has very many, poor man.

"A deal," she said, smiling back through the polka-dot lights.

EIGHT

THE OFFICE LAY STRANGELY SILENT as Marcia came into it. In the two weeks she had been with Irby and Yates, she had come to accept a clatter of activity from the test kitchen as background to the other sounds of a public relations office servicing food accounts. Its lack gave the other, more muted noises of activity a strange impression of being heard under water; a distortion like that of whispers in a cave.

For today the kitchen was empty, its counters bare. No pots simmered on the model stoves. No mouth-watering aromas were wafted into the outer office, escaping from the not always efficient air-conditioning ducts.

"What's up?" She paused at Naomi's desk. "Where's the kitchen help?"

The golden girl looked actually alarmed. "Don't ever let old Granite Puss hear you call her that! She'd skin you alive. Everybody from in there is down to the photographer."

"Oh, I forgot. Release pictures, isn't it?"

"And a couple special placements. Mrs. F dreamed them up, like always, just to heckle Selma. Sometimes, I wonder!" Naomi shook her improbable head, perhaps to indicate that she at least understood in what portion of her these wonderings originated. "It always comes out like every placement this office makes is just something to be mean to Selma."

"But that's what Isobel is here for, isn't it? To make placements?"

"Of course. What else? But it gets under Selma's fingernails to think so. Mrs. F"—she lowered her voice to a con-

spiratorial whisper, although no eavesdropper was near to listen—"has committed a crime, just like you. No Home Economics degree. I guess that's like leprosy or something, yet."

Marcia laughed and walked along the corridor toward her own cubicle. As she settled herself alongside its south-facing window, she felt her heart soar as it always did at the sight of the Empire State tower rising tall and straight into the middle-distance sky. Would she ever, she wondered, grow sufficiently blasé to take this view for granted?

Briskly, she rolled a sheet of yellow paper into her typewriter. A new release was first on her list of chores for the day. This one—for television, Joel had told her—must incorporate physical movement of some sort; must indicate stage business, a little like that in a dramatic play.

"A gal in front of a TV camera," he had said, "can't just sit still in one place and yak or read, like your radio commentator can. Got to keep her moving around, doing something. Give her something to do that's really interesting, and she'll love you for life. TV's never on a diet. It gulps down material like an elephant after peanuts. Those homemaker-show gals really need the kind of stuff we give them. Being on camera for a good long clip, day in, day out, uses up just about every ounce of imagination they have. We help 'em out with a few ideas."

For perhaps ten minutes the office continued in that unfamiliar quiet broken only by the riffling of papers and the clacking of typewriter keys. The pleasant rhythm of work in progress snagged at last on a peremptory ring from the telephone at Marcia's elbow.

She lifted her receiver. "Yes?"

"Mrs. Higgins, Marcia. For you, on nine." Naomi's voice wore its parade polish. Evidently, Selma Higgins was holding the line.

Marcia jabbed down the nine button on her telephone. "Mrs. Higgins?"

The gravelly voice of the office's home economist leaped

to assault her ear. Listening, she gathered that in the bustle of transporting food to be photographed and a variety of props to be used to the mid-town studio, an essential cake plate had been left behind. Marcia would please locate and fetch it, at once. Top shelf, in the left-hand cupboard, to the right of the counter burners. And bring it *right* up. Olga would provide money for a cab out of petty cash.

Actually, Marcia was glad to oblige. The photographic end of the public relations business was one she had yet to see in action. She had admired many of the office's finished pictures, of course; but never had she seen them being taken, and she was more than a little curious as to the processes and procedures involved.

Some twenty minutes later she stepped out of her yellow taxi in front of the high, old-fashioned loft building which housed the photographic studio. *FoodArts*, they called it. *Room 806*. A bulletin board in the lobby confirmed the floor and number Selma had given her.

The creaky self-service elevator to which she entrusted herself made its hesitant way upward. Marcia let herself out into a dingy, dark hallway; made her way toward a door upon which chipped gilt letters proclaimed *The Brewers. FoodArts*.

There was a bell beside the door. She pushed the button and waited. She could hear movement inside and occasionally the rasping voice of a woman—Selma, she thought—and the somewhat lower-pitched mumblings of, presumably, a man. She couldn't make out what they were saying. She rang again, and then knocked impatiently.

"Come in, come in! It isn't locked." It was the male voice, petulant and not too masculine after all, topping her impatience with its own.

Marcia pushed, and the door opened. The room she entered was a big one, high-ceilinged and square. One long wall was lined with bookcases. But in place of any orthodox array of volumes, the shelves were loaded with china; plates

and cups and dishes, tureens and bowls and pitchers of every size, shape and hue. A table in the center of the room was surrounded by a battery of standing photographic lights. A huge camera hovered like a circling hawk high above the table.

On a ladder, peering down into the camera, teetered a very small and wispy man. His sparse, grayish hair exploded in tufts around a face that looked like a pouting baby's.

"Marc," he was demanding, with gestures of one hand, to a second man at floor level, "move that light there . . . to the *left* . . . no, that's too far, back just a *little*. I'm trying to cut out that shadow . . . there! *That* does it!"

Selma Higgins was standing to one side, a gargoyle appendage to this rather startling scene, peering at the food presently displayed upon the table. Her two assistants, uniformed as at the office, were busying themselves in a small kitchen that opened just to the left of the room.

The little photographer came scuttling down the ladder, waving the groundling away. "*Don't* jiggle the table, Marc. Those oysters are all propped up on matchsticks, every *one* of them, and if they fall—" He made the final word sound ominous, even tragic. The ruin of civilization was implied.

The man called Marc was almost identical in appearance with the man who was issuing orders, although obviously he was a few years younger. His hair grew in the same tufts. His face wore the same baby pout. Silently, patiently—and efficiently, too, Marcia noted—he obeyed orders; moved lights an inch here, an inch there, to the satisfaction of the other.

Once this more aggressive of the pair of gnomes was down from his perch, Selma turned to Marcia. "Brought it, I see. You made good time."

"Shall I put it in the kitchen, Mrs. Higgins?"

"Yes. But be careful. Don't jiggle anything. And don't touch." Jiggling and touching appeared to be the two cardinal sins hereabouts.

When Marcia returned from her brief chore, she saw that

Selma was standing with a miniature paintbrush in one hand. With surprising delicacy, in tiny, birdlike motions, she dabbed at a bowl of salad with the brush, touching the curled lettuces with a glistening liquid. "Oil," she said briefly, offering one of her rare explanations. "Makes the leaves shine. Have to be careful about that, especially in black-and-white pictures."

The little photographer, presumably one of The Brewers announced on the door, said, "Water doesn't look so artificial. Like water better, myself."

Selma snorted. "I don't." She spoke the word as though the argument were settled by it, once and for all. But the gnome was hard to intimidate.

"Alice Benson used water on one of *her* salads last week. Mary Anderson of the *Bulletin* is using the picture in a Sunday spread—and you know how fussy *she* is." He swung on Marcia suddenly. "What's your name, girl? You're new. Selma never remembers her manners."

"I'm Marcia Blake. From Irby and Yates, of course."

"Luke Brewer," the gnome informed her. "That's my brother Marc." He gestured toward the other man, but not as if he expected her to be interested.

"A new junior writer. From some small newspaper. No food background." Selma interrupted the civilities, and none too civilly. "Get me the gravy coloring, Marcia. One of my girls will find it for you."

Marcia obediently turned back to the kitchen and asked one of the pair at work there for gravy coloring—feeling rather like a new camper sent out in search of a nonexistent sky hook. But she was handed a bottle of dark liquid, evidently a standard ingredient here, and—to her astonishment—was also presented with a second tiny camel's-hair paintbrush.

When she returned to Selma thus burdened, the argument was still going on. Selma was scrutinizing a glossy

print of a beautiful bowl of salad. Every leaf glistened. The salad itself looked almost alive.

"It's good enough," she said grudgingly. "Alice had sound training. Cosgrove Associates has been doing a lot more acceptable work since Alice went with them. But *I* still prefer oil. If you use it carefully—"

Marcia did not really hear the rest. Cosgrove Associates. Perry's company. If this was their work, this photograph, just possibly at this very minute he might be looking at this same picture. Not likely, but—

"The coloring?" Selma's rasp intruded. "The *coloring*?"

Marcia handed over brush and bottle silently, and watched with interest while Selma—with the brush hairs dipped lightly into liquid—touched up the edges of the Oysters Rockefeller which were the *pièce de résistance* of the about-to-be-taken photograph.

"Easy, there!" Luke Brewer cautioned Irby and Yates's home economist. "Don't make the edges *too* dark." He pranced solicitously. Marcia could detect a running battle, with neither side giving quarter or seeking mercy, between craggy Selma and this altogether unlikely little man.

Selma merely sniffed and went on wielding her brush. She did not pause until she was satisfied that the edges of her oysters had achieved exactly the proper overlay of brown. The elder of the brothers Brewer, meanwhile, had remounted his ladder and was peering worriedly into the camera lens, his head and considerable of his brief body enveloped in a black cloth.

"Come up and check it," he said finally, and it was evident that even Selma did not mount this ladder except upon invitation. "I *think* we're ready." He clambered down to the floor and Selma took his place at the camera. The two silent girls from the kitchen had come out and were standing by. Waspishly, Selma started giving them orders.

"There's the slightest wrinkle in the tablecloth . . . over there, just beyond the oysters . . . Good, good . . . Now,

move the salt and pepper shakers in toward the platter . . . That's right . . . A little more . . ."

Again, she and Luke changed places. Selma sank into a nearby chair and seemed to have no further interest in the picture. She picked up a newspaper from a bench and started leafing through it. The photographer and his sibling proceeded with the actual taking of the photograph.

Marcia stood watching. Suddenly—very suddenly, considering the elaborate preparations—it was all over. The picture was done. Luke Brewer came down from his high perch, handing the plate to Marc, who carried it off to what Marcia rightly assumed to be a darkroom. The air of strain lifted. Luke sat down on a high stool and lit himself a cigarette.

Selma thrust her paper toward him. "Humph! You see this, Luke?"

Peering in the fashion of one who needs glasses and refuses to wear them, Luke read the indicated item aloud. "*What prominent New York P. R. man has been tapped for a high Washington post? Government regulations will force his resignation as a partner in his own agency, if he accepts.*"

Selma said, her harsh face avid, "Any idea who?"

"Could be Cosgrove. He's *prominent* enough, goodness knows. Or maybe a partner at Mallory, Benson and Smythe. They've been cutting quite a swath lately. And they worked on the right side in the last election."

"Don't think it would be Roy Cosgrove. Unless this young brother that's in with him now could run the show here. Alice says he's smart and smooth."

Perry again. Marcia listened breathlessly, while Luke cackled. "I've met the boy. Smart, I don't know, but he's smooth all right. Maybe *too* smooth."

Marcia was summoning courage to ask what he might mean by that when Marc reappeared from the darkroom to announce in his voice like chalk on slate that the picture was all right. Selma bounded to her feet. The loosely related

topics of a Prominent-P.R.-Man-Slated-for-Washington, and of Perry Cosgrove, both were lost in the bustle of activity preparatory to the shooting of the next scheduled picture.

NINE

MARCIA FELT AS THOUGH she were playing a role in a movie; a movie about very successful people. As she waited on the mezzanine at the Hotel Plaza, watching mink-coated women and well-tailored men climbing the stairs, she couldn't quite believe it was really Marcia Blake standing here. She knew that her gray suit fitted perfectly. She knew that the white frills at her throat and wrists were immaculate; that the wisp of veiling and flowers on her shining hair was becoming if not, as were Isobel Forsythe's hats, sensational. Le Seur, Illinois, seemed miles away.

Marcia Blake—on her way to a Press Luncheon!

Isobel had summoned her a few days earlier. "These tie-in releases you've been doing are darn good, little one. For one who'd never tasted an oyster, a few weeks back, you've come a long way."

Joel had raised an eyebrow. "My training. Why not?"

"Maybe, Professor, maybe." Isobel had laughed at him. "Or—could be the kid's bright. Look, lamb, that press luncheon on Friday—"

The co-op between Irby and Yates's oysters and the Olde Worlde Wine Cocktail Sauce that Cosgrove Associates was introducing—Perry's sauce, Marcia called it privately—was prospering. She had even heard Isobel on the telephone, once, talking to him; calling him unmistakably by name.

"Look, Perry," Isobel had said, then, in her cool, light voice, "if our little oysters are paying half the freight on this lunch, our little oysters are going to get equal billing in *all* releases . . ."

"Fight fiercely, Mamal!" Joel had applauded from the sidelines. Presently, Isobel had hung up and swerved her chair around to face them.

"Want to come to the party, lamb? Sort of fun, a press lunch."

"The first one, maybe," Joel had growled. "After that—"

"Ready for the fray?" It was Isobel's light voice beside her, now, and Marcia turned from the mezzanine railing. "Come along, little one."

Luncheon was to be served in the hotel's grand ballroom. Three indistinguishable girls were seated behind a long table near its entrance, with long file boxes in front of them. Isobel went up to one of them, gave her name, and was handed a small badge which she pinned to the collar of her chic navy suit. Marcia, too, received a badge. *Marcia Blake, Irby and Yates*. Merely to read the carefully typed words gave her a thrill.

"People forget names and can't place faces," Isobel murmured. "When you've been to as many of these whingdings as I have, you begin to feel undressed without something pinned on your— Betty! How *are* you, pet?"

Isobel was greeting a pretty, ruffled woman who looked frightened in a cornered-creature-of-the-forests way. "Where's your nice boss? Lucille is always one of the first people I count on seeing—"

"She couldn't make it." The frightened look deepened to near panic. "She sent me, instead. I'm not sure— I don't quite—"

Isobel gestured her over toward the table to collect her badge, explaining when she and Marcia were once more alone. "The assistant-assistant food editor on *Pot Luck*. She's had a look at the rest of the guest list, and she's terrified.

The best food names in town— *Oh, oh!* Too late to duck, Marcia, stand your ground.”

A huge woman was bearing down on them. All that Marcia could think of was a picture over Miss Annie Crawford's mantel, back home; a primitive painting of a whaler—one Crawford ancestor had sailed out of Nantucket, around the Horn—bearing down against the wind. The woman, whose overwhelming hat of flowers and ribbons and plumes towered quite like bellying canvas above a broad, flat, ruddy face, was booming as she came toward them.

“. . . it's just gone into its *ninth* printing, my dear. My publishers tell me it's the most outstanding work in its field.”

Isobel made polite applause of her smile. “How wonderful for you! Edwina, may I present Marcia Blake? She's with us now. A new discovery of Leo's. Marcia, this is Edwina Carruthers, one of our most outstanding food writers. But of course you recognize her name.”

Marcia, who recognized nothing, felt her hand swallowed up in the woman's moist and beefy paw. But it was to Isobel the woman went on speaking.

“Food *authority*, Isobel, my dear. Food *authority*.” The bull-like voice was reproving. “That was what dear Dr. Folsom, the head of the nutrition department at Lakeside University, said when he introduced me for my address out there last month. Such a discerning man, the doctor. So—accurate.”

“Food *authority*,” Isobel repeated obediently. “Marcia, Miss Carruthers has a daily food column which is syndicated across the country.”

“And read,” boomed its author, “by millions of women. Millions. Why, some of my fan mail tells me that my dear readers wouldn't dream of doing their shopping before reading what I advise them to buy. Oh, there, Blanche . . . excuse me . . .” Edwina Carruthers wheeled away—*tacked*, Marcia thought, still seeing her as the primitive whaler—and could be heard saying, to the next face in line, “It's gone

into its *ninth* printing, my dear. The South-American rights alone . . .”

“What was all that?” Marcia realized her voice was shaken.

“The biggest bore in the food field. But a bore with influence. Her columns have a gigantic total circulation, and she publishes reams of cookbooks. Her *First Catch Your Rabbit* even hit best-seller lists. So—one bows.”

The crowd had increased. The table where badges were being given out was in a state of siege. At Marcia's elbow, Isobel pointed out some of the more interesting new arrivals whose approval could prove a benison both to frozen oysters and to cocktail sauces.

“There's Dorothy Marsh of *Good Housekeeping*, Marcia . . . and the *Herald Tribune's* Clementine Paddleford, there by the tall pillar . . . and Edith Barber, from General Features . . . They're all people you're going to admire, if you keep on working in the food field. And over there—”

She interrupted her catalogue briefly to exchange a cordial greeting with a small, dark, chic woman passing toward the doors. As she turned back to Marcia, an afterglow of smile still touched her lips. “That was Ann Williams-Heller, of *Everywoman*. And here comes Josephine McCarthy, from WRCA's Herb Sheldon Show . . . and over there, see, Gay Pauley of Associated Press . . .”

And still the crowd grew, engulfing the mezzanine with a chatter as of starlings congregated for the night on the Doric frieze of the courthouse back in Le Seur. Waiters were moving about with trays of drinks. The babble of feminine voices rose shrill against an occasional counterpoint of masculine bass. And suddenly Marcia's heart stopped for a second before resuming its beat at a greatly accelerated pace. For here, among all the faces, came the face she had waited for; had, actually, been bracing herself to see. Striding toward them, handsome head high, came Perry.

“You must have robbed every top drawer in town to assemble this aggregation.” Isobel's greeting was approving

but casual. "You've done a good job, young Cosgrove. Cream of the crop. Irby and Yates is pleased."

"You don't know how glad I am to hear *you* say that, Isobel." Perry grasped a gloved hand and looked into Isobel's eyes almost reverently. "You're looking particularly beautiful, today."

Marcia stood silently by. Perry's gaze had not even strayed toward her. But now he looked up. And smiled. "Bless my buttons. Marcia Blake."

"Hello, Perry." He had made her sound like a charming surprise. A minor surprise, a side dish, but charming.

"Good to see you." The words were impeccable. But back of them somewhere, she heard old Luke Brewer cackling: "*Smooth enough, maybe too smooth*"—and it rather spoiled the delightful, boyish picture. "We must get together one day soon, Marcia—really soon—and hash over the home town."

