

DBE

THE MEN IN
HER DEATH

Stephen Ransome

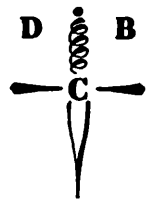
THE END OF
THE TRACK

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DEATH WALKS
ON CAT FEET

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Chapter 1

He was driving slowly, alone in the black sedan.

The highway ahead, threading down the middle of the narrow key between the Bay and the beach, was lined on both sides with motels and restaurants. The miles-long succession of brilliant neon signs transformed the pavement into an earthbound rainbow, red and green and gold. Tourists might think it beautiful; he was used to it and scarcely saw it.

On his right an almost-full moon soared over the spangled expanse of the Gulf of Mexico. He didn't give it a glance. The surf was curling with a sound like the rustling of taffeta, and a lazy breeze was rattling the fronds of the cabbage palms, but he didn't hear. It was a humid night, unusually hot for May in Florida. His face was cold.

His big hands rested loosely on the steering wheel as if this were a smaller, more delicate machine than he was accustomed to handling. He ignored the hum and hurry of the midevening traffic on Gulf Boulevard and kept the needle of the speedometer trembling at the 15 mark. Other cars pressed behind him, then passed one after another, whizzing. He became aware of them and felt a sudden angry urge to match their speed. He could do it. He could tramp on the gas pedal, rush on and keep going—disappear and never come back.

No. The idea didn't make sense. Like so many of the things he had thought and done these past weeks, it was reckless. It was the reverse of what had to be done. He couldn't leave, not possibly. It was Jackie who must be removed from this intolerable situation.

Stubbornly he held his speed down. He was almost there. A feeling of unavoidable necessity was dragging him along. It was almost as if he were taking himself to a hospital to undergo a dangerous operation. It would be very much like major surgery, he could promise himself that. It would hurt to the core, and he would be a long time recovering.

He turned his black sedan off the pavement and stopped in a broad

gateway beside a sign reading *Free Parking for Patrons—The Blue Dolphin*.

Looking for a place behind the low stucco building, where the lot was darkest under the Australian pines, he found it crowded with cars. There was only one vacant space. It was directly beside the entrance in the full glare of the floodlights.

He damned his bad luck, but now that he was here—here for the last time—he felt he could not wait. Jackie probably had a date with some other man tonight; he might miss her.

He backed his car, swung wide, and eased it into a stop. This spot allowed him a broad view into the dining room. The glass jalousies were open on three sides to admit the breeze off the Gulf. The Blue Dolphin was filled to capacity. Not only was every table occupied, and every stool at the bar, but also a hungry group was lined up in the foyer.

His eyes found Jackie. She was at one of the booths near the rear door, seating a party of four. Another party near by was rising from their table, about to leave. It meant he would have to wait after all. She was too busy now, and there were too many people about—perhaps, among them, someone who might recognize him.

It had been like this from the beginning, a matter of hiding and sneaking, increasingly hateful to him—and tonight, of all nights, he must not let himself make a final disastrous mistake.

He had been a crazy, middle-aged fool to let it trap him like this. Thinking back to the first time he had seen her, he realized all over again that he had lost no time getting himself into an impossible tangle of deceptions.

“You remind me of someone I know.”

It was the first thing she had ever said to him. On a rainy Monday night five weeks ago he had come into the Blue Dolphin casually, like an ordinary customer, and had asked her for a table for one. While following her across the dining room he had begun sizing her up. A tall girl, a little too thin; short, glistening black hair, slender, bare ankles; a rangy way of walking. Her white dress, cut low, had accented the sun-brown of her shoulders. On the whole she had puzzled and disappointed him; he had found her less attractive than he had imagined her.

He had seated himself and she was placing a menu before him when she said it. “You remind me of someone I know.”

She had spoken with easy friendliness, but it had startled him. He vividly remembered the first closeness of her heart-shaped face, a face oddly blending sophistication and innocence, and the lights in her dark blue eyes, a glimmer of lively interest. He had stared at her as she lingered there, too disconcerted to answer.

"You really do," she had said earnestly, as if to assure him that this was not routine patter, not part of her job. "He's a boy who lives up the beach somewhere. Belle Loma, I think. His name's Bradford, Doug Bradford."

In his confusion he had answered with a quick shake of his head. "Don't believe I know him."

That had been his first lie, his first mistake.

"It isn't that you *look* like him exactly. You don't really. You're much huskier, more the outdoor type than he is, but there's just something about you that made me think of him." She had asked with a little smile, partly apologetic, partly teasing, "Sure you're not related—his big brother, maybe?"

"Not that I know of."

His attempt to pass it off had been clumsy. Her question had hit too close to the mark. He was still shaken; and having begun with a lie, he had fumbled for a convincing way to back it up.

"My name is Redman. Bart." How had he managed to pull that name out of the air so glibly without having planned it in advance? It belonged to a rigger who had worked for him on a project in Georgia last winter. "Bart Redman."

That had been his second serious mistake, compounding the first—the false name he had felt forced to give her.

"Well then, it's just a coincidence, Mr. Redman—but a nice one. Doug's *very* nice. You haven't been here before, have you." It wasn't another question.

"No."

"Not since I began hostessing, anyway. If you had, I'd certainly have remembered you. Enjoy your dinner now, Mr. Redman, and come back soon, hear?"

He had come back the next evening, but only for a quick double bourbon—just long enough to suggest their first date. He had half expected her to refuse—she had seen him only that one brief time before, and he was so much older—but instead she had accepted immediately, in a flattering way that had left him feeling she was really

glad he had asked her. . . . But that too had been a mistake, and a worse one, leading him in even deeper. Within a few hours, once they were together, he was to begin learning what people meant when they referred to a man's "foolish fifties." He would come to a full realization of it with a bewildering shock.

He remembered how elated he had felt, and at the same time how uneasy. He had gulped the last of his drink and left hurriedly because it was too risky to show himself there for long. He might run into someone who knew him. One chance meeting, his real name spoken just once in Jackie's hearing, and instantly the whole shabby business would be turned wrong side out.

So it had begun with deceit and it had gone on in fear and under concealment, with one lie engendering another, until he had found himself hopelessly caught in a sticky web of his own spinning.

He had almost forgotten his purpose in seeking her out. It had seemed a simple thing at first. All he had wanted was to learn something about this girl Jacqueline Burrows with whom Doug had become so entranced.

Doug had talked about her freely and had been with her almost every night for weeks on end; but for some reason Doug had never brought her to his home. It was serious, he couldn't question that, so serious that he had become deeply worried and, somehow, distrustful of it. He had decided to find out for himself just what this Jackie was really like.

To clear the way he had sent Doug upstate on a long job. He had meant only to observe Jackie and to pick up bits of information about her from her employers and acquaintances, in the same quiet manner he had sometimes used to investigate an applicant for a responsible position with his company. In order to avoid embarrassment later, Jackie, of course, would be entirely unaware of this. His intentions had not included meeting her personally; that would come afterward, through Doug, as it should.

He could not possibly have foreseen how small circumstances would derail his plan at the very outset. He still could scarcely believe the worst of it, that he had been capable of falling headlong into an infatuation with Doug's Jackie.

He had almost forgotten the feeling; he had not been so attracted and excited by a woman in more than twenty-five years. His own vulnerability had perplexed and plagued him. Their relationship

seemed to have grown with a power of its own until it had become overwhelming. He could no longer think straight, not about his work, not about anything; least of all could he think sensibly about that strangely appealing girl. Without being aware of it or fully understanding it, he had lost command of himself. It was like an addiction to a drug or like a bone-deep fever which never abated, never for so long as an hour.

Finally, trying too late to fight it down, he had made the decision he could no longer put off. His need now was a desperate one, to cure himself of her, to get her out of his mind, out of his life, out of his blood. And quickly. Now. Right now. Tonight.

He had stayed inside the black sedan until the height of the dinner hour had passed.

Jackie, momentarily idle, was standing where he had first seen her, beside the cashier's desk with several menus in her hands, and just as he had first seen her, with the light slanting across her high-boned cheeks. In repose her mouth was discontented, almost sulky. Her restless eyes passed by him; she wasn't aware that he was watching her.

It would be reasonably safe for him to go in now, for just long enough to arrange to meet her as soon as she was free.

He left the car, and as he turned to the entrance it swung open. His gaze was on Jackie; he brushed past the woman who had just come out without noticing her.

"Why, hello-o! Hello, there!"

His body stiffened. That lilting voice was all too familiar.

"Good e-evening, stranger!"

Damn Saralee Cooper! Could he pretend he hadn't heard? No; involuntarily he had stopped short. Would a quick "Good evening, Aunt Saralee" be enough? No; she was likely to hustle in after him and with her impulsive chatter betray his true identity to Jackie. He turned back, forcing a smile.

"How nice to see you!" Saralee Cooper sang out, moving closer.

This lively little woman of sixty-odd lived with his next-door neighbors, the Phillipses. Celia Phillips was her niece. Her eyes were button-bright in her youthfully smooth face. Since he had last seen her she had tinted her white hair a light blue.

"Well, just *where* have you been keeping yourself? Cee was say-

ing just this morning we've hardly had a glimpse of you in *weeks*."

With an effort he answered her courteously. It was unreasonable of him to be furious with her simply for being here, he knew, but of all the people who might have bumped into him tonight Saralee Cooper was the most unlikely. She hesitated to drive a car anywhere because of her often-mentioned "heart condition," which wasn't imaginary but real enough, yet tonight she had ventured out on a round trip of almost forty miles. There were a dozen other good restaurants nearer her home, and the Blue Dolphin was hardly an old-ladies'-tearoom sort of place. It became even less understandable when he noticed that she had brought the two Phillips children with her. They were standing side by side just behind her, dressed in their best—Little Saralee, eight, and Toby, six, both blond, both looking up at him with big grins on their nut-brown faces.

"Aren't you going to say hello?" their great-aunt prompted them.

"H'lo," Little Saralee said.

"'Lo," said Toby.

She was beaming at him again. "Why, if I'd only known you were coming! You poor man, it must be so lonely for you, having to eat out every night. I'll bet you're good and hungry by now for some of Beth's home-cooked food, aren't you? How much longer will she stay away?"

"A week or two."

"Do you come here often? It isn't especially attractive, do you think?"

Must she stand there babbling at him? He glanced aside uneasily, wondering if Jackie could hear. Saralee Cooper had once been an actress; she still had something of the grand manner about her and her voice carried. . . . Jackie, still standing beside the cashier's desk, was gazing in his direction.

"I said, do you come here often?"

"Once in a while."

"I do feel it's not especially attractive," Saralee Cooper reiterated. "I don't quite like the atmosphere or something. And that girl in there, the hostess, wasn't very considerate. She made us take a table 'way back in that gloomy old corner where they stack the dirty dishes on one of those carts. Most *inconsiderate*. I noticed she was sweet as pie to all the men, though."

He gave her a quick, searching look; but she had turned to the children.

"You youngsters run along to the car now. Be with you in just a minute, darlings. I have something private to talk about, something you little ones wouldn't understand."

At that he thrust both his hands into his pockets and hardened them into fists. How could he tear away from her? He couldn't—he had no choice but to wait until the children had obediently gone, then suffer through whatever it was that Aunt Saralee must prattle about.

Turning back, about to speak, she checked herself and gazed past him. "I saw you getting out of that car," she said, lifting her eyebrows, "but it isn't yours, is it?"

"Company car." Where was his own then? "Mine's in the shop. I'm afraid I haven't much time, Aunt Saralee. Important appointment right after dinner. Business." Petty lying had become increasingly easy for him—too easy. The necessity of it disgusted him and he wanted an end to it.

"Of course you're busy, you always are, but this won't take a minute." She glanced around to make sure no one could hear—overlooking Jackie still there in the foyer. "I just had to get the children out of the house for a while. Something's wrong there, seriously wrong. Have you any idea what I mean?"

"Not between Cee and Hugh. You can't mean that."

"Yes, I do, and it's dreadful, really dreadful. We're all so upset. It has been going on for weeks now and getting steadily worse. I'm afraid—I'm just terribly afraid Hugh is thinking about asking Cee for a divorce."

"That's hard to believe. What possible reason——"

"He won't discuss it with me, and I know why. He realizes I won't sympathize with him one whit. I've always liked Hugh in spite of his weaknesses, but I raised Cee. It's more than I can stand to see her so unhappy through no fault of her own. Poor Cee simply doesn't deserve that. Someone *has* to bring that man back to his senses. Someone has to do it, but I can't, because he just won't listen. So—won't you please talk to him?"

Her heart was in this simple appeal for help. At any other time he would have responded willingly enough; but not now. His mind

was so jumbled with worries of his own that the mere prospect of taking on someone else's besides was intolerable.

"It wouldn't do any good, Aunt Saralee. Hugh won't listen to me either."

"There's been a sort of rift between you two lately, I'm aware of that, but you oughtn't to let business differences come between you. You and Hugh were the *best* of friends before, and you *have* been next-door neighbors for almost ten years. Surely that counts for a great deal still."

"I hold nothing against Hugh, but since he feels toward me as he does——"

"Then think of it this way—you'll be doing it for Cee. She'll fight to keep her home and her family together, you may be sure she will, but she needs help too. Please. There's no one else I can ask. Won't you?"

It was at least an opportunity to get rid of her. "All right, Aunt Saralee. I'll do my best."

"I knew you would! Do make it as soon as possible, tonight if you can—after your appointment."

"I'll drop over—later."

"Please do all you possibly can. We need you. I'm depending on you. And I'm *so* glad I saw you."

Finally! Finally she was going.

With boiling impatience he waited another long minute while she timorously backed her car toward the boulevard and started off, waving good-by. His answer was a grimace of a smile. Then, when he turned back to the glass entrance of the Blue Dolphin, he saw that Jackie had left the foyer.

She was at the bar now, talking with a thin-faced, effeminate young man, the entertainer who sang off-color songs at the piano for the sniggering merriment of the Blue Dolphin's late-evening customers.

A fluttering motion at the cashier's desk caught his attention. The hard-looking blonde officiating there had just answered the telephone and with one glittering hand was beckoning to Jackie. He held himself back as Jackie hurried forward to answer the call—forced to wait again.

The conversation was mercifully brief. As it ended he saw a flash of alarm in Jackie's eyes. She bit her lower lip and spoke quickly to

Marie—the blonde, the proprietor's wife, who answered with a displeased nod—and immediately turned off. There was urgency in her movements as she hurried away, as if she were suddenly feeling ill.

She disappeared through a door in the rear corner of the dining room.

Long minutes crept by while she remained out of reach.

He had met with one damned, bedeviling frustration after another. Now, in rebellion, he pushed in. A searching look around reassured him; he saw no one who knew him. A stool at the end of the bar was unoccupied. He perched himself on it, ordered a double bourbon, and glanced around again; but Jackie was still not in sight.

Before he realized it his glass was empty. He ordered a refill, although he knew he ought not to drink it. Alcohol, even moderate amounts, worked on him in a way he disliked. It quickened and intensified his emotional reactions. Instead of relaxing him, it tightened him up; he involuntarily resisted its effects, and later, when it wore off, he would be left tired out. He was afraid of it; or rather, he mistrusted himself after he had had a few drinks. He didn't want this second bourbon, but he found himself taking it in quick nervous sips while waiting for Jackie to return to the dining room.

The swinging doors of the kitchen parted. It wasn't Jackie who came out; it was the chemically blond Marie, looking resentful. She began circulating, filling in as hostess in Jackie's absence.

"Redman, isn't it?"

Until then he had not noticed the thin young man leaning carelessly against the bar at his right elbow. It was Lonnie Nichols, the singer of risqué songs. Nichols haunted the place; he entertained at the piano from nine until two in the morning, also took his meals here and drank at a discount. There was a glass in his hand and an alcoholic mist in his narrow-set eyes.

"Bart Redman?"

"That's right," he said shortly. Then he realized Nichols might be helpful. "Where's Jackie?"

"She's around."

"Will you do me a favor? Find her, tell her I have to see her for a minute, right away."

"Sure, glad to." Lonnie Nichols shook his glass, rattling the ice in

it. Otherwise he didn't move. "None of my business, but you're giving yourself a real bad time, aren't you, friend?"

"If you'll just tell Jackie—"

"Real bad time you're giving yourself. It shows." Nichols's expression was deadpan. The movement of his lips as he spoke was like that of a nibbling fish. "You'd like to tell me I've had a couple too many. Go ahead, it's true. Had three or four too many, matter of fact. As I say, it's none of my damn business. You look like a good joe, that's all. Thought so when you first started comin' in. Too bad, he's a real good joe."

He said impatiently, "I'm in a hurry."

Still Nichols made no move to go. "Jackie— Looks like an angel sometimes, that girl. Like a dark angel." He nibbled at his whisky. "Ha!"

"Never mind, I'll find her myself."

Nichols's hand darted to his arm and closed hard—surprisingly strong. "You asked me to do you a favor. That's just what I'm doin', friend. Big one. Hate to see a good joe givin' himself such a damn bad time."