"You two know each other?" Isobel looked startled. Then, "Oh—yes."

"We're childhood sweethearts." It sounded almost as if Perry had said, "We're strangers who met once at a bus stop." But his white smile left nothing to be desired—except, perhaps, sincerity. "Isobel, I'd be grateful if you'd check the speakers' setup." One hand cupped beneath Isobel's elbow as if it supported fragile crystal, he began to lead her away. But he turned back to Marcia, almost as an afterthought.

"I'll see you around, I hope?" he said. "Soon?" he added. And was gone.

Left standing alone, Marcia tried to bring the crowded mezzanine back into proper focus. Just this? No more than this? The moment toward which her life had been building, these past months, had come and gone. It left a numb ache in its wake. She could still see his dark head, as he and Isobel elbowed their way through the crush. She could watch him pause and smile down at people he met, saying

the few perfect words, moving on. The moment was over. So was the waiting for it.

The brief poise and assurance Marcia had felt earlier were gone. She was again the gawky girl from Le Seur, out of place among these competent sophisticates. But a memory of Isobel's advice whispered in her ear.

"I'll never forget my own first press party," Isobel had said, in the taxi on their way across town. "I was petrified. I didn't know a soul, and everybody looked so impressive. I took a deep breath and walked up to the first person I saw and introduced myself. I felt the way I used to when I played the villainess in our high-school play—not myself at all. Matter of fact," she had added wryly, "our job is like acting, sometimes. We've got to convince people we know more about the product we represent than they do. And we've got to do what Flat Top calls carbonating the charm."

" . . . I took a deep breath and walked up to the first person I saw . . . "

Marcia took the breath. She tried to erase Perry's dark eyes from her memory as she made determinedly for a thin, birdlike woman standing for the moment alone at the rim of the crowd. "I'm Marcia Blake," she heard herself saying. "I'm from Irby and Yates. I'm new there and I don't think we've met."

The older woman's smile was warm with a genuine kindness. "How nice to see you, my dear. I'm Faith Babcock, Syndicated Features."

After that, it was easier. Faith Babcock was motherly; blessedly akin to many of the women who sewed for the Church Club, back in Le Seur. She introduced Marcia to several people who came by and, when the doors to the Grand Ballroom were flung open, swept her along in their direction.

"You must sit with me," she invited. "I don't think there'll be place cards. There . . . over there, I think there are chairs . . ."

The ballroom they made their way across was a credit to Perry, if Perry had made the arrangements. Huge epergnes were centered on each of the dozen or more tables, red and green and yellow wine grapes spilling from their gracefully branched silver arms. The walls were hung with temporary but colorful murals depicting vineyards and wine-treading and European villagers dancing. The Olde Worlde Wine Cocktail Sauce was getting across its point in real style.

At the speakers' table a chef in a tall white bonnet waited like a magician about to produce doves out of thin air. In one of the two center places before him sat a man whom Marcia recognized as being their client from Florida. To his right, every gray hair in carefully casual disarray, sat Isobel. Another man, immaculately Madison Avenue in a gray suit and pink shirt, obviously was Mr. Olde Worlde himself—for Perry sat on *his* right, and was being deeply, almost fawningly, attentive.

Marcia followed gratefully in Faith Babcock's wake, and sank down beside her when they came upon two empty chairs against the wall opposite the door. The older woman seemed to know everyone of importance among the guests and considerately attached names to several faces pressing among the tables.

"There's Jane Nickerson of the *Times*," she would say. Or: "Poppy Cannon from *House Beautiful*. And that man just coming in is Gaynor Maddox. You know his N.E.A. column." Or: "Gerry Gruen, from *Life*, just sitting down over there. And Ida Bailey Allen, from King Features . . ."

While the pleasant *Who's Who* continued, Marcia gratefully accepted the brief security it afforded her. The first shock of coming face to face with Perry—and of having seen nothing but politeness in his expression, nothing personal or nostalgic whatever—was wearing thin, now. But it ebbed slowly. She knew that her hands were still trembling and that her answering smiles were stiff as Faith's identifications continued.

“. . . Dixie Oliver, from the *World Telegram and Sun* . . . Al and Dora McCann, you've certainly listened to their morning network show . . . Alice Peterson, of the *Daily News* . . . Margaret Spader from *Living for Young Homemakers* . . .”

The luncheon was masterful. Marcia heard approving comments all about her from the women at her table. She caught admiring murmurs as they opened the prettily wrapped favors they found at their places—charm bracelets from each of which dangled a tiny pearl—for the oysters, of course—and a bunch of grapes made of coral and a miniature straw-wrapped carafe such as those in which the cocktail sauce was to be packaged.

Brief welcoming speeches from the dignitaries at the head table were followed by an artful demonstration by the chef-magician as to just how much trouble it would be for Mrs. Average Homemaker to reproduce at home Olde Worlde Wine Cocktail Sauce. The chef was a finished actor. Gusts of laughter circled the room as he pantomimed the difficulties of the housewife mincing shallots very fine with a blunt knife; of adding *just* the right amounts of wine and herbs and seasonings. His contrasting deftness, when he showed how the company made up the sauce, pointed the moral cannily. The huge knife with which he minced and diced and chopped fairly flew. It was a blue-ribbon performance.

When it had been completed, the luncheon was over. Chairs were pushed back. The movement toward the doors began.

Isobel overtook her on the mezzanine. “Have fun, little one?”

“Oh, yes,” Marcia said; in a way, almost meaning it. “Great fun.”

“I saw you sitting next to Faith. Like her?”

“She's—” Marcia sought the accolade. “She's like people back home.”

"Then the 'people back home' must be extraordinary. Unlike Edwina, Faith Babcock is really our leading 'food authority.' Universities have handed her more honorary degrees than you can shake a stick at. Not to mention the Masters and the Doctorate she has earned herself. Even our own dear Higgins finds it difficult to complain of Faith's qualifications."

"One of which," said Marcia softly, as they started down the stairs together, "seems to be a heart." Which was a quality, she might have added, that had dried up in some who tilted lances in this food field she had just watched on parade. *Oh, Perry, Perry, didn't you remember at all—the lake in summer, or the boathouse, or Rooney's Busy Drugstore . . . ?*

TEN

THE FOLLOWING FRIDAY—after what vote-switching among the gods, mortals could but guess at—proclaimed itself the first day of Irrevocable Spring. Until now, the city had known intervals of warmth and sunshine that brought out hand-clasping lovers to the walks in the parks. But the beautiful weather had been tentative. It had smiled upon the city with a faint sadness behind its gaiety, and chill winds had blown it away.

This day was different, Its pale gold washed the pavements with unmistakable authority. Its balminess was more than a promise. In Perry Street, a hurdy-gurdy was playing as Marcia hurried down Mrs. Ogden's steps on her way to work. On Sixth Avenue, where she boarded an uptown bus, a horse-drawn wagon was peddling irises and tulips and laurel; and the horse wore a rakish straw hat and the nondescript little vendor by the curb was singing opera arias to himself.

The office, when she reached it, had broken out in a rash

of snowy-white piqué and immaculate ruffles. Too early yet for silk prints. But on this special morning the subdued dresses of March and windy April suddenly had cried for frosting. Already in place behind her receptionist's desk, Naomi wore a flower in her shaggily cut hair. Yesterday, the effect might have been alarming. Today—who wouldn't agree?

Leo Irby arrived at the office promptly at nine, carrying an overnight case. He toiled in his sanctum for fifteen minutes or so and then emerged, headed for Pennsylvania Station. He paused on his way at Marcia's chair and smiled at her. But he was already somewhere else, in his active mind, and the office had receded even before he quit it.

"Memo on the Wine Vinegar Association's budget for next year," he said, setting it on her desk. "I want everyone on the executive level to read and initial it, so I'll know they've gotten the pitch. That's Matt, Isobel, Hawley, Selma. Take care of it for me."

Whatever was next on the Irby agenda, he already had reached out to it before the double glass doors closed behind him. He was turning it, mulling it, examining its facets. Marcia stood up slowly, thinking this, and retrieved the memo and bore it first to Matt Yates's door.

When she knocked here, a cheerful—for Matt, an almost extroverted—voice told her to come in. He was practicing golf shots with a new club. An artificial felt greensward, like stage grass, was spread out over his wall-to-wall carpeting, surrounding a metal cup.

"Caught me," he grinned. "Can't deny my guilt, can I?"

"It's a kind of day that makes you almost *want* to be guilty."

Yates seemed to like that. The club lowered slowly. "You know something? Up along Riverside Drive, the forsythia is almost gone. Beautiful, this year. But this morning the gold was almost gone. It does something to you, forsythia, after all the gray months. Like a woman in a gay Easter bonnet, after all the black velvet and mink of winter."

She knew him by now well enough to venture mild jokes on occasion.

"Too bad the office doesn't have the account, Mr. Yates. You could write marvelous copy for spring. I'm sorry I didn't know there was a place in New York where forsythia could be looked at. I'd have gone to inspect it myself. In Le Seur, when it blooms all along Church Street—"

"I should have remembered you," Yates said, regretfully. "I should have taken you along. I'm disgustingly selfish and unthoughtful."

"You're neither one," Marcia quickly assured him. "There's a perfectly good bus I might have used. The one the tourists take to Grant's Tomb."

His mild, pleasant eyes blinked mockingly. "Tourists? So now you're a real city girl? What about that yen for trees and spaces?"

"It's still there," she admitted. "Especially on a day like this. I just have to sublimate as best I can, and bow to the demands of duty."

"Duty stops at five o'clock. What then?"

She shook her head. "I don't really know. I hadn't thought. I have stockings to wash, and a new rental library mystery that will scare me green if it lives up to the picture on the jacket. I'd planned to eat on my way downtown and then just be domestic. But if there really are growing flowers to be seen on this island of steel and stone—"

Yates dropped his club into the leather bag tilted against his desk. Nesting among its fellows, it gave off a metallic sound. "Still better idea. Remember, you promised to go out with me to my sister's place some week-end? This is it. I'll phone Fancy and tell her I'm driving you up. We'll leave now, and get there in time for lun—"

"Mr. Yates! I have releases to write. There's a deadline on the—"

He sighed in comic dismay. "Born in Illinois or not, you're

nine tenths pure New England. Conscience! I'll tell Fancy to expect us for dinner."

"But she must have guests of her own on a fine week-end like—"

"I told you the house is a monster," he interrupted, with greater firmness than Matthew Yates often displayed. "Doubtless, there will be other people. Maybe several. What of it? There's always room."

Marcia was unconvinced. "You'd better give her a chance to veto—"

"This week-end. This very one. And there'll be no veto. Please?" He must have seen her defenses weaken, before the oddly wistful intonation of that final word. He seemed aware he had won. "Go home half an hour early. Surely your conscience will permit *that* much? I'll head uptown about the same time. get out the car, and pick up you and your bags where you live."

"It sounds wonderful," Marcia admitted. "But completely unreal."

"Spring's always unreal. What's it like, the jacket on that mystery?"

She blinked. The change was too abrupt for her. What in the world? "Why—why, it shows an open grave with two clawlike hands just groping over the edge. There's a dripping dagger clutched in one of them. Then, there's a bat circling overhead—casting its shadow across—"

"On second thought," said Yates, "spring is the soundest reality I know. You're not to read a line this week-end. Not a single gooseflesh-inducing, hackle-raising line. I'll pick you up on your doorstep."

Back at her typewriter, after having added Joel's and Isobel's and Selma's various initials to Leo Irby's memo, Marcia found herself still somewhat astonished. Certainly, she had not intended to accept this week-end invitation. She had grave doubts as to Mrs. Hammond's joy when an unexpected guest was dumped on her, however much of a "monster" the

house in Connecticut might be. But somehow Matt Yates—the gentle, the ineffectual, the dilettante—had imposed his will upon hers. Somehow, he had pressured her into agreeing to do as he wanted. She hadn't thought he had it in him. Well—the country would be fun. And seeing what May was doing to it would catch her up on events beyond Manhattan.

It was just short of noon when Naomi came scurrying along the line of desks opposite the test kitchen. She bent over Olga's chair, whispering frantically. After the first two sentences, Olga was on her feet. Sparks of sheer panic seemed to crackle from her coiled red braids.

"The Plastic Pipe people!" She made them sound like men from Mars. "They're in town from Indianapolis, and on their way up here from Grand Central! To discuss their trade-publications campaign for next fall!"

"Is that bad?" Marcia glanced up.

"With Mr. Irby out of the office, we're sunk!"

"Joel knows their account. His copy for it—"

"You know how *he* is when he doesn't *like* people!" Olga wailed. "And they'll expect the red-carpet treatment. Out-of-town clients always do. And Mr. Yates can never in this world— And Mrs. Forsythe doesn't work on that account at all, so how could she be expected—?"

The mention of Isobel Forsythe's name seemed to have a slightly steadying effect, however. An odd admixture of frightened rabbit and tragedy queen, Olga sprinted for the right-hand office at the head of the corridor.

A cry of "*Help!*" in the night could have produced no more prompt activity. Two minutes after Olga had entered her office, Isobel Forsythe emerged from it. She entered Yates's door at what was, considering her usual serenity, almost a run. Her voice could be heard, controlled but urgent.

". . . best to use Leo's office, it's bigger . . . feed you the facts, because they'll expect that as a partner you . . . and come in, as the Air Force used to say, on a wing and a prayer . . ."

Olga had reappeared, bringing with her a sheaf of mimeographed lists and loose-leaf material that Marcia vaguely recognized as being part of the open-shelf file behind Joel Hawley's desk. She distributed her cargo at every typewriter as she passed it, breathing orders from higher up.

"Put away anything else you're doing. Get it out of sight. The Client likes to see us working on *his* stuff. So put away whatever else—"

"The Clients are coming, oh, Lord, oh, Lord," sang an eerie voice in Marcia's head, to an old tune that had to do not with clients but with Campbells. She tore the food copy from her machine, rolled in fresh paper, and began to improvise frenziedly from the top sheet of what Olga had set down. Her fingertips seemed out of contact with her brain.

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy Plastic Pipe . . . Now is the time for all good Plastic Pipe to come to the aid . . .

A scant ten minutes after the warning had sounded, they marched in past Naomi's reception desk. A small, round one, who reminded Marcia madly of Soglow's Little King. A tall, lank one who might have looked remarkably like Abraham Lincoln were it not for his heavy Hapsburg jaw. A dapper one, who minced and wore a blue cornflower in his pearl-gray buttonhole.

Matt Yates, looking distinguished and vague, emerged from his office and smiled and murmured and guided them to the left, past his absent partner's threshold. From their own office, Isobel and Joel emerged and crossed into Irby's like a task force on the trail of Apaches. The door closed on earnest voices.

It seemed, to Marcia's surprise, that Plastic Pipe was doing a fantastic business with Saudi Arabia. An article on its foreign-based employees as unofficial ambassadors of the United States—Joel's article—appeared to have been banging about from editor to editor, so far with no taker. The script

was dog-eared. For want of any better idea, Marcia began to retype it. Olga's typewriter, next in line, was chattering like a nervous debutante—and one could almost hear the keys pounding *Plastic Pipe . . . Plastic . . . Plastic . . . Plastic . . .* Beyond Olga, Nell's fingers too were flying. Even Naomi had a sheaf of Plastic-Pipe figures before her, and was trying to look competent as she checked them. Unfortunately, the test kitchen could discover no logical method of joining the show. In that department, at least, Irby and Yates had to admit to the needs of other clients.

For perhaps an hour—it seemed a year—senseless, hysterical activity continued under full steam. Then the door of Irby's office opened once more. The conference emerged. Isobel was pulling on gloves and looking like a cat licking cream. Joel—to Marcia's utter astonishment—was smiling like the halest of fellows ever well met, one arm across the shoulders of the Little King. Matt Yates looked dazed but agreeable.

Obviously, Isobel was escorting the visiting firemen to an expense-account lunch. As they tramped down the aisle, she spread charm among them like a prom queen holding court. Underneath that cool graciousness, Marcia could guess, the highest number of dollars to be extracted for next fall's trade-paper campaign was being expertly totted. The outer door closed upon a departing quartet. Every typewriter in the room fell silent. But from walls and filing cabinets, echoes of frenzy still seemed to ricochet.

"You may all come out of the cyclone cellar now," said Joel Hawley, at the head of the aisle. "The big blow is over." He looked at Marcia, perhaps by accident. And perhaps by accident, he grinned. She was surprised to find how well a smile suited his usually withdrawn and stoic face.

"It's always like this," she heard herself asking, "when clients come?"

"Not with the regulars. They know we're working for them and they aren't wasting their money." He leaned across her desk, ignoring the rest of the staff as it settled back to normal.

"But when out-of-towners show, especially to talk about spending a dollar, they expect the works."

"I see. This stuff in my typewriter—"

"It's served its purpose. File it in the wastebasket. Leo's usually here for these things, and then there's no strain. But I'm supposed to be lousy at client relations. The uncouth, surly type." He chuckled. The unaccustomed sound, Marcia thought, was warming and young. "We didn't do so badly with the Hoosiers, though. Even Matt was in there pitching. Maybe a slight celebration is called for. You busy for dinner?"

"Tonight?" Marcia managed, aware that she was looking stunned.

"Of course, tonight." The smile faded. "My treat," he added gruffly.

"Joel, I'm so sorry." She hated the swift dimming of something in his face, the closing there of an invisible door. "I'd love to eat with you. But I've already promised Mr. Yates to go out to his sister's place."

He turned away quietly. "I see. Well, it was worth a try."

"I'm *really* sorry, Joel. If—do you happen to have a rain check on you? One that could be cashed in, say, on Monday night?"

He turned back and looked at her, and his face was its old expressionless, faintly sardonic self. But he said, "You've got your rain check."