He put down his impulse to pull away. Here was a chance to learn something he needed to know.

"In case you think I'm kidding myself, Nichols, I'm not. Sure, there's somebody else. And I know who it is."

"That so?"

"Doug Bradford."

Nichols shrugged his thin shoulders. "All I know— See, I live just around the corner from Jackie. We're on the beach ever' morning. Loll there in the sun and talk. I mean I dry out and she talks. Nothin' romantic, y'understand, just sort of pals. So I just thought I'd pass along a little tip to you, friend, save you a lot of grief. She's got somebody in mind, all right, but he's not you."

"I'm aware of it." He said again quietly, "You mean Doug Bradford."

Nichols repeated his noncommittal shrug. "She tell you that?"

"No, but——"

"Didn't think so. At a certain point she stops bein' so cozy and confidential. Clams up. When I ask her who she's thinkin' about, she says, 'Wouldn't you like to know! Just wait and see!' Like that. No

name mentioned. But a big deal, real big. That's all I know—she's workin' on a king-size project. But it ain't you, friend."

"I never thought——"

"Great big plans, spectacular production. And I believe it. That girl lies there on the sand and figures out the angles and laughs to herself, and the way she laughs—friend, the sun turns cold. Affects me that way to hear her, freezes me up. Brother, that girl's got her pretty razor-edged teeth in something, and she's not goin' to let go. Nothin's goin' to take it away from her. No smalltime salesman—"

Foggy-headed as Nichols was, he realized he had gone too far. "Sorry. Better start soberin' up. From drinkin' too much I talk too much, and besides, I play piana like I'm wearin' hamburger buns on both hands."

"That's all right." He finished his drink—and hesitated. "Jackie has mentioned Doug Bradford to me. But nobody else."

Nichols didn't take the bait. "Not sore? Good joe like you wouldn't be sore. Friendly little tip, save you a lot of grief."

"Thanks," he said tightly, and turned away.

The whisky had sharpened his impatience to an angry edge. He went frowning to the cashier's desk.

"I've got to see Jackie for a minute."

Marie was poking into the till, still looking disgruntled. "Headache," she said curtly.

"What?"

"Jackie's got a headache, or so she said. Came on real suddenlike. Anyway, she just left."

Chapter 2

He was driving southward again, going almost fifty miles an hour in a twenty-five-mile zone. The traffic had thinned. He kept his headlight beams up, cutting past slower drivers, alternately peering at the taillights ahead and into the rearview mirror for a police car.

The Blue Dolphin was eight or ten miles behind him when he drew up on a cream-yellow hardtop. It was Jackie's. He knew its license number and saw the dark head of the girl at the wheel.

She was not hurrying. He dropped back, staying behind her.

Was she going home? Yes. Near Pirate's Pass she took the familiar turn to the right into Casablanca Street.

He used the brakes again, swinging after her. The garage apartment she had rented was just beyond the corner; already she had parked in front of it. She was leaving her car now, too preoccupied even to glance in his direction. He did not stop behind her as he had intended to do; instead, he pushed on. He had seen someone standing there in the shadow—a man waiting for Jackie.

Probably it was this man who had phoned her at the Blue Dolphin. He should have known. Of course Jackie had rushed off to meet a man.

Just beyond her apartment he eased the black sedan to a standstill, twisted the switches, and quietly got out. This moonlighted street deadended at the beach. The windows of the near-by cottages were open to the salt breeze. The nearest neighbors, elderly people, were watching television or playing cards. For the sake of comfort on a muggy night they were giving up a degree of privacy to passers-by; but then, they had nothing to hide. But Jackie— There was something of stealth and secrecy in her meeting with this unknown man.

The two were vague shapes in the gloom under the pines, and neither was aware that he was watching them. He felt a sense of shame—but he stayed.

Jackie had stopped closely facing the man. It would not have surprised him if they had gone straight into each other's arms; he was almost disappointed that they had not. They began to talk, keeping their voices down. He sensed a strain in Jackie's. The man's was a low, even sound.

He felt a wild impulse to break in on them, and he took a stiff step forward before he realized the whisky had strung his nerves to a snapping tension. By doing it he would only have made a greater fool of himself. Worse, he would have aroused Jackie's antagonism, and her co-operation was essential. He must not lose the last of his self-control at the very time when his most pressing need was to regain it. He warned himself again: a slip now would be disastrous.

He stayed at the side of the black sedan, determined to wait once more, as long as he must.

The man in the dark was speaking. “. . . Name of Dorne, Jane Dorne. Ever hear of her?”

Jackie answered in a whisper. The noise of the wind in the trees blanketed her words.

"Came in the late afternoon mail. Old man saw it but . . . didn't register."

Jackie had lifted one hand to her lips. She spoke through her fingers, breathlessly and indistinguishably.

"No, not him," the man said next. "Nobody else. And nobody else will as long as I keep it out of sight. That's up to me—and you."

The man drew on a cigarette as he listened to Jackie's quick response. The momentary red glow was not bright enough to reveal his features.

"Sure . . . talk it over. Right now?"

Jackie's voice lifted a little, tight with fear. "No, not now. I can't tonight."

"Pretty important to you, isn't it? Got a date? Break it."

"Tomorrow," Jackie insisted. "Tomorrow sure. Call me."

The man dropped his cigarette, a gesture of finality, and stepped on it. "O.K. . . . Hold it that long, but no longer. Just don't forget I'm giving you a break, kid, a great big break."

Jackie stood still, her gaze following the man as he moved away. Instead of coming into Casablanca Street, the man went in the opposite direction and crossed a neighbor's yard toward the next street. A car started up. Its headlights shone between the cottages as it moved to the boulevard and turned north.

Once the man was gone Jackie's agitation broke loose. She pressed both palms to her cheeks; she stamped one foot in silent fury. She swung half around, as if to pull herself away from the grip of a hand in the darkness, and stared straight toward the eavesdropper she knew as Bart Redman.

This was not the first time he had spied on her, but for the first time he didn't care whether she had caught him at it. He was too intent on accomplishing his purpose to wonder what this cryptic exchange meant. It was ended, that was the important thing. Here was the opening he had been groping for.

"Jackie." He spoke in a low tone as he started doggedly toward her. "Ja——"

She turned suddenly again, ran up the exposed stairway to the door of her apartment, and banged in. She hadn't heard or seen him.

He frowned after her, realizing that because of this upset he must now be especially careful how he handled her—and himself as well.

He climbed the stairway, rapped once, and twisted the knob. The opening of the door caught Jackie in the act of pulling off her slip. Her dress hung across a chair. She grew still, her dark eyes rounded at him.

“Oh hello, Bart.”

She seemed at ease, as if nothing at all had happened. Either he had misjudged the incident below, or she was amazingly expert at concealing her feelings when she wished to conceal them. Perhaps it was a practiced skill in hiding from one man the nature of her relationship with another—or even the other's existence.

“Come on in, Bart, and——”

“Who was that?”

Even as he blurted the question he damned himself for asking it. It showed again how unmanageable his reactions had become. Why should he care who the other man was? He had known all along there were other men, attractive men, easy spenders and certainly younger. It wasn't jealousy that had driven him here. He hadn't come to accuse her but to sever the bond she had somehow put upon him. And he had made a bad beginning. With his first words he had dropped himself into the defensive.

Quite calmly, showing no resentment, Jackie began to answer, “He was——”

“Never mind, it doesn't matter.”

“—a friend. I have friends, quite a few. No need for you to look so burned up about it, is there?”

“Is your headache better?” he asked ironically.

“A lot better.” She smiled. “It's sweet of you to come. You were at the Blue Dolphin, weren't you, and they told you why I'd had to leave early.”

“For an important appointment, apparently. Can you spare a few minutes if you're not too busy?”

She had pulled her slip down and had come closer. Her hands pressed behind his shoulders as she lifted her mouth to his. He stiffened with resistance.

“My time, honey” —her lips moved softly as she murmured it— “is your time—any time.”

He startled himself by laughing at her. It was a harsh sound. She drew back, a childlike hurt in her eyes.

"What's so funny? You know it's true, Bart."

"It has been," he admitted, his voice edged. "I don't understand why you've given me so much of your time. But I'm through kidding myself. It hasn't meant anything to you. To me it has meant too damned much."

She stepped away, estimating him curiously and intensely. "Spoiling for trouble, aren't you? In that case, excuse me for a few minutes."

"Wait, Jackie." She had eluded him time and again the whole, endless evening. "I've already put it off too long. Don't——"

Still calmly, as if she hadn't heard, she had gone into the bathroom—had stepped behind the door, leaving it partly open.