She took Matt Yates's suggestion and left the office thirty minutes early. By five-thirty, her neatly packed week-end bag stood beside her on Ruby Ogden's tall front steps. The antique shop windows across the way gave her back the likeness of a slim, straight girl in a light beige duster. The duster matched her hair, and a cherry-trimmed cloche hat matched the duster. Without vanity, she knew she was as ready to face an unknown hostess as she ever would be. What, she wondered, would Joel think of her outfit? Not that he ever noticed clothes. Perry, on the other hand—

Only two minutes after the time he had suggested for pick-

ing her up, Matt Yates's car turned into the block from Seventh Avenue. It was a convertible, rather alarmingly the color of stewed apricots. The top was down. Yates, wearing a cap, climbed out to stow her bag and to smile approval. A moment more and the convertible was rolling again.

A feeling of high anticipation abruptly replaced Marcia's uneasiness about the expedition. She had started having a good time even before they had so much as turned westward on Fourteenth Street.

There was no way she could anticipate, of course, that the first person she would encounter inside Mrs. Yates Hammond's front door would be a familiar—a too familiar—face.

ELEVEN

THE WHITE COLONIAL HOUSE was big; almost as big as Yates had warned her it would be. It seemed to have been large when originally built—figures over the doorway read 1768. And at frequent intervals since then, sprawling wings had been added. It rode its Connecticut hilltop gracefully, abloom with lights in the night that had gathered since the convertible first hit the hurtling traffic of the West Side Highway.

As they rolled up the driveway, an unobtrusive uniformed figure appeared from the direction of the garages on beyond. To this man, whom he addressed with detached cordiality as Korker, Matthew Yates turned over the wheel of his car. His thin hand guided Marcia gently.

"Korker will see to bringing up our bags. Come and meet Fancy."

In through the open door they moved, out of the mesmeric May night and into a place of lamplight and lilacs in cloisonné bowls, of fadedly opulent Oriental rugs, of softly gleaming

Queen Anne and Chippendale. Someone reading a framed document on the wall, a letter to a vanished Yates from a vanished President of the nation, turned as they entered.

So this is the Public Relations man his sister's "interested" in, Marcia thought, freezing with shock. So this is the man who got my boss thinking it might be fun to— But no, of course she was wrong there. From what her brother had said, Mrs. Hammond's romance went back at least several years. And Perry had been East just short of one.

"Ah, Matt!" he said, smiling engagingly as he came forward. "Fancy's got a bridge game going in the library, and I stole out to—" He paused. But this was the sole indication of a belated recognition. "And Marcia. Kept busy since that press party? Amazing to find someone from home at Fancy Hammond's. But you couldn't have picked a more hospitable spot for a week-end. Same as always, Matt. Half of Fairfield County around."

"Doesn't surprise me," Matt said. "I take it you and Marcia—?"

"Indeed, yes," said Perry. But somehow, despite the dazzling smile, he managed to seem several miles removed. "I'll tell Fancy you're here."

She watched his straight, well-tailored shoulders cross the big room and vanish into a hallway on beyond. Nobody could have said that Perry had snubbed her. But nobody could have guessed, either, that she and Perry Cosgrove ever had dreamed together on Indian Bonnet Lake.

Matt stood gazing at the doubtless familiar letter Perry previously had studied, his vagueness suggesting that he might be unable to recall exactly who Grover Cleveland had been. "Young Cosgrove. Well!"

"We grew up together." Marcia hoped it didn't sound defiant.

"Must have known his brother, then. Roy. Smart public relations man. Fancy's very fond of Roy. Oh, but I guess I told you all that."

"You never mentioned names." Marcia was under better control now. "I just barely remember Roy Cosgrove. He left Le Seur when I was small."

"Funny. Should have remembered the town. Names—as you said—"

Through the door that had swallowed Perry came a woman younger than Matthew Yates, yet still not young. Her bright hair, done in one of those smartly messy "lioness" cuts supposedly the Latest Word from Paris, was too brassy to be probable. In contrast, her face was narrow and almost ascetic; her brother's face over again, although harder and more aware of what the world might think of it. Mauve chiffon rippled about her as she crossed to them, and an emerald like a child's marble shone on her hand.

"So this is Marcia Blake." She said it huskily, and the huskiness, Marcia concluded, had been painstakingly acquired. "So happy."

"It's good of you to let a stranger come, Mrs. Hammond."

"Nonsense, child. No trouble at all. My brother's probably warned you this place is like a hotel. Matt, where are Miss Blake's things? I've put her in the little green room in the east wing."

"Korker's running the bags upstairs. Marcia, my dear, this way."

And so the week-end in Connecticut began. The rest of Friday evening, after she had freshened up in the bath adjoining her bedroom, was somewhat of a blur. There were four tables of bridge in the immense, book-lined library; and as many people again dancing to music from an excellent built-in record player, or gossiping by the handsome mahogany bar.

Matt Yates introduced her to everybody, and the group assimilated her pleasantly. But she couldn't really tell one Hammond neighbor from another, meeting so many so rapidly. And certainly Perry, whose brother's absence from what appeared to be a usual niche as unofficial host had to be ex-

plained over and over, as new arrivals drifted in—certainly, Perry paid her small attention. He was too busy being Fancy Hammond's right-hand man, beaming and tending to drinks and delighting the ladies.

Breakfast next morning was a meal assembled at whim from the vast Hepplewhite hunt table in the dining room. Marcia came down at a luxurious ten o'clock, acting on Yates's suggestion of the night before. He was waiting in the big hall. After eggs and crisp toast, after coffee, he escorted her on a prolonged tour of the acres he shared with his sister.

Some of those acres lay in birch woods, and they followed a trail to a high promontory from which could be seen a great, curving hook of the Housatonic, misty with distance. The trail ran on, doubling back by a different route toward the white house. The return trip led past kennels, where Francesca Hammond's Irish setters were housed—great, tawny animals with sherry eyes who lifted themselves against the wire walls of their runs and wagged their plumed tails in ecstasy at the advent of visitors.

By the time they crossed the last clipped lawn, coming up from the cutting gardens, the morning was well behind them. Their hostess and her other guests were gathering on a wide flagged terrace for a cold buffet. Someone in the crowd mumbled that Fancy was rushing the calendar with her alfresco meals, so early in the season. But actually the sun lay warm over the old flagging and nobody was uncomfortable.

Francesca and Perry wore riding clothes and were full of the delights of their morning's expedition with her favorite pair of hunters. While Korker and two other male servants in white jackets passed laden trays, Yates's sister crossed to where he and Marcia had settled themselves and claimed an empty seat. As usual, Perry was trailing her.

"We ran into Millie Williams riding up near the dam," she said. "The poor love is practically out of her mind, lining up committees for this year's Scholarship Concert. You'll never guess, Matt, who's to be one of her committeemen. That

Roger Van Doren. Remember the Betterton wedding?"

Matt Yates contrived to sound alert. "That so? Well, well . . ."

"Remember how he fell through the hedge in the rose garden, just as the soprano was warming up for *Oh, Promise Me?* Already dead drunk, and at a noon wedding, too! I asked poor Millie if she were mad, or just in love with disaster. She as good as told me that Andrew McCory had offered a big donation to the fund if they'd ask Van Doren to serve again."

"That so?" encouraged Yates once more, a distant look in his eyes.

"They're bosom friends," prattled Fancy. "I suppose he didn't want his bibulous buddy's feelings hurt by being ignored. But Millie must have rocks in her head. Even for a McCory-sized check."

Perry spoke eagerly. "I hear Andrew the Great has been bitten by the love bug. Some chick a third his own age. Perhaps he's just suffering from a general softening of the brain, or something."

"A man would be proud to know Fern, I should think," Marcia announced suddenly. "Any man with a perfectly good, unsoftened brain."

"Fern?" They all veered toward her, but it was Perry who spoke. "You mean, you *know* McCory's new girl? The McCory we were speaking of—"

"Consolidated Chemical," Marcia said, a little angry now. "Her name is Fern Miller. We were on the same train, coming East."

"But that's not like actually knowing her, of course. She's—"

"She's very nice, Perry. Really nice. We had breakfast together."

"Breakfast!" wailed Fancy Hammond. "If only I dared eat any! I'm so famished by lunch that I'm *sure* I eat back all I've lost. But the authority who lectured to our club last month—the most divine Hindu, Perry. He looked positively satanic—" McCory and Fern Miller were forgotten.

The group on the terrace dissipated slowly, once the meal was done. Cars began rolling off down the long, curved driveway. Recorded music again started playing inside the house. Someone daring suggested trying out the swimming pool, and someone else made a mock chattering of teeth.

With superb confidence in the resources of her home, Fancy left them all to their separate devices. Her own afternoon project was simple. She wanted to catch the new Bob Hope movie in New Canaan, and anybody so inclined was welcome to join her. After that, a few errands—

Perry went along, of course; and an English couple who answered to Vi and Horace; and somehow, with a brief gesture toward hostessly duty, Fancy scooped Marcia into the group just before her Cadillac took off on its ten-mile run to the neighboring town. Bob Hope, Marcia figured, was as good company as any she might hope for on this country Saturday. Matt Yates had gone up to his room for a nap. The others all were strangers.

At a few minutes before five, still laughing weakly, they came out into the tawny light of a New Canaan afternoon. She didn't know exactly how it was that, for the first time, Perry was beside her. He had just reached out, obviously on impulse, and caught her hand. It was something out of a past she thought he had forgotten, and her heart lurched.

"Remember Rooney's Busy Drugstore in Le Seur, Marcy?" he demanded. "Banana splits after rehearsals for the Christian-Endeavor play?"

Marcy! How long had it been since anyone—? But no one ever had, except Perry. He had made up the nickname and it was private between them. She had been so put-out with him, there on the terrace, and at the way he was all but fawning over Fancy Hammond. And now—

"Banana splits!" On the other side of her, Fancy shuddered in undisguised horror. "You're being subversive, Perry. My diet!"

"How about it?" For the first time, Perry was ignoring the

older woman; was concentrating on Marcia alone. "Fancy, you said you had errands to do. The rest of you run along. Marcia and I are going to make a sentimental pilgrimage into the past. You can pick us up at the Cherida dress shop corner when you've finished whatever you have to do."

Fancy lofted artistically shaped eyebrows. But she said, "Half an hour, no more. If *any* figure could survive the sabotage this man has in mind, Marcia, I dare say it's yours. But only one, please only *one*."

And she was alone with Perry. They turned left from the theatre. Half a block or so along, they came to a drugstore and turned into it by mutual consent. But when they had settled into a booth opposite shelves of perfumes and cosmetics, when a waitress came, Marcia ordered coffee.

"Mrs. Hammond's right, you know." She met his reproachful glance. "We haven't gone to Christian Endeavor for a long while, Perry."

His white grin told her instantly that she was forgiven. "The banana split was only a gimmick. I knew she'd run screaming. And I wanted to be alone with you, Marcy. Just for a little."

Weeks of hurt were stiff in her voice. "You did? Why?"

"Are you seriously asking me that?" Perry bent closer. "If you don't know why, you have the shortest memory in the civilized world."

"I never had much trouble remembering things."

"That makes two of us," he murmured warmly. "I was so afraid you might have changed, Marcy. But watching you in the movies, laughing like a kid—I knew you were the same. Do you mind that I watched you?"

She did not answer this directly. Instead, "Marcy! Nobody else—"

"It's the right name for you. Fresh and direct and—sweet. All the *you* things. I've been watching for some clue that you hadn't changed. At that fool press lunch. Last night. Again, on the terrace—"

"You were the one who seemed different." She ought to feel happier, surely, than she felt now. All things considered, she ought to be drifting up toward a rosy-pink cloud. Truthfully, she seemed to feel nothing; nothing at all, good or bad. But perhaps that was because all this was happening to her too suddenly. Perhaps once she really comprehended it—

"I was waiting to see how you wanted it to be," he said, and it was a gentle reproach. "After all, I had no right to assume— I wasn't even sure you'd be glad to see me again. People do change."

"I kept telling myself that, the weeks I hoped you'd call me."

His grin deepened intimately. "Well, our misunderstandings are over now. You're here. I'm here. The two kids from Le Seur. Get us, Marcy!"

"I guess it's pretty amazing, at that, Perry."

"I wish this week-end were over. Tonight, there's a dance at the tennis club. Tomorrow, there's church— Fancy insists everyone must show for eleven o'clock service, the one all the right people attend. Then we're all to go over to Millie Williams' baronial castle for lunch. And Fancy's asked about thirty for cocktails. What chance have we? But on *Monday*— ah, on Monday we'll be back in town. Monday night, you and I are going to—"

"Monday," she said quietly, "I have a date. I'm sorry."

"With another fellow?" Perry scowled. "Who?"

"He works in our office. His name's Joel Hawley."

"Oh, Hawley. We've met. Can't say I took to him much. Marcy, this is dreary. I'm tied up myself on Tuesday. Wednesday? Wednesday night?"

"I'd love it, Perry." For of course she *would* love it. "You don't know where to find me." The *Gazette* had printed her New York address, but she repeated it for him. Perhaps he really didn't read the *Gazette* much, any more.

"Wednesday's a long way off," he was saying, there across the table. "I'm going to hate everybody else you talk to, the

rest of the week-end. But—know something? I haven't felt so good since the day I left Le Seur!"

I could touch him, she thought, smiling back as he expected. This is Perry, and if I just reached out my hand he's near enough to touch. Why do I seem to feel too tired even to try?

TWELVE

SHE HAD BEEN AT HER DESK almost half an hour, on Monday morning, before Joel came in. He strode past Naomi's post with a perfunctory nod.

He did not pause at all by the desk where Olga clicked her adding machine, nor by the one where Agnes was making erasures on a letter she had just typed for Matthew Yates, nor by the one where Nell sat pasting up clippings for a photo montage. But just as Marcia thought he was about to enter his own office without a greeting, he swung to face her.

As usual, he was hatless. His thick brush of hair was damp from the light drizzle that had begun to fall last night while she and her week-end host were driving back to the city, and which by morning had taken on the endless quality of the tears of a self-pitying woman.

"Our date for tonight," he said. "Still on?"

"Of course, if you want it to be." She was startled. "Why?"

"I didn't know but what Connecticut might have changed your mind. All the horse people. All the dog people. All the vodka-Martini people."

She felt herself coloring. "It wasn't like that at all."

"I've met Mrs. Hammond myself. Neither of us felt impelled to pursue the acquaintance, so of course I can't pre-

tend to know *all* the inner circle. But the few specimens I've brushed up against—"

"It was a very quiet week-end. It wasn't—what you imply."

"They didn't even stage a polo game for the little working waif?"

"A money snob," said Marcia sternly, "is about the worst kind there is. You ought to be ashamed." She glanced uneasily toward the closed door to Matthew Yates's office, and changed the subject. "It must have taken a breakdown of the whole Manhattan transportation system to make you late for work. Didn't your alarm go off this morning?"

"I'd quit *Chez Ogden* before you had your curl papers off," he said. "I heard you brushing your teeth as I went past your door. Had to stop off at the air terminal to pick up my ticket. Long line ahead of me."

"You're flying somewhere?" It was not exactly a brilliant deduction.

"Tomorrow. Indianapolis. For a guided tour through Plastic Pipe's new plant, with maybe a little side dish of their branch in Milwaukee. Six-thirty, tonight? That'll leave time to get home and change." He started away from her, the wet drops still shining in his cropped hair.

"Make it seven," she called after him. "I may have to work late."

At ten minutes to seven, however, she was ready. Her hair was brushed to a burnished swirl, her most attractive strapless lemon-yellow linen with its minute bolero was sleekly in place, and she was wearing her sheerest and most extravagant nylons. Not that she had any desire to inspire romantic thoughts in Joel Hawley, of course. But she did feel it her duty to show him she drew no distinctions between the ancestral Crown Derby of a Fancy Hammond and the blue-plate-and-movie with one of Ruby Ogden's roomers. To each, she would accord the courtesy of—

Up the stairs, puffing as she came, Mrs. Ogden hove into view.

"For you, honey!" She carried a long florist's box. "I do declare. There was a time, down home, I couldn't find bowls enough to hold all the flowers that— Goodness, open them! Who they from?"

Marcia was wondering that herself. Surely, Joel wouldn't have sent them. No reason at all for flowers from Joel. Unless Matthew Yates, in some gesture of gallantry as a windup to the week-end, had sent this offering— Her fingers snapped the green twine. Inside, in a froth of tinted tissue, lay two dozen red tulips and a card.

"Who?" Ruby Ogden pressed, all but reading over her shoulder. Marcia was careful to set the card face down on the corner of her dresser. Its message— *This is only one thing I'll be remembering—until Wednesday night!*—was definitely not intended for the eyes of the curious.

"They're from a man named Perry Cosgrove, Mrs. Ogden."

"Who's Perry Cosgrove?" The pink mouth in the bisque-china face pursed in delighted speculation. "A young gentleman from your office, honey? I did sort of think my own Mr. Hawley might have the inside track there. I did have a little old idea he might be sweet on you."

Marcia stared at her. "Joel? Sweet on me? He'd run a mile if he—"

"He's a right nice young man, Joel Hawley. You know that, honey?"

"I like him." Marcia did not add, "In spite of himself."

"Never makes trouble." Ruby warmed to her subject. "And always on time with his rent money, always right on the dot. Papa always used to tell me, when I was a girl—'Ruby Imogene,' he'd say, 'you look right off at how a young man stands up to his financial obligations. That's the thing to keep your eye on, daughter. True character,' he used to say—"

Because of a more than somewhat detailed report on what "Papa" used to say, Marcia was still settling red tulips into the Souvenir-of-Mexico vase her landlady eventually had pro-

duced, when Joel tapped at her door. Tall and hatless, he fixed the flowers with an instant accusing glare.

"Well!" he said, not in approbation. "A bower, yet."

"They are pretty, aren't they?" Marcia was humming as she gave the arrangement a final touch. "Imagine his remembering I love red tulips."

"Does this take a super brain?" Joel muttered. "Who's the mental wizard?" Without requesting permission, he picked up the card on the corner of her dresser and turned it over. "Ugh. Young Cosgrove."