"Jackie, we've got to have this out. Here and now. Have it out."
"Oh?"

There was neither surprise nor concern in her voice. Her coolness disturbed him—yet shouldn't he be glad of it? Perhaps it meant she might be easier to reason with than he had thought.

"I—I should never have fallen into this, Jackie."

This time she did not answer at all. There behind the half-open door she was stripping off all her clothing. He could not see her, but he pulled his gaze away and began moving about.

"I went off the rails," he said. "I can't explain it, not even to myself, but—it's an impossible thing, it's got to stop."

"But Bart, a big man like you, so upset? Don't be. Make yourself a drink, sweetie, and you'll feel——"

"I don't want a drink. Damn it, Jackie, come out of there. I can't talk to you when—— I've got to face you with this."

"In half a minute, Bart. . . . I don't see why you're so sore at me."

"I'm sore at myself, not you." It wasn't true. He *was* angry with her, fiercely angry, simply because she had happened to him. "I should have known how to handle this better, but I've never gone through anything else like it. I did everything wrong. If only I'd had sense enough to come clean with you in the first place—"

She had changed to red shorts and a thin white jersey shirt. Her feet were small in soft white moccasins. She was not—he repeated this to himself for the thousandth time, almost savagely—not quite pretty. Her tanned legs were sleek and straight but too thin. Girls

more beautiful than Jackie were to be seen every day on the beaches. Besides, there was something disturbingly wrong inside her. He knew it was there, although she kept it hidden like a disfiguring scar. It was some kind of perversity, an—unhealthiness. . . . Could that, in some strange way, be the answer to the puzzle of why she had had such a devastating effect on him? The deep-lying disquiet he had sensed in her and his desire to displace it with a new contentment given from within himself? . . . He didn't know. It was beyond his understanding.

"Well, Bart? Go ahead. What're you waiting for?"

"Jackie—— One thing I didn't tell you—— I'm married."

Her smile was faintly derisive. "I'm floored."

"Not happily but solidly married." He started. "You knew that? How?"

"You *act* married. Your wife's away, isn't she? It didn't matter to me, Bart."

"It damned well should have made a big difference to me. And there are other differences, too many of them. Our ages. You're not much more than half as old as I am. The whole thing has been—insane."

Her lips took on their sulky droop. "So now you've come to your senses and you want to get out of it."

"Listen. I've tried to figure the whole thing out the best way for both of us. This isn't the right place for you, here on the West Coast. It's slow, dull, too many old people doddering around. Miami, Miami Beach—that's where the excitement is, and higher salaries and bigger tips. You can have much more fun there—and find yourself a much better job."

He fumbled for his billfold, opened it, held banknotes toward her.

"I'll pay for your trip down, and your expenses until you find just the kind of job you'd really like to have."

She made no move to take the money, didn't even look to see how much it was. Her dark eyes were narrowed at him.

"I don't get this, Bart."

"It's simple enough. You've got to go away."

"Why?"

"Because——" He gestured hopelessly, shying away from the truth. "You simply can't stay here, that's all."

"And why can't I?"

"Jackie, you don't understand what you've done to me!"

Resentment hardened her face. "What *I've* done?"

"No, I don't mean that. The way I feel isn't your fault, or mine either—except that I shouldn't have let it bowl me over. But I did, and now—— As long as you're here——"

"What are you trying to tell me? That you're so crazy about me you can't trust yourself? That you're afraid to live in the same country with me?"

Her ridicule hurt; but to him it was far from ridiculous. "Yes, it's partly that."

She was smiling again, with a wry sort of sweetness. "But Bart—— We've gone out together a lot, and we've had lots of fun together, drinking and talking, but that's not so terribly serious, is it? A few kisses, nice good nights, but that's all. It isn't as if we'd been having a real hot affair, Bart. You don't owe me anything. So if I upset you so much, why don't you just stay away from me?"

"I've tried!" he said angrily. "I've tried and I kept coming back. But I'm not talking about that. There's a great deal more to it than you realize."

"Well then, maybe it would help if you just sat down and told me all about it."

He couldn't tell her, couldn't justify all his deceptions or reveal the danger he faced now. Sooner or later Doug was certain to bring her into their home—and how could he possibly face them together? It would be unbearably embarrassing. He could not count on his own ability to hide his humiliation or on Jackie's discretion then or afterward. Doug would be certain to find out what he had done; Doug would resent it deeply and despise him for it. Still worse, Doug's mother might suspect and nag it out of them; then he would never hear the last of it, and the result would be an everlastingly painful rift in the family. No; he could never let it go that far. The whole shameful business must be kept under cover at any cost.

"Jackie—— I can't explain. It's too late for that. I've bungled into something that can't be undone except in one way."

"By buying me off!"

It *was* the only solution. He was tied down to his business and his home. Doug's roots were also here. But Jackie hadn't been on the Gulf Coast very long—she had come from somewhere in the Middle

West only three months or so ago—and unlike them she could easily move away if she wished.

“Just tie a tag on me and ship me off!” she said caustically. “As simple as that, and no reasons given!”

“I said I’d make it well worth your while—give you the money you’ll need for the trip and all your expenses until——”

“If you think you can buy me out of here, Mr. Redman, you can think again.”

“But there’s nothing to hold you, Jackie! You can work and enjoy yourself anywhere. In a way I’m offering you a new job, anywhere you say. How much money do you want? I’ll pay you whatever——”

“Keep your money. I don’t need it. I’m not that kind. And it just so happens I *like* being right where I am.”

The enfolding warmth he had once found in her seemed never to have existed.

“I like it here very much, better than any place I’ve ever been, and I have no intention of giving it up.”

He was foundering and he did not know how to find his footing. The feeling was one he had never before experienced. He was accustomed to command. No job he had ever tackled had been too tough, no emergency he had ever faced had been too sudden or too big to bring under control—until now. The damnable thing about this girl was that she somehow stripped him of his resources and rendered him powerless. He was actually finding himself reduced to pleading with her.

“Jackie, I can’t possibly let you stay here!”

“Oh, can’t you! Well, you have nothing to say about it. Get that through your head. You haven’t got enough money in the bank to change my mind about that. I’m *staying*.”

He had thought she would bargain; he had not expected a flat refusal. It left him blankly groping. As long as she was determined to oppose the move there was no way he could force her to go.

“I think this is very damn funny.” Her voice cut at him. “There’s been something funny about you from the very start. You’re a salesman, you said, you peddle fancy groceries—but you’re hardly the type for it. You didn’t get that deep, all-over tan from taking orders for canned goods.”

Again she had made him ludicrous. He seized both her shoulders; and she lifted her head defiantly.

"You didn't get those strong, rough hands from pushing a pencil!" Quickly he released her.

"Just what have you been putting across on me, Mr. Redman?—if that's really your name. Just who *are* you?"

"Jackie, please listen——"

"I said I'm not leaving. And that's final."

Rage came up in him swiftly. She saw it and stood firm, challenging him.

"What's more, Mr. Redman, or whoever you are, I think I'm going to begin finding out just what you're trying to pull off here."

She could not have said anything more shattering. Her threat struck at the worst of his fears. The vindictive glitter in her eyes promised him she would actually do it.

His hands were already lifting when he realized how dangerously close he had slipped to the frayed end of his self-control. He was horrified by the violence of his reaction. He swung himself away; he grabbed blindly at the doorknob and slammed out.

On the dark landing he stopped, pulling in a long, deep breath. He had failed utterly to resolve the predicament of Jackie, but by the narrowest of margins he had saved himself from a calamitous act of desperation. In another second he might have struck her down with his fists. In another second after that he might have found himself crushing her throat in those "strong, rough" hands, crushing it until she was dead.

Chapter 3

She stood glaring at the door and listening to him going down the stairs, one thumping step after another.

The old fool! Did he imagine she cared how mixed up he was? Well, she didn't. She'd been nice to him, sure, but only because he'd been a convenience, a fill-in while Doug was away. She'd been about through with him anyhow. After tonight he would have been nothing but an old nuisance. So let him stew. It certainly wasn't *her* fault he'd gone off the deep end.

But she knew it meant more than that. Why hadn't he simply

dropped her and let the whole thing go? Because he was scared. He wanted her out of here because he was crazy-scared of something he couldn't even mention.

She had told him she'd find out what it was, and she intended to do just that. Not that she gave any part of a damn about the trouble *he* was in. He was plenty old enough to look out for himself. She had to look out for Jackie first, and she'd just thought of an important new angle—he might try again, some other way to get rid of her. He might have a trick up his sleeve in the shape of a big-time connection. Well, gawdammit, she wasn't going to stand for anybody fouling *her* up, not now, not when she had come so close to getting exactly what she was after. She was going to find out who he really was and exactly what this was all about.