"That's right, you know Perry." She remembered, now, Perry's unflattering estimate of their acquaintance. Joel seemed to reciprocate in full.

"We've had inter-agency dealings. On tie-ins, where something had to be launched or unveiled. He's as phony as a three-dollar bill. How come he's remembering now that you like red tulips? What does he want?"

Marcia felt herself stiffening. And the evening not yet really under way! "It just happens we grew up together."

"Don't expect me to applaud. Sometimes the most sensible-seeming females will come up with the screwiest personal judgments. I'd challenge you that this patent-leather character ever grew up at all. If you think you like him, it's probably mere habit. By an exercise of will power, it is possible to break bad habits. You'd better give it an intelligent try."

"I don't quite think of Perry as a habit, good or bad," snapped Marcia resentfully. "Please, shall we talk about something else?"

He eyed her thoughtfully. "That's right. This is supposed to be a gay outing. Forgive me for trying to point out the obvious. Ready?"

She would have said that she could predict their evening down to the address of the Italian cellar where they would eat spaghetti and the type of double feature he would choose for them afterward. Fortunately, she had backed up her convictions with no cash bets. Out on the street, Joel comman-

deered a cruising cab with a masterly whistle and gave its driver the name of an almost legendary East-Side restaurant, well uptown.

When a doorman had bowed them inside, some fifteen minutes later, a hovering minion checked names on a list and escorted them to a table marked *Reserved*. Matt Yates himself could have arranged matters no better.

Seated, Marcia looked about her in carefully concealed surprise. This was a bistro she had read about even back in Le Seur. Movie stars came here, and the debutantes who prowled after tarnished Old-World titles, and the playboys with eleven ex-wives. That she should be seeing it, or any spot like it, as the guest of Joel Hawley—

“You like it?” he asked, but not too eagerly. “It’s all right?”

“I’m—fascinated.” She studied lavish emerald satin draperies, a sleek dance floor approximately the size of a child’s playpen, silvered walls of mirrors, the enameled faces at the tables nearest their own. It was elaborate. It was expensive. It was artificial. Anything less like the man who sat across from her, she could not imagine.

Joel ordered; competently, but with the air of one grimly determined to see through a preposterous duty. He did not linger over the menu with Matthew Yates’s almost loverlike attention. Presently, a small but capable orchestra off in one corner was inspired to begin the *Beguine*. Joel gestured and they rose together and he led her to the tiny floor.

Now Marcia received her second major surprise of the evening. He danced, not merely acceptably but very well. The lean body that seemed almost to shamble at the office became a silent partner to the music. His rhythm was flawless. He led her as though she were a feather, in patterns neither intricate nor showy yet possessed of a satisfying effortlessness.

After the first startled moment, she gave herself up to pure pleasure and closed her eyes and moved pliantly, happily, in his wake.

The music faded, too discreet to emphasize a finale. Joel

followed her back to their table, where by now a hot-crab appetizer had arrived at each place. He was not precisely a chatterbox; but conversation flowed back and forth between them at a comfortably unstrained pace.

The soup was a cold French concoction, subtle and memorable. The glazed duckling was sufficient, in itself, to build a chef's reputation. They were savoring the chocolate-misted cloud of a soufflé when another couple passed them, being bowed to a far corner by the solicitous waiter.

The dark girl, dressed as always with that understated simplicity, caught Marcia's eye and smiled. But she did not actually pause on her way across the room. The distinguished, eagle-featured older man moving behind her did not even seem aware of her slight hesitation, as he seated her with courtly attention.

Joel had not missed the brief incident; and now his eyes—thoughtful, surprised—turned back to study Marcia.

"So you really do know the mysterious Miss X, like you told Leo and Isobel and me the other day. It wasn't one of your hallucinations."

"I've never met Mr. McCory." The glow that had been gathering about the evening for Marcia dimmed abruptly. "I do know the girl he's with, slightly. And what you mean by my 'hallucinations'—"

"You do get them," said Joel firmly. "Take your weird compulsion to stick up for a jerk like Roy Cosgrove's brother. In the year since that gold brick has been cluttering up Roy's office—"

This time, it was Marcia who interrupted. She gathered up her handbag with a defiantly militant gesture and surged to her feet.

"I'm not going to listen to any more talk against Perry, Joel. If you'll excuse me for a moment, I think my make-up needs freshening. And while I'm gone, you might try freshening your own manners as my host."

Anger carried her on swift feet to the ladies' lounge, back

behind those smoky walls of mirror. Seated at one of the brief line of dressing tables, she jerked a lipstick across lips which required little improving. She tugged a comb through her dimly shining hair, and the hand still shook. Just now, it had come dangerously close to slapping Joel Hawley.

The door behind her opened, and Fern came into the perfumed cubicle. As she caught Marcia's smoldering gaze in the glass, she smiled.

"So we *have* met again in the big city, Marcia Blakel"

Marcia turned on her bench. "Hello, Fern Miller. New York must be a much smaller place than people claim. This is the second time I've seen you since the train. One evening, at a theatre opening, you—"

"I know." Fern's smile faded a little, although the after-glow of it still warmed her striking and sensitive face. "I thought I saw you, that night. But Andrew was so anxious to get on inside—there were news cameras on the sidewalk, covering arrivals, and he thought it might embarrass me to— But I saw you, Marcia. And I heard you."

Marcia knew she could not pretend ignorance. "I don't know what came over me. I have a temper, and when that monstrous woman in tweed—"

"That's why I came back here. To thank you. I suppose it's only natural for people with suspicious minds to speculate."

"Why should they? If you and Mr. McCory are friends—"

"They say Andrew's old enough to be my father. And he is. Quite old enough. He was one of my uncle's classmates, actually. That's the way I knew him at first. As a grave, kind friend who came often to the house."

Fern had made the automatic pretense of turning toward the looking glass. She lifted a hand to her dark hair. But she was not really aware of her reflection. Her reason for being here was not vanity.

"But, you see, I don't think of Andrew as a father, Marcia. To me, Andrew is— Well, I mustn't burden you with all this. But I'm going to marry him. He sent for me to come East so

that he could ask me. All the way, I kept praying that was how he had decided."

Marcia said, ineptly, "If it was his decision alone—"

"He knew what *I* wanted. But he knew, too, that people would gossip. He wanted to spare me that, even if it meant we never— Goodness, I mustn't keep you here! That attractive man you're with will hate me."

"A little waiting," Marcia said, "won't hurt that man."

"I do apologize." Fern turned her head, and in the dark eyes there were lonely tears on the very brink of spilling over. "I haven't anyone much to talk with in New York, you see. Andrew's so busy. And after you defended me so generously, I knew you were my friend."

The impulse which carried Marcia up off her bench extended to her catching Fern Miller's hands and pressing them together warmly.

"Fern—please come to see me. We can talk almost any evening you'd like. I'm nearly always home. Here, at this address." She caught up a match folder from the table and scribbled on it. "This is the telephone. Perry Street's easy to find, once you're in the Village."

"I think you mean it," Fern said slowly. A tremulous reminder of her recent smile began to form. "You *do* mean it. I will. I'll call you soon."

As she returned to Joel's table, Marcia could not suppress a sidelong glance in the direction of Andrew McCory. He sat alone, light from some mysterious source overhead like a nimbus on his silver hair, face sad and withdrawn now it was no longer animated, awaiting Fern's return. As she looked back to her own companion, Joel's eyebrows quirked upward.

"You still amaze me, freshman. This wench with the great McCory must be your best buddy, the way she scuttled for the powder room right on your heels. What's with this I-know-her-slightly routine?"

His power to irritate her was still operating under full steam.

"I meant exactly what I said. We've only talked once before tonight. Do we have to bicker about *her*, now you seem finished with Perry?"

"We don't have to bicker about anybody," answered Joel promptly. "If you're not having fun, I could take you home."

"That might be a very sensible idea. Tomorrow is a working day."

Marching out of the mirrored room, Marcia did not notice whether or not Fern—now back at her table—looked after them. She was too resentful to care; inside her armor of lemon linen, she bristled most of the way downtown. Conversation was sporadic, and it did not scintillate.

But at her second-floor door, she repented of having been such poor company—no matter what the provocation. "Thank you, Joel."

"For what?" he parried, unhappily. "A riotous evening? A ball? I'm sorry it didn't go better. I wanted it to. Maybe another time."

"I did have fun." The protest was as sincere as it had been prompt, although respect for the truth made her add, "Most of the time. Why don't we try it again, Joel? Some night after you get back from Indianapolis? Only—it needn't be so elegant, you know."

"I wasn't sure you hadn't picked up champagne tastes over the week-end."

So that was the explanation. He'd been carrying that chip on his shoulder because he thought she might be comparing—Marcia laughed softly.

"What would be wrong, next time, with a neighborhood movie?"

"Movies are dangerous. People get to holding hands in the dark." He turned, with what one almost might have thought to be reluctance, toward the stairs to his third floor. "Well—" he said. "Good night—"

THIRTEEN

TUESDAY MORNING was bright and sunny, the rain gone, the shine of spring back on the city's face. The hats along Fifth Avenue that passed Marcia on her way to work were so many ambulatory flower gardens, daring the gray concrete and stone like banners. It was a crime, they proclaimed, for anyone to plan on spending so rare a day in a skyscraper.

Marcia sighed as she turned into her building. Spring was a wonderful time of year, she thought. And then she thought, Of all the clichés to end clichés! How many billion girls have shared that brilliant thought of yours, Miss Blake? Girls in love, of course. She halted before the ornate elevator doors in sudden astonishment. But I'm not a girl in love, any more! she thought. At least—I don't *think* I am.

In the polished metal facing her, a second shadowy reflection had joined her own. Ordinarily, she would not have glanced up. It was a large building. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, toiled here. But the reflection spoke, and in Joel's voice, which did make her jump.

"The usual penny," he offered. "Are they worth it?"

"My thoughts? Not even an inflation penny!" Marcia would not have confided that particular thought in that particular man—not after last night!—if the heavens fell for her silence. She had rather hoped Joel would manage to catch the same uptown bus, this morning. She had kept looking for him all the way to Sixth Avenue. How he had managed not to be there, and still to arrive at the elevators precisely as she did, was a mystery.

"I hope you weren't hating me for being a boor, last night," he said. From the expression on his face, humility tasted sour

on his tongue. Nevertheless, he was being almost humble. "The trouble is, I *am* a boor."

"You're not, at all." Marcia was a trifle surprised at her impulse to deny it. She ought, it seemed to her, to be agreeing; for humbleness would do young Mr. Hawley a world of good. "I was wondering if I'd ever grow *used* to luxury like last night's. When I'm an important executive?"

"The kind who wears hats in the office, to show she's a success?"

"Yes. Like Isobel."

He looked down at her gloomily. "I'm trying to see you then. Going home to a chic little decorator's dream of an apartment; and cooking yourself a chic little dinner of one egg and a cup of tea, to eat *chicly* alone."

"Certainly *Isobel* doesn't live like that?" Marcia had always thought of Isobel's after-hours life as being led on a kind of three-way shuttle—from Twenty-One to the smartest opening nights to the ateliers of agonizingly expensive dressmakers. It was upsetting to imagine her as lonely.

"Could be." Joel's voice was harsh. They entered the elevator side by side. "They used to sing about all those broken hearts along old Broadway. There are plenty of them in the advertising and P. R. sorority, too. The gals are too smart to want any run-of-the-mill husband. And they're too dumb not to show their brains enough to frighten the prize packages off."

"Somehow, I never thought of Isobel—"

"Oh, our Princess is undoubtedly an exception. She's a real dish, with plenty of inner resources. But look around you, freshman, at the smart women you'll meet. Maybe in a bright eye, here and there, you'll detect just the hint of a suspicion that the latest color placement in *Life* isn't enough to fill up all the odd corners, after all."

She was amazed. "I'd have said you were a confirmed bachelor, if ever I knew one. And here you're plugging romance and marriage as if—as if—"

"As if they were Plastic Pipe? So maybe this is a product I believe in. For girls, anyway. For the ones like you. I'm a boor, not an idiot." He glared at her. "You'll find you a guy, someday. You'll see. And he won't be a phony, either, like—well, never mind like who."

Her desk, when she had left off gloves and crocheted stole in the coat closet, looked particularly clean and efficient on this gem of a morning. Someone—Olga, perhaps—had been making the rounds with fresh blotters, and the rectangle of bright red gave her tiny alcove a festive air. Pausing only a second to salute her view, Marcia readied herself at her typewriter. Today's first order of business was a release for SpeedDee Mixes.

A quick modern dessert with a good old-fashioned flavor is easy to achieve when you use— But how to get the specific product across, with an editor who sternly rejected the mention of brand names? How to make it obliquely clear that only SpeedDee, none of its numerous competitors, could aid in the achievement of the miracle? Her fingers slowed. Her brow creased.

The bludgeon of Selma Higgins's down-East twang hit through her ponderings. "Marcia, we're photographing today. Again today. How this office expects me to get all my regular recipe developing done and still spend half my time at FoodArts, I don't know. But *she* needs more pictures."

By now, Marcia had sufficiently settled in at Irby and Yates to know that when the home economist said "she" in that particular tone, she meant only Isobel. To Selma, "she" was as much a proper noun as the placement chief's personal name.

"*She* goes ahead making placements. Supposed to be so smart, everybody so impressed. Then she goes blithely on her way, expecting me to do all the work. It's lucky for Leo Irby and Matthew Yates they've got an old plow horse like me around, to pull the load. I tell you, it takes every hour I ever spent in class and twenty-four working hours seven days a week—"

"Yes, Mrs. Higgins," said Marcia dutifully, rather hoping the proper answer would not turn out to be "No, Mrs. Higgins"—but still in no mood to sacrifice herself by actually listening. She kept her eyes averted.

". . . handled my own placements and wrote the releases, too, in the last firm I worked for." Somewhere Marcia had lost a connecting link. "Work, work, work! So if you'll just find out for me which grapes *are* in season in November, that's one chore off my mind."

Being an assignment, this registered. "Grapes? November?"

"I've got to know the color and the shape of them. Don't just give me names. Tell me what they look like and where I can get them now. I have my hands full with all this photographing. I haven't time for research, research, research. Call me at the studio." Selma turned and strode away. There was no please, no thank you. She disbelieved in non-essentials.

For a few minutes, Marcia sat trying to sort out her thoughts. Grapes? Why grapes? And what about November? No use in following Mrs. Higgins to ask. She would only be rewarded by another tirade on the hateful *She*.

It was Olga, who had watched the brief scene, who presently enlightened her. Coming up the aisle with a load of office ledgers, she made a small grimace. "Selma's getting you to do her work, now, eh?"

"What on earth was she talking about? Grapes?"

Olga giggled. "Isobel and Leo chewed her out, last night after you left. Seems she did a picture awhile back in which she used Florida avocados. The picture was scheduled for release at a time of year when there ain't no such animal. But our girl forgot to check that minor detail."

"How can anyone tell what state an avocado was grown in?"

"Maybe you can't." Olga feigned despair over one so benighted. "But the average food editor can. They know their avocados. The Florida breed has a bumpier skin, and is bigger. The California ones—the ones we were being paid to plug

—are smaller and smoother. So we had an expensive picture thrown back at us. It was a great crisis.”

Marcia supposed it must have been. “And this ties in with grapes?”

“The powers that be gently reminded La Higgins of that catastrophe last night, when they were discussing grapes for the background of a Thanksgiving-cake picture. And fur flew. If Leo hadn’t been there, Mrs. F might have been skewered with a kitchen knife. So get out your books and find out all about grapes—which is what they told her to do. Or maybe you could buzz the United States Department of Agriculture. They’d know.”

Marcia was reaching for her phone when it rang. An outside call.

“Marcia?” She didn’t have to be told, but he told her. “Perry.”

If she wasn’t in love with him any more, as she was almost certain she wasn’t, her heart must have leaped from habit. “Yes, Perry?”

“It’s crazy, this waiting to see you again. I’ve managed to weasel out of my date tonight. Just in the hope you’d be free. Are you?”

Still pinned upon the point of her current concern with grapes and their seasons, Marcia made a small and affirmative sound.

“Dinner, then?” His voice came to her warm and deep. “And after that, we’ll do something—oh, wonderful. Dance in the streets, maybe. Seven?”

So the grapes were somewhat of a confusion in her mind, after she had gotten through to the Department and had her questions efficiently answered—even though she carefully set down everything they told her, and the information for Selma Higgins was impeccable. That voice had been—so, yes, loving. Not the Department man’s. Perry’s. They might have gone back in time to the Lake, to the basketball games, to Observatory Hill. But—

Marcia still felt oddly suspended in space when Agnes came out of Leo Irby's office. The plump secretary looked a little as though she had just been invited to become the bride of Frankenstein's monster. Her usually applelike face was chalky. Her lips were quivering.

Olga glimpsed her first and rushed to her. "Aggie, for Pete's sake!"

"I'm *not* going to faint," whimpered Agnes, who normally never thought about fainting. "I'll just sit here, *and I will not faint.*"

By then, Nell had made a dash for the water cooler and was returning with a dripping paper cup. Marcia had started from her chair with her grape notes in hand, ready to utilize them for fanning purposes. But Agnes, safe at her own desk, seemed to be getting control of herself.

Everyone in the office knew that she had been shut up with the senior partner since before the rest of them had arrived, taking dictation. It was also common knowledge that Irby's lawyer had been with them. But this was not unusual. The various legal aspects of a public relations firm—the contracts, the tax matters—demanded frequent service from the lawyer. What was unusual was to see the phlegmatic Agnes so shaken.

"He's the man," she mumbled, groping for Nell's damp cup.

"What man?" Olga sounded waspish, without meaning to. "Who's what—?"

"Leo. The boss. *He's* the P. R. man who's slated for Washington."

"The one everybody's been guessing about?" Marcia burst out. "But that's wonderful! Perfectly wonderful!"

"Wonderful?" Agnes stared at her drearily. "Why? He's selling his share of the business. He has to, you know, before he accepts that appointment. There are laws about men in government having private connections."

Olga was rigid in her chair. "Who's he selling to? Matt Yates?"

"Of course not. It's somebody new. Someone from outside."

Tears seeped now past Agnes's round eyes. "They never once spoke his name. It was all party-of-the-first-part and party-of-the-second-part. But the sale's *made*."

Marcia sat now with the rest of them, huddled like sparrows against a gale. The end of Irby and Yates? The finish of the firm, at least as they knew it? Who was the stranger coming in? What would it mean to them?

FOURTEEN

THE AFTERNOON HOURS settled over the offices of Irby and Yates, that day, like fallout from some exploded bomb.

Once the news was out—stunning, unbelievable, despite all the whispers and conjectures that had preceded it—only a pretense of work kept the staff going through motions. Voices were hushed. Eyes avoided other eyes. Naomi ruined her fabulous face altogether, weeping as if bereaved and blubbering that she couldn't understand *why* she was doing this because, honest and truly, she *never* cried except at weddings.

"This man who's buying out Leo's share in the partnership." Nell Clements had heard a prediction from what (she imagined) newspapers might describe as a usually well-informed source. "They say he's the senior partner in one of the big Madison Avenue agencies. And that all he's after is our good accounts. They say he's buying in to shut us down."

Olga had heard the same rumor, except that in her version the purchaser who would replace Leo Irby had no interest in public relations at all; was merely a speculator, who bought up prosperous businesses to milk them of their profits and then cast them aside.

One of the girls in Selma Higgins' test kitchen knew a man

who knew someone else who said the buyer was a millionaire looking for a little tax relief. His idea was supposed to be to make the business lose money so he could claim a king-size deduction on his return.

Oddly, no one of the three had heard any rumor whatever—up until today. This fact somewhat blurred the reliability of what they had to report. Numbly, unhappily, Marcia listened—and offered no opinions.

She wished she might have discussed the bombshell with Joel, who was exasperating but at least levelheaded. Unfortunately, only a brief while after Agnes had gone in to take Leo Irby's dictation, Joel had emerged from his office and had—with only the most arid nod of farewell in her direction—taken himself off to pack and catch his flight for Indianapolis.

She wondered what he was thinking about all this, if anything. Perhaps he didn't even know, up in the clouds, wherever he was by now.

Nobody worked late. At five minutes past closing time, not a light burned in the entire suite. Marcia, for her own part, walked over to Sixth Avenue as usual and caught a bus downtown. She had to clutch a strap until Forty-second Street, where some of the home-bound passengers transferred for the cross-town to Grand Central. But she barely knew whether she stood or sat. The bus was lumbering across Fourteenth Street before she even remembered that she was going out tonight with Perry.

The realization that she had entirely forgotten their moved-up date unnerved her. A week ago, dressing to meet Perry would have seemed the most important event of the afternoon. Of the day. Of the week. But things had changed since a week ago. There had been a Connecticut week-end, and now—

Opening the door to her second-floor room in the house on Perry Street, she halted on the threshold. Thrust under the door, lying on the slightly worn spot in her carpet, was a folded sheet of paper; obviously a message. She scooped it up

and let her eyes follow the picket-fence script that was Joel's longhand. *Telephone call for you while I was packing. Your friend Miss Crawford is in town. Stopping at your old hotel. Wanted you for dinner. Said you'd call back, as didn't know your plans.*

Miss Annie in New York! Two emotions seemed to strike at Marcia simultaneously: one was a lurch of homesickness; of hunger for Le Seur, where everything was familiar and one's world could not fall to pieces because a lawyer paid a call to an office; the second emotion was dismay. Just now, with her future suddenly so uncertain, the necessity to seem calm and confident under Miss Annie's shrewdly possessive scrutiny was almost more than could be faced.

She went downstairs to the pay telephone in the lower hall, and called the Hotel Van Tyne. Relief flooded through her when a voice at the hotel desk told her that Miss Crawford was not in her room at present. Leaving her name and saying she would call again, Marcia hung up gratefully.

This time, she climbed the stairs more slowly. Remembering Miss Annie's firmness, the old lady's propensity to run other people's lives, she felt as if she were toting a dead weight almost too heavy to manage.

Because the various crises of the day had assailed her from so many sides at once, because she had been thoroughly upset and edged off base by them, Marcia took particular pains with her dressing. The lemon linen was the newest and smartest dress she owned. She pressed out the few tiny wrinkles that were souvenirs of her date with Joel, and put it on again. She laid out fresh gloves. And all the while, she was amazed at herself because these activities were so mechanical. Was this the same girl who had sat on a bench at Radio City, after her first day's work, and watched the faces of the hurrying crowd? Was this Perry's Marcy?

She was almost ready when she heard the doorbell rasping down below; heard Ruby Ogden trotting to answer it. Perry is early, she thought, opening her door in readiness to go

downstairs. But it was a feminine voice, uncertain and hesitant, that spoke from the front lobby.

"I—I wonder, is this the right house for Marcia Blake?"

"It is." Ruby had gone all over Southern graciousness, down there beyond the banister. She was welcoming another guest to Papa's pillared mansion. "Won't you step in? I know Marcia's home, because I just heard her closing her window. It's second floor, then toward the rear . . ."

Light, quick steps sounded on the stair treads, coming up. Marcia waited where she was. Around the carved and once-lovely post at the head of the flight, neat and smart and unobtrusive as always, Fern Miller came into view. Her dark eyes fell in recognition on the lemon linen sheath.

"I've come at a bad time." She paused. "You're going out."

"Not yet." Marcia's face warmed in welcome. "And I'm all dressed, and my date isn't due. Please come on in. If you'd called ahead of time—"

But what she had been about to say was not the truth, and she didn't say it. No matter *who* had called, she could not have broken her date with Perry. She had waited too long. She had imagined it too often. And now, even though the anticipation seemed to have dimmed a bit, she still knew it was something she would do, come fire, come flood.

Somewhat uncertainly, Fern followed her.

"I should have called, of course. I just acted on impulse, hoping you wouldn't be busy. I know I'm being a nuisance, but seeing you at the night club—a familiar face, after all the strange ones—"

"You don't have to explain," said Marcia. "I'm glad you've come."

"Then you do forgive me? I guess I was clutching at straws."

"Straws?" Marcia gestured toward the shabby wing chair that was the sole formal seating facility the room afforded. She sank herself onto the edge of the trimly slipcovered day bed. "Straws are what they mention when someone's drown-

ing. Fern, is something wrong? If you're in trouble, I can just tell Perry when he gets here that—"

"It isn't that kind of emergency," Fern said hastily. "I guess it isn't really an emergency. But with all the things I've had to think out, lately, without a—a sounding board— Oh, I *am* an idiot."

"Is it something about the wedding?" Marcia was reaching back toward last night, in the powder room. "Is it about marrying Andrew McCory?" But surely she hadn't been wrong in her first estimate of her guest? It couldn't be that Fern had snatched for this important man's tempting wealth and then had gotten cold feet at the thought of—? "I got an impression, last night, that—"

"I love Andrew," Fern said, very quietly. "I—love him."

"But then, since he loves you and wants you to marry him, as you told me he did—since it's all settled—"

"Andrew is dying, Marcia."

The words were so softly spoken that, at first, their meaning was obscured. Marcia stared back at the slender figure in the chair—her eyes widening only after a moment, as what Fern had said sank deeper through her awareness. At the edge of her dresser, the tulips in a vase suddenly deepened to the red of blood.

"His doctors say it will only be a few months. Not a year, at the most. The thing has spread all through him, but so far it hasn't attacked—" Fern began again. "Nobody knows this. Nobody suspects it—yet."

"But he told *you*."

"He had to tell me. In fairness, he said, before I made up my mind about our marriage. But really, it was—well, what I was saying. Everyone has to have *somebody* to talk to. At least one person to listen to the things that are so heavy they sink down to the bottom of you."

Marcia said, in wonder, "You make him sound so—lonely."

"All those important businessmen he deals with, as head of Consolidated Chemical, think Andrew is as hard and firm as

Gibraltar. They'd never believe he could be scared, like a little boy—scared of looking ahead into the dark, without a hand to cling to.

"They none of them realize, of course, how sick he is. At least, not for sure. It's common gossip that he intends to take a leave of absence, for a honeymoon and a good rest. The thing nobody else knows is that he won't be coming back. Calvert Phillips, the vice-president he plans to appoint just before we leave—to sit on things during his absence—won't know, until the time comes, that he's been put into Andrew's place permanently. He'll be the King of Con Chem—that's what they call Andrew now—when the old King is gone."

"And this is a secret from them all?"

"Andrew won't tell anyone. He—he's so afraid of their pity, after all those years of being on top, of being admired, of holding the reins. The only thing he can ask me to share, he said, is these few months together. He wants us to have them without having people—oh, whisper and wonder how much longer. We'll probably go away on a long cruise. That will seem natural, a honeymoon trip. After that—it will depend."

Marcia felt herself wishing savagely that the woman at the theatre could know the real truth about this relationship concerning which she had professed to have no doubts. But the slight, smartly dressed girl opposite her now was not asking for sympathy. Her head was high and her low voice held steady.

"I'm a good nurse. For years, I took care of my uncle." Fern's hands parted and came together again. "If the last of it is—is bad for him, drags on the way those things sometimes do, I'll be there. To look after him. To be a buffer, and lie for him if necessary, and— Can you understand, Marcia, how a man like Andrew would *have* to die still as the King?"

"Fern—" Marcia began. "I don't know what to say. I—"

"There's nothing. It's simply the way it is. He couldn't bear to see some former underling running his kingdom—to be like a shadow or ghost. And I can help him when that time comes.

That's why I prayed so hard he'd let me marry him. If I had to think of him as being alone—alone, without anybody to hold his hand—”

“He really hasn't anybody else? So important a man?”

“Nobody. Nobody.” Fern looked down at her hands as if they did not belong to her. In her lap, they lay quite still. “He has *one* friend. One real and loyal friend. A man who fought with him in France, 'way back in nineteen eighteen. They've been close ever since. But that's no real prop.”

I could name him, thought Marcia, in sudden horror. I could give the friend's name. And I could tell her why he would be no prop for a dying man to lean on. He's a drunkard. Roger Van Doren is a drunkard.

“Roger—Roger Van Doren,” Fern was saying, like an echo, “has had a drinking problem. They're not very dependable, men like that.”

FIFTEEN

THE SOFT WORDS were a mere murmur in Marcia's ear, and for the moment meaningless. Stronger voices cut across them, more immediate although they arose out of memory.

“If the rumor's true and McCory is going to step down, the Consolidated Chemical account will be anybody's . . .” “The billing on that account alone darn near equals everything we've got in this shop, combined . . .” “If McCory were to step down . . .” “If Van Doren ever gets the skids under him . . .” “I'd give up Wash—a lot of things, to land that baby!”

And Fern, with no thought that any of the story she was telling might have a special significance for her audience of one, sat quietly across this rooming-house bedroom telling her all this!

"For a number of years, Roger's trouble looked almost hopeless. Andrew says he couldn't master it at all. But just lately Andrew's gotten him started with Alcoholics Anonymous. It's making a new man out of Roger. He's eating, he's sleeping, he's gaining back weight. And his hands don't tremble any more. He's even good at his work again. That was almost the worst of it, for Andrew. Dying, while Roger needed him so terribly."

"You think it's possible a man like that can really change?"

"I *know* Roger has. With Andrew's help." Fern said this with a simple pride. Her white face glowed with tenderness. "Unless something happens to knock him off his feet before he's really set. Roger does publicity for Andrew's association. If he lost that work—as some people in the association feel he should—he might go to pieces again. But he's getting stronger every day. Andrew only wants to be sure, before he lets go."

"This other man? This Mr. Phillips? Would he keep Van Doren on?"

"I suppose it's possible that, if anyone knew for certain Andrew wouldn't be back, Calvert Phillips might be—I think Andrew's phrase for it is 'softened up.' But that would be a real tragedy. And if it doesn't happen before Roger has time to prove himself to the new management—" The soft voice stopped.

Marcia looked at her guest swiftly. But Fern seemed quite calm, rising to her feet. She even managed a small smile.

"Don't worry, Marcia. I'm not going to cry. I've finished all my crying—oh, weeks ago. That's one thing loneliness is good for. You can get all the tears out of your system. Now, I'm just grateful."

It was a word Marcia could not believe she had heard. "Grateful?"

"Grateful because Andrew has decided to let me be with him, for whatever time he has left. And grateful, in another way, to you." Fern was at the threshold. "You listen to peo-

ple's unburdenings in such a good way, Marcia. As if you really care."

They went down the dim stairs together, and Marcia opened the street door for her visitor. She was unhappily aware of the just-ajar double doors to Ruby Ogden's front parlor, knowing that a flood of questions concerning her caller must be ready and waiting.

But she would not let Fern guess her uneasiness.

"Come again," she said, as Andrew McCory's fiancée moved down the street steps. "Soon! In spite of last night and tonight, I'm usually home. There's no need for you to be alone. You know that."

Fern looked back briefly. "Yes," she said, "I do know that—now. I'll be counting on you." As she turned and walked away briskly in the direction of Greenwich Avenue, her dark, hatless head was held high.

Before Marcia could close the door, a taxi cutting in from Seventh Avenue had slid to a halt at the curb. She saw Perry climb out of it, thrusting a bill into the driver's hand. But for several seconds, before he turned toward the house, his gaze followed Fern's diminishing figure.

Marcia waited. As he started up the steps—Fern had by now rounded a corner—Perry saw her. His dark eyes lit with pleasure. His wide mouth lifted, framing the white evenness of his strong teeth. He looked the way he had at Indian Bonnet Lake, hurrying up the trail toward Miss Annie's lodge where Marcia waited for him.

"I'd forgotten one thing about you, after all." His deep-set eyes glowed up at her. Then he had reached her side, and was looking down. "You're the girl who's always ready when she said she'd be. Do you mind if that makes you practically perfect, Marcy?"

Aware that Ruby Ogden hovered just inside, Marcia said quickly, "It's such a heavenly evening, I thought I'd wait on the front stoop."

"Stoop! Now I *know* I'm home again. Back home in

Le Seul, Illinois, with the prettiest girl at the basketball game to kiss me good night—unless a white-haired old dragon was spying behind the curtains.”

It didn't seem as long ago as it really had been that they had avoided that surveillance. “Miss Annie's in New York. Did you know?”

“Heaven forbid!” Perry actually shot an uneasy glance past her shoulder. “Not in yonder? I just saw one of *those* curtains twitch.”

“I have a landlady.” Marcia laughed. “And tonight is going to be too much for her. Let's be on our way, Perry. I won't go back for gloves.”

Instead of taking her uptown, as Joel had done, Perry aimed them toward lower Fifth Avenue. One of the hotels a few blocks above the Square had an entertainer in its supper room whom he thought—so he said, very New York, very knowing—she might find amusing. When he had settled her attentively on a *banchetto* in one dim corner, he sank into place beside her, reached for her hand and gave it a warm, possessive squeeze.

“I wish I dared hope,” he said, “that impatience over me had you out on your steps—your stoop—when my cab pulled up. Wasn't that girl coming out of your place? The girl in black?”

Glancing about her at a forest of little tables, a circular bar over which glassware gleamed, a raised platform where a small piano was bathed in smoky spotlight, Marcia nodded. She had expected him to let it go at that; had expected his casual interest to die. But he kept on.

“I thought I recognized her. Either she's the mystery wench Andy McCory has been doing the town with, or she's that girl's twin sister.”

“Fern's the same girl,” Marcia said. “I told you I knew her.”

“But—as well as this? One meal on a train needn't mean—” Perry bent toward her in the dimness, his voice the low caress it once had been, his smile the magic charm that she had

known back home. "I thought you'd just been talking big, at Fancy's, to impress the gentry."

"Why should I try to impress anybody with lies?" The room actually was warm. But Marcia seemed to feel a chill draft at the back of her neck, the more mysterious because the smoke hanging against the spotlight was quite motionless. Even the abrupt appearance of the entertainer, whose name was Johnny something, did not disturb the smoke.

"I didn't mean—lies," Perry was assuring her hastily. "Only exaggerations. You know how it is. A person from a small town meeting that kind of people for the first time. Wanting to measure up."

"It didn't occur to me, I'm afraid, that I ought to invent—"

"You don't have to invent anything," Perry murmured. "You really do know McCory's girl. What is she like, Marcy?"

"One of the sweetest, finest people I know." It was a simple statement of fact. Her admiration for Fern Miller scarcely needed emphasis.

"But is she the kind the old boy could actually go for? You know what I mean. You've probably heard the rumors yourself. That the King is about to take off around the world with this new—playmate. That he may be gone for months. That whoever holds down the lid for him at Con Chem just possibly might replace Roger Van Doren in their public relations post. Your own boss is probably after it as much as any of us."

Marcia wondered, unhappily, whether he had any idea how clearly the eagerness in him showed through the charm. "I don't think the Con Chem account figures at all in Mr. Irby's present plans."

"Then—what about Cosgrove Associates?"

A glass had been set down in front of her. The piano in the white puddle of light was yielding brittle chords, to accompany Johnny Somebody's wittily naughty account of *just* what had happened to a Mrs. Peabody-Plotz after she established her divorce residence in Las Vegas.

"I'm not sure I understand exactly what you mean, Perry."

"Simple enough." He leaned toward her urgently. "If I could ease open a door for him there, so he could go after that business, Roy would have to pay me a fat bonus. Maybe there'd even be a junior partnership. Think what *that* could mean to our future, Marcy—darling Marcy—"

"Our future, Perry?" Somehow, what he was talking about seemed to have no more personal meaning than the frenetic activities of the heroine of Johnny Somebody's song.

"Now that things between us are back the way they were in Le Seur." The hand covering hers exerted a tender pressure. "Now that we've found each other again. A fellow can't help looking to the future. Remember, Marcy? Indian Bonnet and Miss Annie's canoe and the way the stars—?"

"I thought we were talking about Cosgrove Associates, Perry."