She took up her cigarette case, the gold one Doug had given her, and slipped it into a pocket of her shorts. The noises of his leaving came up—his car door slamming, then the motor starting. As he backed around, the shine of his headlights passing her windows, she picked her keys off the coffee table. She went directly out then and ran down the stairs. When she reached her car he was swinging northward into the boulevard.

So he had spied on her tonight, had he! "Well, Mr. Redman, now it's my turn to spy on you."

From the erratic way he was driving she could tell how upset he was. Several times he started to pass another car, then saw he couldn't make it, and jammed himself back into line; and twice he ran through red lights without even seeing them. That was O.K. with her; he was too rattled to notice she was sticking right behind him.

By the time they had passed the Blue Dolphin, still heading north, she was settled confidently behind the wheel. She let him gain where the highway curved through a stretch of swampy subtropical jungle. How far was he going? It didn't matter; she meant to stay with him all the way.

The motels began again. They had gone almost thirty miles. The next town was Belle Loma, one of the choicest colonies on the Gulf Coast, and he was driving a little more slowly now. Belle Loma! She felt a new stir of excitement. This might turn into an even bigger discovery than she had thought.

The car ahead swung off the highway, then swung again into

Belle Loma Drive. A single line of costly homes stood along the landscaped strip between the drive and the water. This part of the town, called the Point, was the classiest of all. Since the first time she had seen it, she had felt a devouring envy of the people who lived here. They had Cadillacs and cabin cruisers; the parties they threw were glittery affairs, with dozens of top-drawer guests and the best caterers. . . . Envy them? No, not any more. Why should she? This was her kind of life, the kind she would actually be living soon, just as soon as her million-dollar plan had worked out. It *was* working out, and she wouldn't let anybody spoil it for her now, least of all this spooked-up old lover-boy who had had the quaint idea that she would jump at a few measly hundred. He just didn't know she was playing for a far bigger jackpot than that, and for keeps. He just didn't know Jackie.

His car was now the only one in sight, and it was slowing to make a turn into a driveway. With cunning quickness she swung to the left into a lane which, after only a hundred feet, ended in soft sand and thickets of sea oats. The houses on both sides were dark. She switched off the headlights, slid out of her car, ran back to the Drive and on—quietly in her moccasins, without being heard or seen.

The man she knew as Bart Redman had stopped in a two-stall carport alongside a rich-looking, L-shaped house. She watched him expectantly while he turned to a side entrance. She meant to give him a few minutes, then walk in on him—startle him out of his wits. She already had the upper hand and every intention of making the most of it.

But after using his key and putting it into his hip pocket, he stood there a moment, reluctant for some reason to go in. He struck his fists together and kicked at the door mat, and a sound broke from his throat, a sound of wrathful disgust. Wasn't that too bad? she thought acridly. He was burned to a crisp because he couldn't get her to go away, and that was just too damn bad for him.

Abruptly he started off, following a flagstone walk toward the water. She shifted her position, gazing after him, calculating his intention. Turning along the beach, he became a silhouette moving against the flickering background of the Gulf. He walked rapidly, as if trying to work off the angry tensions in him, and in less than a minute he was out of sight.

"That's just fine! Better make it a good *long* walk, Mister so-called Redman. Because when you get back I'll have you right where I want you."

She went into the driveway. That dented, scratched-up sedan of his didn't belong at a place as gorgeous as this. It was part of the false front he had put up in order to fool her, like all the lies he'd told her about himself. He'd had her fooled for a time all right, but now this certain Mr. Bart Redman was in for the jolt of his life.

She turned to the side door. Better and better. He had left it ajar. At her touch it swung inward. There was a hall, dark rooms on both sides, a night light glowing at the base of a curving stairway. And nobody inside, nobody at all. The way was wide open.

She smiled with growing assurance in herself and boldly entered the house.

The first wall switch she snapped turned on the lights in the hallway. She nodded knowingly, amused by what she saw. The colors were nice enough, cool sea-green and white, but the rest was what she might have expected. The furniture was old-fashioned mixed pieces showing long use. (Not to her liking at all; as soon as she moved into *her* place on the Point she was going to have it done completely over in the latest moderne.) So far so good. Already she had learned that the people who lived here were the conservative, well-settled family type and probably deadly stuffy.

A telegram lay open on a table beside the archway to the living room. Without hesitating she picked it up and read it.

"'Matthew Bradford,'" she began aloud—and stopped, the smile flickering off her mouth.

Her eyes went round with a shock of realization. The wire had been sent this morning from North Lake, Florida, to Matthew Bradford on Belle Loma Drive, and it was signed *Doug*.

"Well-l!"

The message said: *Job going ahead on schedule. Have wasted five weeks here doing nothing. Starting back right now arriving some time tonight. Must have serious talk about future arrangements sooner the better.*

"Well, well-l!"

She slapped the telegram back on the table with mingled elation and resentment. Just inside the archway she found another wall

switch. A scattering of floor lamps showed her a long room cluttered with an awkward arrangement of more mismatched pieces of furniture, including an antiquated radio-phonograph and a massive television console. Her narrowed eyes quickly found a framed photograph sitting on the grand piano.

She walked straight to it, beginning to smile again. It was a formal portrait of a handsome young man with dark hair and a sensitive mouth, taken some years ago.

"Hello-o, my love. Imagine finding you here, Duggie!"

She laughed, and the sharp mockery of it cut through the quiet.

She circled the room, moving quickly with the excitement of discovery. There wasn't any need, she told herself, to snoop through the rest of the house—this much had brought more than enough to light. It was almost too rich. It was real-l juicy. And one thing about it was certain—she had absolutely nothing to fear from this Mr. Matthew Bradford who had passed himself off on her under the phony name of Bart Redman. Not now! From here on in it would be Jackie who called the tune.

Then she saw the telephone on a desk near the piano, and a new idea crossed her mind like a flying spark.

She seated herself at the desk possessively, entirely unafraid of a possible interruption. She looked into the directory, found the number she wanted, and dialed it.

"Yes?" It was a tired, unhappy voice that answered, a young woman's.

"May I speak with Mr. Hugh Phillips, please?"

She asked it in a deliberately lofty tone that implied no one could have a superior claim to Mr. Hugh Phillips's attention. Her smile became derisive because the woman at the other end of the line—Hugh's wife Cee, of course—did not answer again. There was a rattling noise as the other phone was put down. Then the tired voice again, faintly: "Hugh? Telephone. Take it downstairs, please?"

Hugh's answer came from another bedroom. "Why should I? I'll take it right there."

She heard his footfalls as he came in, then the sound of a door closing.

"Hugh darling, can you talk?"

He made a displeased sound. "I warned you not to call me here."

"But sweetie, I can't see you tonight, so there's no other way, and this just can't wait."

"Where are you?"

"You always ask so many questions, darling. Just listen while I tell you——"

"You said you'd be busy. Are you? Busy with what?"

"Something big, Hugh, real big for both of us. Are you alone?"

"Yes, she's left the room."

"And she's probably listening in over an extension."

"That's unfair. Cee isn't like that."

"Oh no? Well, let's not waste time talking about *her*. This is important. I know you've been up a tree about money, Hugh, but you can stop worrying now."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll have all the money you need, and right away. I'll get it for you."

"What? Where?"

"Oh-h——" She was stringing it out, enjoying his surprise and confusion. "From a friend."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"From a man named Bradford," she said airily.

It stopped him for a moment. "Doug?"

She laughed. "I'm talking about *money*, darling."

"Not Matt!"

"That's his name—Matt Bradford."

"You don't even know him!"

"Oh yes I do, Hugh darling. I know him pret-ty well, in a special sort of way."

He was tightly silent again. "I don't understand this at all! Where do you get the idea you can borrow money from—him?"

"Who said anything about borrowing it?"

"What? How else can you get it?"

"I'll just ask for it, that's all.

"Ask for it!"

"And you won't have to pay any of it back either, not a cent. Hugh darling, it's going to be perfectly dreamy. As soon as I have the money we'll go to New York together——"

"Stop it, Jackie. I don't know what you've gotten into, and neither

do you. You can't put the bite on Matt Bradford. Nobody can. He won't hold still for it."

"Oh, but he will."

"Dammit, I know what I'm talking about. He's told me how he feels, how he's willing to pay for what he wants, but—— In his business there are plenty of chances for kickbacks, padded contracts, outright bribery, that sort of thing, but he won't stand for it. He'll blow up if you so much as suggest——"

"Oh, I don't think so." She said it with superlative self-confidence. "I know just how to handle *him*."

"No! For God's sake, don't——"

"Next time you see me, darling," she assured him gaily, "I'll be loaded with dough and off we'll go."

"Jackie, don't! Don't even start anything as wild as that. Matt would soon find out why you wanted the money. That would really wreck me with him. It would wreck my last chance to get his contracts and all——"

"There's nothing to be so excited about, Hugh."

"This means a damned lot more to me than you realize! Where are you? I've got to talk to you. You've got to see it's entirely too damned risky even to try——"

"Just relax, sweetie. Just leave this whole thing to me. Simmer down for a minute, won't you, and listen?"

"I don't want any money you might be able to get hold of that way. I need money all right, but not that bad. I'll raise it myself somehow, so don't even think——"

She became the capable helpmeet. "You've already tried everywhere, and you know it's no go. For me it will be so easy. Then, as I said, we'll go off to New York together, and we'll stay until we get the lawsuit all worked out. When it's all settled we'll come back together, and then there won't be any trouble about a divorce. Isn't it the loveliest idea you ever heard of?"

"No," he said bluntly. "That's entirely the wrong way to go about it. People would talk their heads off about us."

"Hugh darling, you know it will have to be soon anyway. Your divorce, I mean, and our marriage. We just can't wait much longer, because then they really *would* talk."

A thudding noise came over the line—his fist banging the telephone table. "We can't work it as fast as all that!"

"But we can, Hugh—in fact we're going to, just the way I've said." She went on quietly, "We mustn't quarrel now, darling, with everything working out so perfectly for us. Anyway, there's nothing for you to do—except start packing. And get two reservations on a plane for tomorrow morning. Be ready to leave early, because I've got it all-l set."

He blurted something.

"Good night, Hugh, my sweet. See you soon, very soon."

The phone was spluttering furiously when she disconnected.

Hugh's protests hadn't bothered her at all. The idea of getting money from Matt Bradford had been a surprise, of course, but he'd soon adjust to it; he'd soon be laughing with her about it and enjoying it as hugely as she was enjoying it in prospect.

There was just one little formality to be gone through, a little talk with Mr. Bradford. She would tell him she had changed her mind, and she would make him give her all the money she wanted—the money Hugh needed—but without once mentioning who it was really for. She actually would leave, too—but she wouldn't go alone, she'd go with Hugh, and before long they would come back together—to stay.

All this she had handled shrewdly and beautifully, she thought. She had been as careful as an artist creating a masterpiece. None of the other men she knew were even aware she had been seeing Hugh. It would come as an eye popper to them all right, when it was announced that she had become the new Mrs. Hugh Phillips of Belle Loma Point.

She settled herself luxuriously in an easy chair, made an elaborate gesture of using her gold cigarette case with the built-in lighter, and began waiting for the return of Doug Bradford's father.

She wasn't quite certain when the feeling insinuated itself upon her that she was being watched.

She sat up, frowning at the casement windows facing the Gulf. The bamboo blinds were not lowered. The glass was wet with a film of salt spray. Because the lamps in the room were bright, she could not see even a glimmer of moonlight; there was only blank blackness outside. But someone was out there. She sensed it. Someone was peering in at her—someone who might have overheard her conversation with Hugh.

She rose, more annoyed than fearful. There must be an outside door on the Gulf side, she thought. Going into the hallway, she found it and opened it. She pushed at the screen and stepped out, gazing around.

"Mr. Bradford, perhaps?"

No one answered. There was nobody out here. She peered in the direction Matt Bradford had gone and saw nothing on the deserted beach except the silvered waves smoothing themselves.

Back inside, the door closed, she returned to her chair. Nothing could dislodge her now. She refused to be afraid, not of Matt Bradford, not of Hugh's half-baked objections, not of anything. She held all the aces in this deal. Suddenly, even sooner than she had counted on it, everything she craved was within her grasp. She meant to take it and keep it. She couldn't let herself turn squeamish now over something as trivial as a creepy feeling or——

A noise. She wasn't sure she had heard it. Had a door opened and closed—the side door she had used when entering the house? Had someone come in?

There was no other sound, no footstep.

Well, what if somebody *had* stepped in? She hadn't heard a car stopping, so if it was anybody at all it would have to be Matt Bradford back from his walk, and she was more than ready for *him*.

She returned to the hallway. The side door was standing halfway open. Had she closed it behind her? She couldn't remember. Maybe the wind——

She lifted her head, challenging her own misgivings, and called, "Mr. Bradford?"

Again there was no answer.

What *was* this? Frowning, she went down the hallway. She pushed the door shut, taking no pains to be quiet about it, and turned back. Then, just opposite the first room on the left, she came to a taut standstill.

The moonlight slanting into the windows of that room shone on something white. It was the kitchen. And someone was in there. She could just barely make out that somebody was standing in the darkness a few feet back from the open door.

"Well, Mr. Bradford, did you enjoy your stroll?"

The black figure stood motionless and soundless.

"Surprised to see me here, Mr. Bradford? I can imagine! Well,

you're in for an even bigger surprise. I hope you'll like it. You wanted to talk things out? That's just what we're going to do right now."

The figure moved forward quietly, without speaking.

"Oh, stop acting like a scared rabbit!"

She reached inside the door and slid her hand over the wall in search of a switch. She had not yet touched it when she saw the first dark glitter of the knife.

A hand sprang to her shoulder before she could recoil. It gripped hard, jerked her forward. The knife slashed down. The burn of it cut across her left cheek and streaked to her breast. She tried to scream. It was a gagging sound; the knife had already struck again, into her throat.

The force of it knocked her sprawling into the hall. She fell heavily on her back and tried to roll away, but she was helplessly pinned down. The knife was stabbing into her body again and again. Her arms wouldn't lift. She couldn't stop the knife. She—couldn't—stop it. Under the swift, savage pounding of the blade she could do nothing but submit.

Chapter 4

Matthew Bradford had started off almost an hour ago, quietly, so as not to attract the attention of the Phillipses next door. He had done what he had had to do, and he had turned back as soon as possible. Every inch of the way he had carried with him the dread that Doug might reach home before him. When he swung the black sedan into the carport he felt almost sick with relief to see that the house was still entirely dark as he had left it.

He switched off the headlamps and the ignition and gave the Phillips place a cautious look. Although it was past eleven his neighbors had not yet retired for the night. Lamps were burning upstairs, and he could see into the downstairs corner room which was Mrs. Cooper's. Aunt Saralee often called to him from her window when he arrived and held him there for a few minutes of chit-chat. Tonight, thank Heaven, she wasn't in sight; apparently she was lying

down. Celia, trim and tawny in pink pajamas, was sitting straight-backed beside the bed as if in earnest conversation with her aunt. He had seen Cee at once, with a twinge of apprehension, but she had not looked up; his return had gone unnoticed.

As he loosened his hold on the steering wheel he became aware again of the stickiness on his hands. It brought a new surge of revulsion. He used his handkerchief on his palms and fingers, then to rub and wipe the wheel in the dark until it felt smooth and dry. That was good enough for now. In the morning he could finish cleaning the car. There was a far more important job waiting to be done inside the house.

As he pushed himself out of the car, he stumbled. Fatigue was on him like a sandbag across his shoulders. He could not stop remembering the incredible rubbery looseness of Jackie's body in his arms. He was rid of it, but that had been only the first step. He could not know how much or how little time he had for the rest. Doug was already overdue; Doug might show up at any minute.

He went in by way of the side door. The night-light glowing at the base of the stairs showed him, there on the hallway floor just outside the kitchen, where Jackie had fallen, a great dark agglutination.

He snapped the switch in the kitchen and shrank back, his eyes closing for a moment. The knife lay just inside, the whole of it smeared with a darkening film. There were thick blots on the cork-tiled floor and ugly spurtings on the white doorframe. He moaned in despair, seeing all this in the light for the first time. So horribly much of it! With what seemed a deliberate vengefulness, the girl had fouled his home with the signs of her dying. And his person as well. More of her blood, almost dry, had soiled his shirt and his slacks.

He could at least be thankful that the kitchen windows faced away from the carport and the Phillips house, and that they were screened from his neighbors on the opposite side by tall bushes of flowering hibiscus. He could work unseen; and, exhausted as he was, he must work fast.

He ran the cold water, first to dissolve the red crumbs off his hands, then to soak a plastic sponge. He began with the connecting door. The stuff did not come off easily. It smeared and ran. Each time he rinsed the sponge, the sink took on a spreading stain of its own. In trying to hurry, he left spatters; hurrying only gave him

more mopping up to do. The cork tile, being absorbent, resisted his hardest scrubbing. At this rate, unless Doug had been seriously delayed, he could not hope to do a thorough job. At best he might get most of it off, but he would have to come back to it later, at the earliest chance, and meanwhile hope that no one would notice.