"Good girl!" He laughed soft approval. "Always with an eye right on the ball! Well, darling, it's obvious how much good it'd do us with Roy if I could show him how to get on this job ahead of the wolf pack."

"And?" Marcia said. The word might have meant almost anything.

"You know this girl of his. She seems to like you. All right, then, what can we find out about his plans? Does she know who'll take over during his absence? How long will old Andy be out of the picture? How does his replacement feel about Van Doren? Would a little financial persuasion make it worth his while to contemplate a switch? Any inside information you're able to dig out of this girl of Andrew's—"

She turned her glass on the polished table, studying the wet ring it spread. "You're really excited, Perry, aren't you? This Consolidated Chemical account means a great deal to you?"

"What do *you* think?"

"And it was just after I'd mentioned knowing Fern, out at Mrs. Hammond's, that you suddenly remembered how close you and I had been back home. After a whole year, Perry.

Three letters in a whole year. And—after I'd been in New York for weeks, without any word from you."

"Honey. Marcy. I've been so busy. Trying to make good with Roy. Trying to land that junior partnership. For *us*, Marcy. So I could come back and offer you something more substantial than—"

"Than those stars at Indian Bonnet? Believe it or not, there was a time when I wouldn't have asked for anything more in the whole world. But I'm older now. *I've* come to the big city, too."

"I—see." The hand that had clasped hers fell away. But Perry was studying her in the dimness with a fresh awareness, a new respect. "It's money that's on your mind. You want a cut of whatever bonus Roy pays me. Fair enough, Marcia. We'll split it down the middle. A business deal."

"A business deal? Between you and me?"

"And no nonsense about that old romance. If we play it smart, we each can make more than our salaries for a year. If you get this Fern to talk—"

She looked back at him and wondered where the other Perry could have gotten to; the Perry she had waited for on a bench at Radio City. But she knew the answer to that. He'd been a dream. He never had existed.

"I had to find out," she said quietly. "I had to make certain you'd really say all this, if I threw you the cues."

In sudden alarm, as she stood up, he caught at her hand. "Hey! Wait! Aren't you going to work on this girl of McCory's to tell you—?"

"I don't have to, Perry." She looked down at him, sad because the end of almost any dream is a sad, sad thing. "I don't have to work on her. She's already told me. I know the answer to every question you've asked. But I wouldn't tell *you*. Not for the whole million-dollar account."

It was only three short blocks up Fifth Avenue to the Hotel Van Tyne. At the desk, they told her Miss Crawford had re-

turned some time ago. They sent up her name. The elevator, rising, seemed to sigh for all lost loves that died too late.

When she reached the door to Suite C-9, it stood open—waiting. Against the lights inside, white hair shone. Marcia dutifully put her lips against a pink, powdered cheek dutifully lifted.

“So you’ve called off your date for the evening.” Miss Annie stood aside to let her pass, and followed her into the characterless comfort of the hotel parlor. “When I answered your phone message, some person with a voice like treacle told me you’d gone out again.”

“My landlady. A Mrs. Ogden.”

“You needn’t have altered your plans, Marcia. It wasn’t necessary.”

“I wanted to see you.” At the moment, it startled Marcia to know how much she had wanted that. “To see somebody I could *depend* on.”

“I trust you will find me still dependable,” the dry old voice said. “Well, girl, so you’re a New Yorker these days. A career woman. You once claimed this would broaden you, I believe. Have you learned anything in the city that couldn’t have been learned more comfortably at home?”

“Yes!” said Marcia earnestly. “Oh, yes, Miss Annie, I’ve learned things I never even dreamed of in Le Seur But that’s not important. Tonight, I want to hear about you, how you’ve been, how long you’re going to be East. I’ve got to hear somebody speaking nothing but honest, decent common sense.”

SIXTEEN

BY MORNING, the newspapers all had it. There were news stories on page one, because this new department Leo Irby was to head in Washington might one day loom large on the international scene as well as be domestically important. The columns on the business pages ran subsidiary speculations, angled not so much at what Irby was going toward as at what he was leaving behind him. How would Irby and Yates fare under new management? What policy shifts, what personnel changes, might be in order?

Marcia had read them all on the uptown bus, before she quit it in the Fifties to begin her brief eastward trek afoot.

There was little in any of them to add to what she already knew. The new partner, Waldo Haynes, was from the Pacific coast; had recently sold out somewhat similar interests in Seattle. How much of his old organization—if any—he might plan to bring East with him was unknown at the moment. What alterations in the structure of Irby and Yates might result, what Haynes accounts would now switch to New York, no one could say.

Telling herself that she was not being paid for speculations, Marcia set sternly to work on her Wednesday chores. The first of these was a trade-press piece on Cook-Out Grills—an obvious pitch, with summer lurking somewhere in the not-too-distant future.

The story almost wrote itself, despite her efforts to avoid the hackneyed. Her increasingly competent fingers raced over the keys, and several yellow sheets had been filled before the bell of her desk telephone began to jangle. Naomi, answering

her brisk hello, sounded as flustered as only Naomi could sound when facing the unanticipated.

"Marcia, it's Alicia Ransome. You know. From *Women's Work*."

Marcia blinked. "What could Miss Ransome want of me?"

"She's calling Isobel. But Isobel's out with clients." Naomi sounded as if she might be about to weep. "Miss Ransome says it's important. Very, very important, she says. She sounds cross as a tick. Would *you*—?"

"Of course," Marcia answered. "Put her on."

Still thrusting Cook-Out Grills from her mind while she waited for the incoming call to be transferred to her telephone, she tried hurriedly to call back anything she might have been told about Alicia Ransome. The magazine was one of the leading service publications, geared to women who ran homes and jobs and children with (apparently) an ease greatly facilitated by their devotion to *Women's Work*. Miss Ransome was supposed to pride herself on doing all her own planning for food stories; her own research, her own developing and tasting of recipes. And La Ransome was rumored to sneer at folk immersed in public relations, and to make no bones about it.

Her bell whined and Marcia spoke with a cordiality she prayed would cover the knocking of her knees. "Miss Ransome, this is Marcia Blake. Mrs. Forsythe is out of the office today. May I do something for you?"

"Where is she?" The voice in her ear was like a tensed wire quivering. "Where is Isobel? Where can I reach her at once?"

"I'm afraid that's not possible. She may be in later, but—"

"I need whatever she can give me *right now*." The fate of the Republic trembled, by implication, on the brink of disaster. "I need it now!"

Marcia's even voice still had to cover for the jittering of her heart. Women of Miss Ransome's eminence, she well knew, were accustomed to getting what they demanded. Their circu-

lations justified this. Even Joel—had he been in his office—would have jumped through hoops for *Women's Work*. "If it's anything here in the office, I'll get it for you."

"I hope you can," the harsh voice assured her. "We're going to press in three days. And I've a hole in my book you could drive a brewer's big horses through. I *must* have a story and pictures, *right* away."

It was possible to combine sympathy with curiosity. "Something must have gone terribly wrong. Everyone says your copy is set weeks ahead." The best-laid plans of Alicia Ransome, so the grapevine had it, showed little in common with those of mice and men.

"Always!" grated Miss Ransome. "My copy is *always* ready when due. I pride myself on it. But Production can't blame *me* if some sub-human twerp in the photographic studio spilled acid all over my negatives."

"How dreadful!" Marcia murmured, meaning it. "Perhaps we have some pictures to fit your story, so you needn't do all the work again."

"I've tried that. The piece is a history of the potato. I had to arrange *months* ago to go to Beltsville and borrow samples of early and little-known potato varieties from the Department of Agriculture. *You* know how the government works. They'd never get me duplicates in time. I need a brand-new story—and recipes—and pictures—by this time tomorrow. Have you anything?" The voice sharpened. "Or, shall I keep on trying?"

The implication was that if Irby and Yates were unequal to a Ransome emergency, other agencies with other clients would not be. An image of those nationally distributed food pages shimmered before Marcia's eyes.

As she gazed at them, they seemed to fade into thin air—rather like the Cheshire cat. She took a deep breath and plunged headfirst.

"What—about—oysters?"

Alicia Ransome lashed back grimly, "What about them?"

Marcia fought wildly to keep her plunging thoughts in

tandem with her tongue. She knew it was vital that she telegraph no hint of panic.

"We have a beautiful color shot in our files of the different varieties of oysters. The big Louisiana ones. The tiny Olympia ones from the West Coast. And"—she did not add the *of course* that Alicia Ransome might have expected—"the Florida type. It's really a beautiful picture, Miss Ransome, all in pale grays and misty mauves. As for your story—"

The Ransome voice had softened, mellowed. "Yes? The story?"

"We could build it around the fact that there are almost as many varieties of oyster as there are ways to prepare them." Marcia's forehead was damp with strain, but her words sounded amazingly competent. "We'd send you a couple of dozen recipes that Mrs. Higgins has tested here in our kitchens, for you to choose from. Then we could develop three or four really original ones for you to feature."

"What about black-and-whites for my runover pages? I'd need three."

"We could do you one picture of"—Marcia gulped a deep breath—"of a plate of oysters on the half shell, packed in ice and with cocktail sauce in the middle. Then, we could do you an oyster stew. And for your third—what about fried oysters in a wicker basket, wrapped in a checkered napkin? You know, the old-fashioned kind with fringe and—"

"September." Alicia Ransome was musing aloud. "The perfect month for oysters, too. When can I have the whole schmeer, Miss—er—?"

"You go to press in three days? Well, we'll take the pictures this afternoon, if we can. Tomorrow morning, at the latest. We'll be working on the story and the recipes while the pictures are being done. If we rush the whole business—would day after tomorrow be soon enough?"

"Bless you!" The voice which had begun as an abrasive was by now a purr. "Where have you been all my life? If a

few *other* people in public relations— We *must* have lunch together, once I'm breathing again."

"I'd love to." Belatedly, Marcia realized that she had DONE it. Out of panic and inexperience, she actually had dragged an important placement. A placement that would really shed credit upon the office. A warm glow spread through her, and the hand holding the receiver began to shake again—but for a different reason. "Meanwhile, I'll send the color shot right over to you by messenger. And get wheels turning on the rest."

The receiver clicked. Marcia sank back limply. Her first placement! Her very own! What was Joel going to say to this? And Isobel? And—? Her blood chilled abruptly. And Selma Higgins? Here she had sat, making promises blithely, quite forgetting that the dragon of the kitchens—

The bell beside her snarled again, giving off much the sound she might expect when the home economist was informed of her commitment. This time, there were no interpolations from Naomi. The call was for her.

"Marcia Blake?" A male voice. A stranger's voice, yet half-familiar. An ingratiating voice. "This is Roy Cosgrove. Perry's brother."

She stiffened instinctively. "Oh," she said. "Oh, yes, hello."

"You probably don't remember me from Le Seur. We were different generations, almost. But I remember you." He chuckled, friend to friend. "I remember you well. The little girl with the wide gray eyes and the big butterfly hair ribbons. You used always to be sitting in the porch swing at Miss Crawford's place when I drove past in my prewar Nash."

How passionately she had hated those butterfly hair ribbons! Out of fashion a good fifteen years before the time when Miss Annie had insisted she wear them, they had made her feel a freak; almost as if she had grown rabbit ears. If Miss Annie hadn't been quite so uncompromising, if it had so much as occurred to that younger Marcia that rebellion was possi-

ble— Did Roy really remember the hair ribbons, or had Perry coached him?

“My brother’s been talking a lot about you,” Roy was saying. “About what a good start you’ve already made hereabouts in public relations. Now, I don’t go raiding my competitors for the promising people in their stables. Naturally not. But it did occur to me—”

Marcia regarded her receiver suspiciously. “Yes, Mr. Cosgrove?”

“It seems to me *your* case is different.” This easy charm was what Perry’s excessive eagerness might mellow into, given a dozen years. “The papers this morning do indicate that considerable shaking up may be due in your shop. Perhaps your own future plans—”

“They’re uncertain. I have no idea, really, what will happen.”

“Then maybe you and I should get together for a talk. After all, two exiles from the old home town ought to have a lot to say to each other. Cosgrove Associates is a constantly expanding agency, you know. Always out after new business. Which means, naturally, that we need new blood to handle those accounts as they come in.”

He’s saying the same thing Perry said last night, Marcia thought. But he knows better how to say it. He can keep the greed under control, and make the bait—the bribe—sound as natural as breathing. How hungry they must be, both of them, for that Consolidated Chemical account!

“You’d feel right at home here,” she was being assured, “with two other Le Seur alumni. Perry tells me you’re really talented, did a lot of the work launching our Olde Worlde Sauce tie-in. I know we could work out a deal attractive to you, if you contemplate a change.”

Her eyes were fixed on the blank window. “As I said, my plans—”

“At least, let’s talk about it. These things shouldn’t be decided on impulse. I’ll call you again in the next few days.”

Sensing opposition, Roy Cosgrove was too accomplished to allow it to crystallize into a spoken refusal. "Perhaps you'll have changed your mind—" And he added, Big Brother all over the words, "Little neighbor!"

As she hung up, the double glass door from the outer world shimmered and swung inward. Isobel Forsythe came past Naomi's battle station, elegant as a mannequin in her Paisley silk suit and matching hat, stripping soft mocha gloves from her well-tended hands as she moved up the aisle.

She paused at Marcia's alcove, brows lofting, blue eyes alert beneath the hat's mushroom brim. "What's with you? You look sick."

"I am. I just made a—a placement. With—Alicia Ransome."

Isobel blinked. "But Ransome *never*— What did she want?"

"One color picture, three black-and-whites, and a story."

Marcia was shaking again. "She called you. She was in a jam. I—I told her what stuff we had, and she seemed to like it. But maybe I shouldn't have—"

"No buts about it! We've been trying to crack that gal for years."

"But I had to promise three exclusive black-and-whites. And in only two days. And three original recipes in the same time."

"We can do them." Isobel was calmly efficient. "It's only a question of my getting Selma to—" She looked down at Marcia and grinned. "Correction! Of *your* getting Selma to pick up the ball. You may not enjoy this, but it's part of your education. The bitter with the sweet. You've got to learn how to give production orders if you're going to make placements. You've done a wonderful job so far with La Ransome. Carry on!"

To Marcia's horror, one of the slim hands fell on her shoulder with a pat that washed Isobel Forsythe of all responsibility for the *Women's Work* feature. Before the welling protest in her could erupt into terrified words, Isobel had gone on into her own office and closed the door.

SEVENTEEN

FOR SEVERAL MOMENTS after Isobel had left her, Marcia sat in frozen immobility, feeling a new dread melt slowly—very slowly—inside her. This panic had a definite name, a recognizable face.

She had to beard Selma Higgins in her den; Selma, of whom she was frankly terrified. Isobel's frequent attempted explanations of the Higgins psychology made good-enough sense. Actually, Selma's job in the agency was to carry out the orders of those who made the editorial placements. Couch the instructions for what must be done however tactfully, they still were orders; and Selma was compelled to accept them from people she despised. It made the surly antagonism of the test kitchen understandable, but no less formidable. And now—right this minute—Marcia must face it in behalf of the promises already made to Alicia Ransome.

Three black-and-white pictures and three original recipes in two days? Her heart sank. The difficulties in her path seemed for the moment insurmountable. Almost undoubtedly, the photographers would be booked solid. What if the Brewers refused her, even though Selma were persuaded?

With a conscious knowledge that she was postponing the worse of two evil hours, Marcia reached first for her telephone and dialed the FoodArts number. Actually, the next few minutes were not nearly so difficult as she had anticipated. Evidently Luke Brewer had taken a gnomish fancy to her. With a surface unwillingness that was actually almost pleasant, the odd little man allowed her to persuade him to juggle his next day's schedule to include three "absolutely impossible" black-

and-white oyster pictures at half-past nine the following morning. Once more, she had succeeded.

But the worst still lay ahead. She stood up, squared slim shoulders, and made for Selma's domain.

The enemy sat at her accustomed desk, spine its customary ramrod line, supervising Beverly and the other girl in the mincing and chopping of a pile of vegetables. "Fine, girls . . . I want them *fine* . . ." She glanced up, bleak as a March wind. "Oh. You. What do *you* want?"

"It's the most wonderful thing!" Marcia was consciously trying to project her personal excitement at what she had come to say; was willing this cold-eyed woman to catch fire from the fire in herself. "I've placed a story, Mrs. Higgins. It's for *Women's Work*. Alicia Ransome."

"No." The words said, bluntly, Liar. "Ransome won't use P. R. stuff."

"But she's going to, this time. She's in a jam. So now I need your help badly. There are three new black-and-white pictures—"

"You don't mean Ransome's in a *hurry*, do you?" The word was made to suggest an impropriety. "My girls have all the work they can possibly turn out for at *least* the next three weeks."

"But we're to take the pictures at nine-thirty in the morning."

"*Utterly* impossible. We never could get an appointment with Luke. Don't you even realize that, as top food photographers, they are booked?"

"It's all arranged. I've called them, and Mr. Brewer said they'd do it"—Marcia was learning diplomacy—"as a favor to you."

Selma sounded somewhat mollified. But not very. "And what are we to photograph? Or don't you feel I ought to know?"

"Oysters."

"Oysters!" Selma's voice thinned and lifted, honed sharp

by contempt. "Oysters, of course! I told Leo Irby when we first took the account that it was *absolutely* impossible to photograph oysters. Where's the *color*? They're dreary gray. Where's the *texture*—the nasty, slimy things?"

"We've got the account, though." Marcia was amazed at her own firmness. This, she would have said, was utterly unlike her. "And so I guess we'll have to take the pictures. Talking it over with Miss Ransome—"

"But *not*, naturally, with me." Selma glared at her. "You people with no training, no sound food background for evaluating—"

"I told Miss Ransome that we'd do one shot of oysters on the half shell, a fried-oyster picture, and one of an oyster stew. They may not be easy, Mrs. Higgins, but they'll be marvelous—the way you do them."