Each time he turned he came upon more marks where there had been none before. He found himself working feverishly, helter-skelter—at the sink, on the doorframe, next on the floor to soak up the drippings, then on the door frame again—but finally he was making headway. Back at the sink to use scouring powder on the porcelain, then the spray. Another look at the floor. It was almost all right. The hallway, the worst of it, was still to be done, but then he would be finished, at least for now.

He was filling a pan with clean water when he suddenly remembered. The knife!

When first entering the kitchen he had seen the knife lying where it had fallen. It wasn't there now.

He stared down blankly, then dropped to his knees. After a moment he saw it. It was lying in shadow, in the toe space under a cabinet. While moving quickly back and forth he had inadvertently kicked it aside. He shrank with the fear of what questions might have followed, what unanswerable questions, if he had overlooked it entirely and someone else had found it.

He brought it up. The stuff on it had dried to a crust. Cleaning it would take precious time. He might better get rid of it—let it go out with the garbage. But it was an exceptionally fine knife, hollow-ground and razor-sharp; it might be one of Beth's favorite implements. After her return home she might miss it and ask about it and comment everlastingly on its mysterious disappearance.

Turning to the sink with it, he heard a car in the street.

He stiffened, listening to the car as it turned into the driveway.

He dropped the knife into a drawer and flung himself at the light switch. The sudden darkness slapped him across the eyes. He groped his way out and sprang across the slippery hazard on the hallway floor. Moving with frantic rapidity, almost without conscious decision, he snatched a white throw rug from the base of the stairs, quickly brought it back and spread it out.

The blot covered over now, he straightened, staring down at him-

self. His shirt and slacks were wet with sweat and splashed water, contaminated beyond any possible explanation.

The car had already stopped in the port beside his own. With a gesture of forced abandonment he hurried to the forward vestibule beyond the stairs. His only escape from the house was the door that opened toward the beach.

Chapter 5

For Doug Bradford this was the end of a long pull, but not the end of a long day. The bad part of it was about to begin. He expected to go through a rough session with his father about the telegram he had sent from North Lake this morning and the further decision he had made while driving back home.

It had been a hard, hot trip, but it hadn't tired him; he was too keyed up to feel tired. This night would be a big one in his life, that was for sure—a turning point; or, rather, a breaking point. He had been a long time working up to it, but finally here it was. *Brace yourself, boy. Go on in now and get it over.*

He combed his hair with his fingers, slid out of his open convertible, and pulled two traveling cases after him. His father, he saw, had been using one of the company cars today, but he didn't stop to wonder about that particularly. He pushed open the side door of the house, slid one case into the hallway, and went in carrying the other.

"Hey, Dad! . . . Dad?"

Strange, he thought. A minute ago, when turning off the drive, he had seen light shining from the kitchen windows. But nobody was here now.

He walked forward along the hallway, crossing the white throw rug—that rug didn't belong there, did it?—and left both cases at the foot of the stairs. Turning on lights as he went, he gazed around with a puzzled frown. There was a peculiar feeling in the house, as if something had gone wrong; but there seemed to be no definite reason for it. With the exception of that small white rug, which al-

ways before had been placed at the base of the stairway, everything seemed in order.

There on the table lay the telegram he had sent. *Well, whattaya know, it's still whole.* His father hadn't ripped it to bits in a rage. That wasn't too reassuring, of course, but it was something.

His next move took him across the living room to the desk where the telephone sat. He dialed a number and waited, his frown deepening, while the distant bell sounded repeatedly. He counted twelve rings before he disconnected, puzzled and disappointed because Jackie had not answered.

He climbed the stairs, lugging one traveling case along and leaving the other until later. After going into his own room for a moment and finding it just as he had left it five weeks ago, he went on to his father's . . . No, not there either; the bed had not been touched.

An amusing thought crossed his mind. Was it possible that while Mother was away, his father, left all alone and on the loose, had— Well, no, hardly. Matt Bradford's friends referred to him as a "big, rugged, outdoor type," but his son couldn't quite imagine him turning playful and certainly not romantic.

Doug returned to the stairs, disturbed because things were not going as he had anticipated. Jackie knew he was due back tonight, and he had thought surely she would wait for him. Also, it was fairly remarkable for his father to be out of the house at this hour. Usually Matt Bradford spent the evening in his downstairs study, reading—surveys, or his project managers' reports, or engineering magazines, but never a book—and regularly turned in at ten in order to get a standard eight hours of sleep before rising at six. The telegram should have been enough to keep him on hand tonight, but somehow it hadn't had that effect.

The whole reason behind his message had been to prepare his father for a showdown. It had said in blunt words. "Must have serious talk, the sooner the better"; and besides, he had committed raw insubordination by walking out on the North Lake bridge job. So what did this mean? Was it possible his father had decided to ignore the whole thing? Not likely! Maybe something important had come up, but even so he wasn't to be ignored this time, or roared down, or put off. That serious talk was going to be had—and the sooner the better. He'd wait up, and as long as necessary.

He was halfway down the stairway when the click of a latch

surprised and stopped him. The front door opened and his father came in. Matt Bradford was wearing navy blue swimming trunks.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hello, Doug."

This was his welcome after a fairly long absence. Just a hello—no handshake, much less a warm show of affection. He knew the affection was there, deep and steadfast, but his father had always been hesitant and awkward about showing it. Besides, there had been serious differences between them these past several months, differences sharpening into pointed antagonisms. Doug had expected a cool greeting; but as he waited for a word or two more he sensed a peculiar new quality in his father's attitude. It was a kind of guarded tenseness—wariness.

"First time I ever knew you to go for a swim after dark, Dad."

"Took a walk on the beach. Damned hot day in town. Good cool breeze off the Gulf." His father was staring oddly, searching his face. "You're pretty late. Car trouble?"

"No, no trouble," and he meant to explain no further than that.

It must have been a very long walk, he thought. Matt Bradford was an ungainly but powerfully built man who could work all day long, if he chose, with the toughest of his construction crews. Tonight he appeared profoundly tired, so tired as to be almost ill with it. Doug thought his father looked as if he'd taken a bad beating.

"Anything wrong with you, Dad?"

"Wrong? Of course not. Feel fine."

It wasn't true, Doug told himself uneasily. His father was shaky and trying to conceal it. This might be the effect of his telegram, but he didn't think it was only that. Perhaps some other upset, from some other source, was mixed in with it. If so, he'd better be extra careful. Otherwise his father might suddenly feel pushed too far, as he so often did; then they would go into another of their loud, futile blowoffs. When Matt Bradford set himself against something, he stayed dead set against it forever; and Doug earnestly wanted his father's understanding and approval.

He said nothing further until they had gone into the living room and taken chairs facing each other.

"The job's humming right along, Dad. Gregg's living with it night and day, right there on the spot in his trailer—the best damn bridge super in the South. They had the main cables spun on sched-

ule, then speeded up. The raising gang was swinging the third section into place when I left. They'll get it done in jig time for you, with a nice bonus. But I guess I can't tell you anything about it you don't already know."

He had purposely said "they," not "we"; but apparently his father hadn't noticed.

"Gregg keeps me up to date," Matt Bradford said. "On progress, I mean. His reports haven't mentioned you."

"There wasn't anything worth mentioning for me to do. You've got an A-1 bunch of bridgemen there. They work together with their cranes and wrenches and driftpins like the Philharmonic under Toscanini. The best help I could give them was to keep out of their way."

He thought his dressing-down would begin now; but it didn't. Matt Bradford squirmed in his chair; that was all.

During the unnatural silence Doug re-estimated his father. Matt Bradford was an earth-mover, a man absorbed in the most realistic and practical of businesses. The Bradford Construction Company's projects, sometimes carried on in co-operation with other companies and often extending far outside the state, were to move mountains, to dam rivers, to build highways, airfields, railroads, power plants. What he did could be considered the very essence of American expansion and progress. On a huge scale he created, using machines which were mechanical mastodons—power shovels, trenchers, sheep-foot tampers, tankdozers, draglines, some of them capable of clawing house-size holes out of the earth. Yet his first, most basic tool must be an exceptional knack for handling men—men of highly specialized training and experience, some of them as temperamental as prima ballerinas, who risked serious injury or death every day. Doug Bradford's father possessed that talent; and there lay the kernel of irony in the difficulties between them. In the field, Matt Bradford could organize and command his crews, from veteran supers down to the rawest hooker-on, but he could not bring this genius home with him. He had been less than expert in handling his own son.