Oddly enough, Marcia knew by now that she was right in this. Despite a compulsive argumentativeness, this stolid and seemingly unimaginative woman did have the knack of turning out really good pictures. To what extent credit for this was due her expert photographers, Marcia was not yet experienced enough to judge. But certainly the food in the finished glossies always managed to look mouth-watering.

"About recipes," she went on doggedly. "We need three originals."

"*This week?*" Selma sounded as disbelieving as if Marcia had just announced she had ridden a flying saucer. "My professor—there never was a sounder food man—always used to say no recipe could be *decently* developed and tested without a *minimum* gestation of two weeks. He—"

"I thought one thing we might do is a dish Miss Annie Crawford's old cook, Pammie, loved to make back home. A corn-and-oyster pie."

With four words, Selma flattened the notion. "Never heard of it."

"It's delicious, really. They always pestered Pammie to

make it for church suppers. You take a very short pastry and line a pie dish—”

“Amateur recipes! It takes someone with no training, no training *at all*, to begin one, ‘You take—’ Of all wretched, unprofessional—”

Marcia laughed. The sound surprised her, for considering how she felt she would not have thought herself capable of making it. Nevertheless, she laughed. “Pammie called it by-guess-and-by-gosh cooking. I guess that was the same thing. You line the pie dish with the pastry. Then combine fresh corn, cut from the cob, with oysters and a little cream and pepper and salt, and of course a bit of celery salt. Put on a top crust, bake, and it’s divine!” She knew too well that no recipe should end with *It’s divine*. The proper, the professional finale was, *Yield: so many portions*. But how many had Pammie fed with one of those luscious pies?

In spite of herself, Selma was looking interested. She knew the job must be done. Somewhere, behind the chill eyes, wheels were turning.

“Fried oysters won’t photograph. I can’t do that.”

“We’ve promised Alice Ransome.”

“You promised. But, as usual, *I’m* the one who has to deliver. If I were ever consulted, I know what will photograph and what won’t. I spent *years* of study finding out. I hold a diploma. But does anyone ask me?”

“Mrs. Higgins, there was no time. Miss Ransome was on the phone.”

“Sometimes I wonder why I was ever hired by this office. With my professional experience, with my knowledge, you might think it would be to *me* these requests would be addressed. But no. It’s only ‘Do this!’ or ‘Produce that!’ People expect rabbits out of hats.”

Marcia turned slowly toward the door; slowly, so that her departure could not be mistaken for retreat. Her heart was pounding, but she was not vanquished. She felt it was important that Selma Higgins know this.

"We have a commitment with an editor. If you'd like, I'll go along with you in the morning. I can wash dishes, or do anything else to help."

Morning came again, as Marcia had recognized that it must—despite strong personal hopes to the contrary. Dressing for the office, she could recall how even the indomitable Isobel sometimes had paced her floor, muttering under her breath, "I'll tell her just as soon as I finish this one cigarette. I simply can't endure another scene so early . . ."

All the way uptown on the bus, she kept telling herself that there still was an outside chance of rescue. "There's always time, even in the very last minute, for some sort of accident. I could trip getting off the bus. A car could run up on the sidewalk and knock me down."

But of course it didn't happen. The bus trip was uneventful. Not so much as a handcart invaded the bailiwick of pedestrians during her brief crosstown walk. Inside the building which sheltered the activities of Irby and Yates, an elevator operator smiled as she entered his car. He mumbled something about a nice morning, with depressing normality. The cage rose without even contemplating a plunge to the basement.

As Marcia entered the test kitchens, Selma was organizing her staff like a top sergeant. "Pack the oysters in that insulated bag, Beverly," she was commanding. "And check the prop list twice, to make sure. Now, in that big basket I want the casserole and the sauce dish and—" She glared as though Marcia were an unexpected road block. "Well, *here* you are!"

"Good morning," said Marcia.

"Can't say I've had time to notice if it's a good one or not," the older woman snapped. "Rain or shine, the work on *my* shoulders never lets up. Since you're here at last"—it still lacked a quarter of an hour to the office's official opening time—"you may as well make yourself useful. My work charts for the pictures are on the clipboard. Pack that in the basket. And the table silver for the stew shot. And—"

The four of them were filing along a still-untenanted aisle, like a small safari braving a jungle of empty desks, when the main door opened. Joel strode past it, hefting the suitcase he had not taken time to return to Perry Street—Joel, obviously fresh in from the airport.

He studied them with reddened eyes that bespoke a night flight and sleep aloft, stepping aside to let the two kitchen assistants and their wooden-faced mentor move past him. Marcia came last in the laden line, the insulated bag and a selection of possible tablecloths in her arms.

She did not quite know whether he made the move that stopped her, or whether she turned toward him purely of her own volition.

"You're back!" she said. Strangely, she sounded grateful.

"Obviously," he said. It wasn't exactly a tumultuous greeting.

"I—I'm going to FoodArts with Mrs. Higgins to help with pictures for a placement. For *Women's Work*, Joel. And I made it myself."

"So?" he said. "Well, that's what we're here for." He let her pass.

At first, as she made for the double doors, Marcia felt a blaze of resentment. One word of encouragement, which she sorely needed, wouldn't have cost him much! But then she recognized the rising emotion in her as not being resentment at all. His calm acceptance of her news had not been a slap, really. It had been a vote of confidence. By making nothing of it, he had as good as told her that he knew she could handle the job.

For the first time since Naomi had transferred Alicia Ransome's call to her telephone, Marcia knew it, too. She *could* handle the job.

Her eyes glowed as she turned to look for Joel again. But the door to his office was just closing. It was—oh, surprisingly good to have Joel Hawley back again on the premises!

EIGHTEEN

FRIDAY WAS ANTICLIMAX, and the week-end that followed it was pure let-down. But Márcia accepted them both, and gratefully. After her Thursday in the FoodArts studio, she had needed a bit of anticlimax.

The two kitchen assistants had gone with them only as far as the street. Once baskets and props were loaded aboard a taxi, they returned to the office to work on the testing of the recipes. Not, however, without Selma's highly articulate misgivings.

"How you girls can *manage* while I'm at the studio, I certainly don't know. These *concoctions*"—the word was venomous—"are impossible, all three of them. But since the front office *placed* them without consulting me, we'll have to develop them somehow. Now, with this corn-and-oyster pie. I worked till two o'clock this morning. Not being privileged to know how thick or how runny it was *supposed* to be inside—"

Right up to the moment the taxi swerved from the curb, she was barking orders. Before traffic closed about them, Marcia saw the two girls in white turning back toward the building like patient, plodding animals subdued by the lash. Selma, on the seat beside her, sat glaring forward in tight-lipped silence as if facing foredestined disaster.

At the studio of the brothers Brewer, her militant attitude had undergone a sea change. She had become an early-Christian martyr about to be hurled—unwillingly—to the lions. She had whined, she had ranted, she had sulked, until it was obvious Luke Brewer contemplated slapping her. Still, the two photographers had done their leprechaun best to achieve successful pictures. They had wheeled lights to various an-

gles, at her whim. They had folded spindlelike arms across their narrow chests and heard her out while she raved about what was *absolutely* impossible.

Particular outcry had been made when it developed that no fat for the deep-frying of the oysters had been included among the items in the basket. This, for some reason, was entirely Marcia's doing. Not until the clipboard with its work list was produced, and it was discovered that no fat had been mentioned on it, could quiet be restored and fat sent out for and—eventually—the photographs taken.

So it was a somewhat bruised junior writer who took her accustomed place before her typewriter on Friday morning. The special recipes—all three successful—had been given to Agnes for typing, along with the background memo Marcia had prepared for *Women's Work*. In due course, a special messenger had borne them off to Alicia Ransome. But echoes of a task supposedly completed still troubled the office throughout the day.

From the kitchen, Marcia could hear Selma's twanging voice cataloging indignities. It seemed that she had been forced to work until well after eight, the evening before, to finish those *impossible* photographs. The truth of the matter was, as Marcia knew, who had been with her, that they had left FoodArts shortly before five; somewhat earlier than Selma's customary hour of departure from the office. But mere accuracy was no stumbling block for these harsh complaints which produced dutiful murmurs from the luckless pair toiling at the test stoves.

A telephone call from the Brewer studio toward midafternoon informed her that three glossies were on their way to Alicia Ransome direct. Luke allowed that the shots would "most likely do in a pinch." And with this, she had to satisfy herself as best she might. Her week-end of letting down to normal was, she thought, rather like a decompression chamber for tunnel diggers returning to the upper air.

On Saturday, there was another telephone call for her from

Roy Cosgrove; but she had Ruby Ogden inform him that Miss Blake had gone to the country. On Sunday, she washed stockings and delved deep into a murder story of which Matthew Yates certainly would disapprove. The jacket for *this* one depicted a hooded corpse dangling from a great dead tree, with a particularly gruesome castle in the background. By time for work on Monday, she was practically back to normal.

And on Monday morning, file prints of the oyster pictures were delivered to the office. Naomi, who had received the large gray envelope from the inevitable bent old messenger inevitably referred to as "the boy," swayed up the aisle and placed it portentously on Marcia's desk.

A moment later, Marcia was staring in numb amazement at a trio of pictures. But they were—*beautiful*! Yes, sharp and clear and beautiful. The lights and the shadows seemed to glisten with life. The arrangements of the various dishes, the balance between food and props, were artistic; clever. To semi-tutored eyes at least, they looked flawless.

The oyster-stew photograph, in particular, was balm for her spirit. A pile of oyster shells to one side of the tureen, arranged at photogenic random, told the story of what the stew contained. Marcia felt a special pride in this, her own suggestion—opposed, naturally, by Selma. The shells had set a mood for the picture and given it an interesting texture. They were so rough, so warped, they seemed to cry aloud of the sea.

It's a good picture, Marcia thought, in awe. *It's really good.*

And behind her, she heard Isobel's light voice. "Pictures?"

"They just came. I was going to bring them in to you."

"Come on in, then. Flat Top will want a look-see, too."

In the shared office to the right of the corridor, she waited anxiously for a verdict. Isobel held up the prints to the light, one after another, squinting professionally. Joel slipped on his working spectacles.

At last, Marcia could stand it no longer. "Are they—any good?"

"You sound like a mother with a first baby, counting fingers

and toes." Isobel smiled. "Why, yes, Miss Blake. They're *very* good."

Joel? She still waited. He nodded. "They make your pitch, all right."

"One of the toughest things about public relations art," Isobel said, "is getting your story across. These three shots do it." She sat down at her desk and lit a cigarette, waiting for smoke to curl through her nostrils. "A P. R. person talking to an editor has got, first of all, to catch the sort of thing she'd be interested in. You have to adapt your mind to hers, think the way she does, sense the kind of pictures her story will need and the recipes that will point it up and the mood the whole job calls for. All this you must have done well the other day, when Ransome called—or there'd have been no placement."

Had she really done all that, Marcia wondered? Had all the things Isobel was listing really taken place during the few moments of blind panic she had suffered while talking to Alicia Ransome? Certainly, there had been no conscious accomplishment of any such complex—

"Granted the placement, granted that you both understand each other, there are still the people who'll help produce the material. In this case"—and Isobel's aristocratic nose wrinkled—"Selma. That can be even harder than your work with the editor. Often an editor doesn't quite know what she wants, and it's up to you to sell her. But essentially she co-operates. Whereas, the Selmas of this world will fight against you every inch of the way. Anything novel is an effrontery, an outrage."

It was, for Isobel, quite a speech. After Thursday's ordeal, Marcia could detect upon it the scars of uncounted battles with the rigid New Englander in the test kitchens. In a small way, she herself now knew what it was Isobel was trying to tell her. Oh, yes, she was learning.

She had not clearly realized it before, but now she knew. A good public relations job was one that started with an idea. The idea was the thing. From there on, it was a matter of

following through. Eventually, if one succeeded, the whole package met the light of day as a story in a magazine or newspaper where the public could read it; as a radio or television broadcast, which the public could hear or see. The term *public relations* had not been coined as a matter of whim. It meant what it said. The public and public reaction were vital parts of the process.

This new feeling of increasing competence carried her through half the remainder of the week as if she were walking a little bit above the pavements. When a crisp but approving note of thanks arrived from *Women's Work* in Tuesday's mail, bearing her own name, she felt like singing.

On Tuesday evening, thus armored, she had dinner with Miss Annie in the cathedral hush of the dining room at the Hotel Van Tyne. Their talk was a virtual monologue upon the advisability of Marcia's abandoning "this New York nonsense" and rechanneling her future along lines her grandfather's friend considered more appropriate; more "feminine."

Back home, it had been hard to stand up to Miss Annie. Here, with a knowledge of what she had accomplished in the past few days to hug to her, it was easy. Miss Annie, departing in the morning for a week's visit to Boston, more than implied that upon her return the battle would be joined again. But Marcia found herself not in the least dismayed.

On Wednesday, she further contributed to her new sense of inner security by researching a Wine Vinegar Association piece for the trade papers that even elicited a gruff compliment from Joel. In fact, on the strength of it, he invited her to that movie they had previously discussed.

The evening was fun. They did just about what she had anticipated on her first date with him: the spaghetti, the double feature on Seventh Avenue. But somehow there was a freshness about the whole thing, an unexpectedness. They actually laughed together. Joel seemed to shed his caustic surface like a snake's outgrown skin—although she knew he would be safe inside it once more when morning came. In the dark-

ened theatre, he did not actually hold her hand, but she was astonishingly aware of his tweed shoulder close to her own; and somehow quite certain Joel was aware of her.

An evening to be grateful for. On Thursday, the axe fell.

When she came back from a modest lunch at a modest neighborhood tearoom, with Olga and Nell for company, she found a memo rolled into her typewriter. *See me as soon as you get back.* It bore Leo Irby's initials.

At her light knock, he told her to come in. When she stepped past the threshold of his private office, the retiring head of the agency looked up wearily from a mass of papers spread out before him. His swarthy, appealingly ugly face was almost expressionless. He nodded, and she sat.

For a long time, he said nothing. Then, "Well, Marcia."

She sensed that she would have to help him. And her heart seemed to still until she was not certain it went on about its business. "You want to tell me something, Mr. Irby? Something that isn't easy for you?"

"It isn't easy," he agreed, his mouth drooping. "And talking to you was so very easy, that couple of days in Le Seul. Yet now here I am almost wishing that you were deaf and couldn't hear me."

"I guess I know what you want to say, sir. It's that my job—"

"Lord knows, it's nothing I *want* to say! You've done good work here, child. Isobel showed me your Ransome placement. Even Hawley seems to feel you show promise. That's what makes it so hard that after mid-June—"

Not now! something deep within her protested, with surprising violence. *Not just as I've really gotten the feel of it!* "Mr. Irby—I wonder—is there a reason I couldn't at least try to satisfy the new partner? I'm getting a grip on public relations now. Someday—"

"I know you'll be good, my dear. But the way things are—"

"If I had a chance with Mr. Haynes—" Her hands clenched tight.

"Were it up to me, you'd stay on here until Doomsday." Irby's square blue jaw was set in distress. "But, you see, Waldo has a daughter. In a few weeks now, she'll graduate from college. She has this notion a business career might be—oh, I suppose it does sound glamorous. Her doting parent has promised her she can have your berth."

The clenched hands relaxed slowly. "I—see."

"No question as to which one of you deserves the job. But, unluckily, the other one's father will own half the business. An office this size—I'm sure you know it yourself—can't carry two trainees."

Oddly, she felt that the first thing she must do, the most important thing, was to reassure this man opposite her. "You hate doing this."

"I loathe it. There'll be a lot of things I'll hate doing, after I get to Washington. It's no fun, ever, being the hatchet man. But I doubt anything I'll be bucking down yonder will be tougher than—today."

She smiled for him. A real smile. "Then I hope you'll remember one thing. No matter what happens, you've given me a chance I'd never have found otherwise. And it's been the best two months I can remember."

NINETEEN

BY NEXT MORNING, Friday, in that fashion which suggests that the walls of an office must breathe, news of Marcia Blake's impending departure from Irby and Yates was common property. Marcia had said nothing to anyone. Nor, she was certain, had Leo. Still, the entire staff knew.

Olga, passing Marcia's cubicle on her way to the supply cabinet, did not say anything in words; but her thin fingers fell briefly on the younger girl's shoulder, with a pressure that spoke of sympathy.

Nell Clements, easily rattled by emotional situations, sat at her own desk and avoided so much as a glance toward Marcia's. Naomi, on the other hand, stared in morbid fascination; the blank eyes back of their picket-fence lashes fixed as upon one condemned to the gallows.

Matthew Yates was out of his office altogether, and Marcia had a feeling that it was because he felt too uncomfortable over the situation to want to face her.

She was just finishing the background memo to accompany a SpeeDee Mixes release, toward noon, when Joel came out of the office he shared with Isobel. She heard him pause, and looked up. He was studying her.

"Any plans for lunch?" he demanded.

"Why, nothing special." She rolled the memo out of her machine.

"Come along with me, then," he commanded. "Council of war."

He took her to the same place where they had eaten on that first day, which now seemed so long ago; to the Tavern.

Not until they were settled into its atmosphere of brick and smoked oaken beams and checkered tables, not until he had ordered for them both—charcoal steaks, this time, and a green salad—did he get around to what obviously was on his mind.

“Rotten shame this happened. Just because a rich brat wants to play careers, something to do for kicks until one of her Rock-and-Roll playmates gets around to offering legal matrimony.”

Despite herself, Marcia laughed. “You sound like some anarchist with dark glasses and a beard, about to blow up the palace with a bomb!”

“I just don’t go for injustice. With all his dough, Yates could—”

“If you mean personally pay my salary—why should he? In an office as small as ours, there’s only so much work to do. I’d be a fifth wheel.”

“This may astonish you, my past statements considered,” Joel said slowly, “but I think you’re going to make a good public relations person.”

“Why—thank you! I thought you felt I was almost hopeless.”

“You’ll be all right. Given a couple more years’ experience.”

She smiled ruefully. “It doesn’t look as if I’ll be getting them.”

“Why not?” he scowled. “You’ll land another job. Bound to.”

“We both know,” Marcia answered quietly, “that isn’t as simple as it sounds. A year from now, maybe. But I haven’t had enough experience to make me worth much to a new employer. Leo Irby just happened to like my writing, and had a personal idea something could be made of me. But going out cold into the market place, I just haven’t much to offer—yet.”

“Defeatist attitude,” glared Joel. “That’s no way to talk.”

“Not defeatist, just realistic. I might work somewhere as a glorified office girl. But I couldn’t get by on much less than

I'm earning now. The girls for those jobs still live at home with their folks."

"Couldn't somebody stake you? That old girl on the telephone—"

"Miss Annie Crawford? Oh, yes, she's more than willing to help me. But not to stay on in New York. We had a long talk the other night, and she wants to sign me on as her paid companion. She says she's getting too old to be rattling around without someone to look after her. And I think she means it. She does seem much frailer even than when I left home. Perhaps I imagine them, but the changes—"

The stark horror on his face checked her even before he spoke. "Look here! You're not serious? An old lady's companion?"

"Why not? It's a good salary. And if she really needs me—"

"She was getting along alone all right, until you lost your job."

All this, Marcia had told herself—over and over—through the wakeful hours of last night. "Oh, it isn't any crashing emergency. It isn't as if she were actually ill or incapacitated. But I think she really does want me. She's planning to go to Europe this summer, and someone younger could take so much of that off her shoulders. The plans. The luggage. Seeing to conductors and passport people and porters. You'd be amazed how I can prattle along in my high-school French."

"Paris in summer?" Joel whispered, shocked. "With an old lady to be waited on—demanding, criticizing, telling you when to breathe? *You?* You're right for publicity. If it were even a month from now—"

"What difference could a month make, Joel?"

"I'd offer you a job myself. By then, I could do it." He saw the blankness of her face, and leaned closer so that his words could not carry in the bricked and timbered room now filled to capacity. "I hadn't intended to mention it yet. I don't want it known, until my plans are set."

"Plans about what, for heaven's sake?"

"When Leo bows out, I'm quitting at the office, too. The bosses both know it, and I've told them why. This new guy coming in may be all right, but what I've seen of him I just didn't cotton to. So I'm going to try it on my own. Open my own office. Joel Hawley, Public Relations."

"Joell!" Marcia's eyes were shining now. "How wonderful!"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Always a chance I'll sink without a ripple. But I've got the background for it. My work's solid. I know the field. I can do a job. The pay-off is in convincing enough potential clients of that to keep the ship afloat through the first couple of lean years."

She leaned toward him. "You can do it. I know you can."

"I have my first account. Plastic Pipe. The boys originally signed at I. and Y. because of Leo personally. Now he's out, they're looking for greener pastures. Matt and his new partner know they're leaving. It's all out in the open, no hard feelings."

"And—they want you to handle their publicity?"

"They put it up to me while I was out there. They like my work. I can handle them on my own, if I want to. Well, it's one account. One smallish account. I figure it's about half the shoestring. If I knew one more would be coming in for sure, I'd sign you on right now."

Marcia leaned back slowly, until the captain's chair felt rigid at her back. Or perhaps it was her own shoulders that had gone stiff. She felt older, suddenly. Almost like an old woman. Old and tired.

"So you need one more account?"

He nodded, and eagerness had brought a faint flush to his thin face. The unemotional Hawley! "It would have to be something with a big-enough billing so I'd know I could pay you a decent salary."

Consolidated Chemical, to name a name, Joel? The account Andrew McCory has been able for so long to control almost as a matter of personal prerogative? So this was what you were leading up to, Joel, with all your pretense of friendly

concern for my business future! The bait was a bit different. But I recognize the trap. Perry Cosgrove's trap. Same model.

She said none of these things aloud, but stood up hurriedly. "I have to be getting back to the office." Her voice was almost harsh. She hated him—because she had believed in him so completely. "Thanks for the job you can't pay a salary on. But I like Miss Annie's offer better."

"Hey!" His astonished protest followed her as she lunged past him.

"I'll send a post card from Paris," she gasped, over one shoulder.

The afternoon hours she filled with grim attention to the copy in her typewriter. When Joel came back from lunch, shortly after her own return, she deliberately swung her chair so that her back was to the aisle. She heard him pause there uncertainly, but she did not look up. Presently, he moved on to his own office without speaking. But she could imagine the intent scowl on his face; that face she'd believed she knew so well.

For the second time since she began work, Marcia left the office early. She wanted to make certain she would ride downtown alone, without Joel's company. But the now-familiar succession of crosstown blocks flowed away from her, while she sat by a bus window, without making any claim upon her recognition. *Joel was offering me a bribe to tell him what I know . . . Joel, of all people in the world . . .*

She had been in her room for twenty minutes before she heard him come in from the street. After these past weeks, the sound of his step on the stair was so well-known that she never doubted whose it was.

The steps paused outside her door, and he knocked—softly at first, then again and more demandingly. Huddled in the shabby armchair, Marcia scarcely breathed. He rattled the doorknob. But she had shot the bolt, and the panel did not yield. Presently, giving it up, he moved along the hall and she could hear him climbing higher.

While she sat staring at the blank wood that had shielded her, the tears formed under her lashes and slid soundlessly down her cheeks.

It was absurd that betrayal by Joel, whom she'd never thought of in any romantic way, should hurt like this; so much more sharply than the hurt Perry had dealt her, when once her whole life had centered about him. Yet that was the way it was. She felt pinned to the chair by her pain, as if it were a lance run clean through the middle of her.

Morning was a long time coming. Awakening from a scanty and unrefreshing sleep, Marcia could look back upon an evening of misery spent locked in her room. Twice more, Joel had knocked at her door. And once—sounding somewhat desperate—he had called her name. But both times he had gone away quietly, in the end. Later, while she had lain wide-eyed on her bed in the dark, she had seen the square of light his rear window cast against an abutting brick wall go black.

And now, today, what? She would run no risk of encountering him in the office, this being Saturday. But on the other hand, it would be more difficult to elude him here in the rooming house. She had to eat. She could not stay locked in this room all day, and all Sunday.

She hurried out for breakfast at the cafeteria two blocks down Greenwich, bought a magazine—anything to keep her mind occupied—and hurried home again. Safe once more without having met him in the halls, she felt almost giddy with relief. But this was only a reprieve.

When the moment came that could not be held off by a door bolt or by shaken silence, midmorning had flooded the back courtyard with its brief hour of brightness. The lone, sickly Ailanthus tree thrusting out of bare earth below had tempted a single bird from somewhere, and the feathered songster was chirping jauntily. The Italian tenant of the opposite building had run out her morning wash on a double line. Someone's television set, presumably manned by junior hands, was tuned in loud to Captain Kangaroo.

And against all this normalcy fell the knock at her door.

"Marcial" Joel's voice was a summons. She faced the door tensely, but said nothing. Her breath came slowly.

"Marcia, stop being childish. Whatever's eating you, this has nothing to do with me. Somebody wants you on the telephone downstairs."

Panic took over. Telephone. The easiest, simplest stratagem in the world to get her out of her room. Joel was lying to her. She hadn't heard any telephone ring. Of course, the racket from the television— But it *hadn't* rung. He was trying to trick her.

"Are you coming?" Joel demanded. "Whoever it is, she's waiting."

She. Clever of him. He'd made it sound, without saying so, as if Miss Annie were calling. A person soon to be dependent upon Miss Annie for a job wouldn't be likely to ignore such a summons. She had to think!

"Marcia? You're in there, all right. Are you coming?"

"I—I can't. I'm—washing my hair."

"All right," said Joel, out in the hall. "I'll take a message."

She heard him lopping down the stairs, just as if really bound for the telephone. But the canned din wafted in at her window drowned out any further sound. Now what? She couldn't huddle here any longer. It was too degrading, too—Joel's word had been childish.

Hastily, she caught up a bath towel from the wall rack beside the dresser and wound it turbanwise about hair presumably damp. She unlocked the door and was out in the hall—where he could be gotten rid of more quickly than if he entered her room—when Joel came bounding into view again. Rounding the carved newelpost, he eyed her sardonically.

"Said her name was Fern Miller," he reported. "Isn't that the—?"

"The girl we saw dancing with Mr. McCory. What did she want?"

Joel shrugged. "Something about a wedding. She left this

number so you could call back." He thrust out a scrap of paper. "She's not one to leave details with strangers. Said to tell you there's bad news from some doctor and she's marrying some guy right away."

He hadn't been lying, then. At least, not about the call. Marcia sank back against the wall, not at first understanding more than this.

"Quite a shock for McCory, eh?" Joel grinned, but without humor. "The way he's been chasing her around. But there it is. She wants you to help her pick out a wedding dress. Right away. This morning. I allowed you'd probably be able to put up your hair in curlers and meet her."

She studied his hurt, mocking face with a dawning realization. "You *don't* know, do you? That it's Andrew McCory she's marrying?"

"You mean to tell me—?"

"If it's to be soon, that much of their plans won't be secret now."

Joel was shaking her. "You mean to stand there claiming you know what McCory's future plans are? This girl, this Fern, she's told you about them?"

"She had to have one friend to confide in."

"And you," he accused, "were telling me, only yesterday, that you didn't have anything to sell in the market place? That you were going off to turn yourself into an old lady's human footstool?"

His hands hurt but she did not flinch. "I can't see what this has—"

"Who's kidding who? You're not stupid, Marcia. You know darn well that you can walk into any P. R. office on this island and parlay what you know into a better job than the one you have right now!"

TWENTY

HIS ANGER FAIRLY SHOOK the small space between them. Yet Joel had not lifted his voice at all. The usually alert ears of Ruby Ogden, in the front parlor directly below, had caught no hint of the interchange. Her double doors remained closed.

Marcia spoke slowly. "I meant what I told you yesterday, Joel. I've nothing to sell any P. R. firm. Not if you mean Fern's confidences."

"Spell all of this out for the village idiot," he said. "Words of one syllable. You knew McCory was marrying this Fern. What else?"

While she stood looking up at him, it never occurred to her to loosen the tight grip of his hands. If they hurt, the hurt was unimportant. For the expression on his face, while rather complicated at the moment, was unmistakable. He was angry; because she refused to solve her problem in an obvious way. He was baffled; because he had not dreamed she had a solution, and now was trying to discover why she would not use it.

The anger and bafflement could not be there if the fact of her knowing what she knew about McCory were not brand-new to Joel.

Then he hadn't known this yesterday. He hadn't even suspected this. The offer he had made at luncheon had been just what it seemed. He hadn't been suggesting anything in return, except the work due the job itself. He hadn't been trying, as Perry had tried, to—

She mustn't cry. She mustn't.

It was ridiculous, really, that there should be this acute

threat of tears. She felt quite giddy with happiness. After what she had been so miserable about, all yesterday afternoon and last night— Standing on Ruby Ogden's threadbare stair carpet, she knew abruptly why it had been so much worse to think Joel was trying to bribe her than when Perry had tried. She knew why her hurt about Joel had been nothing she could fight under control in a mere few minutes' walk up Fifth Avenue.

"What else do you know?" Joel was probing harshly. "Whether the King is really going away on a long vacation? How long he'll be gone? Who'll sit in for him at Con Chem? How much power this temporary guy will wield? What P. R. decisions he'll have the authority to make?"

"Yes, Joel," she said, but almost indifferently. She was thinking of something else. "Fern's told me all that. And—and more."

He let his hands drop, in a gesture of dismay. "And I worried about you! You've seen how everybody in the business has his tongue hanging out over the Con Chem account. You know how big it is. You could make it for yourself, hands down, just knowing ahead of time the name of McCory's pinch hitter. If there's even an outside chance Van Doren may be dumped in the near future, the office that gets there first with the mostest—"

"What would happen if I did sell what I've been told?" she countered quietly. "For one thing, a man fighting a terrible weakness to make a comeback would be knocked back onto his knees for keeps. You know Van Doren's—"

"You've never even seen Roger Van Doren. He's only a name."

"He's a man," said Marcia. "A real man, bucking real trouble. Then, too, there's Andrew McCory. Suppose, after all his struggle to help his old friend, someone did replace Van Doren while he's—away?"

She spoke carefully, now. Despite what she had come to know was the truth about Joel's concern for her, the knowl-

edge that McCory never would return to his empire was not hers to share.

"Should I hit Mr. McCory below the belt, Joel?"

"You don't know McCory, either." Joel sounded as if he might be about to shake her again. "The other night, he didn't even bow to you."

"Why should he bow? He had no idea Fern knew me. All right, and then there's Fern. What would it do to her, do you suppose, if I sold what she told me to someone who paid for it? How soon do you imagine she would be able to trust anyone again?"

"So you're just going to pass?" Joel pressed. "With a winning hand?"

"Perry wanted me to 'play it smart,' too, Joel. His interest was different from yours. But he tried hard. So when we were at lunch—"

"When we were at lunch!" Joel's face tightened slowly. "I get it now. You thought yesterday that I was trying to suggest—"

She no longer believed it, but: "You did say that one more—"

"One more *small* account. Like Plastic Pipe. I couldn't take on Con Chem if they begged me. The organization necessary to service an operation like theirs—no man just starting out could hope to build it up, if any P. R. switch is imminent there. It would take a year or more to build that kind of a staff. So my bribing you would have very little point."

"It wasn't a bribe. I was a fool even to— I know that it wasn't. You were only thinking about my cashing in on an obvious advantage."

"So, because you knew this, you walked out on our lunch? Cold-shouldered me in the office? Ducked out of work early? Locked your door, last night?"

"No," Marcia said quietly. "I know that about you now, Joel. I didn't know, yesterday. Someone else had already tried to worm information—"

But he knew, of course, that this was Perry. "I told you about Cosgrove," he glared. "Long ago, I warned you. If you'd just listen—"

"I can't listen, if you mean now. Would selling my information get me anything to balance what I'd have to live with if I did sell? Thoughts of the people I had hurt. Things I'd know about myself?"

"Well!" he said, eyes riveted to her lifted face. "Well!"

"Why are you staring Joel? As if you'd never seen me before?"

"Maybe," said Joel, "I never have really seen you before."

Downstairs, Ruby Ogden's parlor doors sliding open gave off a familiar warning. Marcia backed toward her own room, instinctively tugging the towel turban from her head. Her sandy hair spilled free. Joel stared at it.

"So you were *that* sure I meant to hurt you." His voice was raw with fury. "All right. Now you know there's nothing to be afraid of, you'd better go meet McCory's bride."

"Joel—" she began. But he had turned on his heel and was taking the stairs to the top floor three at a stride. Down below, Ruby Ogden had begun tentative twitterings. Hastily, Marcia retreated into her own room and closed the door.

It took her only a few minutes to ready herself for the street. The least she could do for Fern was meet her now for this bittersweet errand on which the other girl wanted company. Picking a dress to be married in was nothing for any bride to do alone; not even under happy circumstances.

Gloved and ready, she paused at the entrance-hall telephone only long enough to call back the number Joel had scribbled. Fern answered, and there was gratitude in her voice as they settled on the store where they would meet in half an hour. As she walked to the corner and turned right into Greenwich, Marcia wondered how close she herself might come to approximating Fern's quiet courage in such a situation.

Full spring by now was in possession of the Village. A

fresh impudence sparked the decor of the windows she passed; the copper craft shops, the antique shops, the cellar cubbyholes. Even the gloomy façade of the public school on the north side of the street was washed in a sunshine that mollified the terseness of certain belligerent scrawlings in chalk. Hope marched along with her, fitting its stride to her own. This thing she had just discovered about herself, about Joel and herself—

She had reached Sixth Avenue and the uptown bus stop before she heard his step behind her. When she turned, he was right at her shoulder.

He stood glaring down, brows drawn savagely together. "Don't imagine I'm tailing you. I'm not out to spy. But one thing—"

"Yes?" encouraged Marcia, as innocent as the morning.

"What did he do to hurt you? That Cosgrove whelp?"

She saw her bus, a block away. And nothing, absolutely nothing that suggested transportation, in view behind it—the entire avenue long.

"He did nothing I won't get over. For months now, I must have been buying my own public relations campaign to sell—something that didn't even exist. Don't worry about me, Joel. I'm all in one piece."

"Then there'd be no danger of its just being rebound?"

"Of *what's* just being—?" She gasped in dismay. "My bus! Oh, no!"

"Take the next one," he commanded, a trifle wildly.

"But there isn't one in sight. And Fern—"

Others had gathered at the corner, awaiting the bus. As its doors opened with a pneumatic sigh quite in keeping with the morning, she felt herself being propelled forward as if by an ungovernable wave. She mounted the steps blindly. The coin box—a nickel and a dime, ready in her hand, clattered down the chute. Then she was in a seat by an open window.

Outside the window, Joel's crew cut bobbed up.

"You do know you have a new job, don't you?" he demanded frantically.

"But you can't afford to hire me, not until—"

"It's all part of my lack of business ethics. This way, I'll be getting a release writer for free. She's no ball of fire at the work, yet. But she shows promise. I can teach her." The bus had begun to roll. He dogtrotted alongside, oblivious to a swerving delivery truck. "Marcia—"

It wasn't very coherent. But neither, to the casual listener, was her answer. "You said 'for free.' What did you mean? 'For free,' how?"

"You know darn well what I meant. And if you weren't speeding off in this blasted bus"—actually, it was stopping for a traffic light at the corner—"and forcing me to gallop along like a coach dog—"

"Are you asking me to marry you, Joel?"

"In front of all these people?" he raged. "Do you think I have no pride at all? Nobody'll have box seats to watch *me* being turned down!"

"I could get off at the next stop, Joel." Marcia was getting to her feet. "A taxi would get me to Bendel's even faster. A taxi is private. In case you wanted to come along, I mean."

"Just for the ride?" He sounded wary. But there was a grin beginning on his face that made it look— Oh, dear! And his ears were scarlet.

"No!" A future release writer for Joel Hawley, Public Relations, called it back wildly, jerking a green signal cord with one hand and clinging to an overhead bar with the other. "Not just for the ride!"

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