"When you sent me up to North Lake, Dad—— It wasn't because I was needed there. Partly, just partly, you were still hoping I'd catch the fever, the same fever that makes you live and breathe construction. Well, as I've said before, I seem to have a natural immunity to it. You've had it in your heart for me to do the same

big things you've done, and I've tried. But it's no good trying any more. Let's quit kidding ourselves, Dad. I'll never be another Matt Bradford. It simply isn't in me."

"What *is* in you, then?"

Blunt, direct, and skeptical. That was better, closer to normal. Still, Doug felt his honest answer would be incomprehensible to a man who had mistakenly believed for so long that a son must inevitably be a second edition of his father.

"Writing."

"What?"

"I want to write."

"Write?"

"Dad, you'll never understand this, because—— Well, you're tuned to big-scale operations, but I take naturally to little, intangible things, like ideas and words. I know I can write. Not heavy literature, but just light entertainment for the magazines. Novels later, when I've grown up to it, but first just stories. It's hard to tell you what I want to do. Dad, because it's the kind of thing you've never read."

His father was standing, glowering down. "Whatever you do, you'll have to make a living at it, remember that."

"I'm not asking you to support me. I've saved some money, enough to give it a fair trial. I'll be strictly on my own."

"I suppose it's useless to remind you you're throwing away a fine future, one that—that another young man would give his right arm to have—including a thousand starving writers."

He came to his feet. "Yes, Dad, it's useless."

His father seemed suddenly overwrought. "I'm damned if you realize what you're doing. Think, Doug! Think it over some more, then—then we'll talk about it some other time."

"There's nothing left to talk about really. I've made up my mind." He stood there being glared at. "And that's not all I've made up my mind about."

"So? What else?"

"This goes back to your real reason for sending me off on the North Lake job. You were giving me a chance to—let's say simmer down. To cool off on Jackie."

His father looked quickly away, then turned back, tensely on guard again. "That was it, was it?"

"Yes. I knew it at the time. I could have quit then and there, but I decided to play along with it in order to show you and Mother—and myself too—that I mean it. That it would last. Well, it has lasted. Your plan didn't work, except to prove it's the real thing."

"You—you don't know enough about the girl!"

"I think I do. I've analyzed it as well as anyone can analyze something as deep and strong as my feeling for Jackie. There are risks involved, I admit that. There's something strange about her—a strange hardness inside—but that's only because she's had a damned rough time getting along on her own. She's bitter, always ready to retaliate in case she gets hurt; and she instinctively protects herself against getting hurt again. Once she's learned you won't hurt her, the tendency toward cruelty disappears. Then something else takes its place, something I can't quite define. Warmth and sweetness, yes, but it's much more than that. It's something—elemental, something that's the very essence of a woman, except that most women don't have it. Know her? Yes, well enough to love her."

This *would* bring on the big explosion. He was ready for it; but again, strangely, it didn't come. His father was staring through him at nothing.

"Dad, you haven't even listened!"

"I don't want to hear this! It's—it's no good, Doug. Forget her!"

"How can you say that when you've never even met her?"

Now his father reacted with a vehemence that rocked him.

"I said forget her! You don't understand how—how crazy——" Momentarily inarticulate, Matt Bradford tossed his arms. "Doug! Listen. Just forget her—for your own sake, forget you ever saw her!"

Matt Bradford stalked from the room, his bare feet thudding against the floor.

"I won't even try to forget her, Dad. I'm going to ask her to marry me."

Angrily he held himself still until his father had disappeared up the stairs and the door of the master bedroom had banged shut. The understanding he had hoped to reach seemed impossibly remote. He had come up against an insurmountable barrier, and he couldn't even see it, he didn't know what it was. . . . All right then. If there was one trait he had in common with his father, it was stubborn determination. He had set a straight course for himself and he damned well meant to stay on it.

He turned back to the telephone, frowning, and dialed Jackie's number again. His sense of expectancy was so sharpened that while waiting he noticed trivial details—that the directory had been left lying open, even that the alphabetical index printed at the top of the page was *Pet* . . . After two long, empty minutes his expression had become one of hurt bewilderment.

Why didn't she answer? Where was she?

Chapter 6

It had taken him a long time to fall asleep and now he was awake again. His bedroom was as dark as the night outside the open windows; the moon had long since immersed itself in the Gulf. The glowing dial of the bedside clock read twenty after three.

At first he thought it was a stirring of the palms that had awakened him; but the wind had died away. The sound seemed to be inside the house, downstairs—a kind of rubbing noise, quiet and persistent. On the other hand, it could be outdoors. Raccoons prowled about all night and with their almost-human hands tried to pry the covers off the garbage cans. Whatever it might be, he told himself it wasn't worth bothering about. He punched his pillow and sank his head into it, ordering himself to go back to sleep.

When he looked mistily at the clock again it was almost a quarter of four. The noise was still going on. It *was* inside the house. He muttered what the devil and sat up in bed, intending to go down and see what it was. Just then it stopped.

O.K. You've had a rough day and a damned disappointing evening. Give yourself a break, boy. Blank it all out for a while.

Now he heard someone moving about downstairs. The sounds were—stealthy. The possibility of a burglar seemed unlikely—but it was just as unlikely that his father would be up and about at this hour.

He groped his way to the bedroom door. As he put his hand on the knob someone began coming up the stairs—someone taking pains to be as soundless as possible. The almost inaudible feet came up to the landing, then along the upper hall, and slowly passed his door.

"Dad?" he called without opening it.

Abruptly the sounds stopped. That was the way, he thought, that a man caught in a guilty act would freeze.

"Yes, Doug?"

"You all right?"

"Couldn't sleep. Thought a glass of warm milk might help. . . . Good night now."

"Night, Dad."

No longer trying to be quiet, his father went into the master bedroom and closed the door.

He ran his fingers through his hair and sat again on the edge of his bed, disturbed by the feeling he had had, ever since coming home tonight, that something had gone wrong here. Matt Bradford's leaden fatigue, his attitude of wariness, his moments of peculiar abstraction followed by hair-trigger impatience, his sleeplessness since—none of these was entirely natural and all of them hinted that something unusually disturbing had happened. Doug had already asked about it twice, and his father had twice denied it. He knew it would do no good to ask again, but he was fairly certain now that some sort of crisis had occurred and that his father wanted to keep it hidden from him.

He smoked a cigarette in the dark, thinking and waiting. It was ten minutes past four when he rose again. Opening the bedroom door, he stood listening. He did not know whether his father had fallen asleep by now, but there was no reason he shouldn't also go downstairs if he liked—for a glass of warm milk.

He went down and back into the kitchen and snapped on the light. His puzzlement grew. If his father had used a pan to warm milk on the stove, and a glass, he had also washed them afterward, toweled them and put them away—which was also unlike a man who never knew where to find anything he wanted in the kitchen and whose wife often complained of the clutter he left behind him.

There was a peculiar faint odor in here, an unpleasant one which Doug could not identify. A sense of dampness, too, as if a great deal of water had been used. The floor, or most of it—chiefly the part near the door—was wet.

Gazing about, uneasily curious, he saw that one of the cabinet drawers had not been completely closed. He pulled it open. In it lay an assortment of kitchen gadgets of the kind his mother doted on buying and rarely used. He didn't know what most of them were

good for, but he noticed one item that seemed out of place—a knife.

Two droplets of water were clinging to the knife blade. It had been used and washed but not thoroughly dried. Taking it up, he saw that it had not been thoroughly cleaned either—there was a dark line of something across the steel where the blade joined the handle of black bone. He briefly admired the keenness and quality of the knife, then put it back and closed the drawer.

About to leave the kitchen with the riddle unanswered, he halted. There on the hallway floor was another area of wetness. When coming into the house this evening, he remembered, it was at this same spot that he had seen the white throw rug. It was no longer there. The position of the rug had been changed again.

He went along the hall, sensing now an odd need for quiet, and found the rug in its old place at the base of the stairs.

It seemed very unimportant. Yet there must have been a reason why his father had moved the rug back, particularly at this unlikely hour of the morning.

Possibly these little signs pointed to something much bigger. They might have something to do with the upset his father had suffered, which in turn had rebounded on him hard enough to wreck his immediate hope of reaching an accord. That certainly made it his own concern, and he had a right to know what it was. Still, these were such trivial things—just wet places on the floor and a rug shifted from here to there and back again.

He shrugged over it. That keyed-up feeling had left him; he felt let down now, confused, really bushed.

The hell with it, he decided, and went back upstairs to bed.

Chapter 7

At eight-thirty Doug Bradford was sitting uneasily on a corner of the desk in the living room, the telephone at his ear, listening to the intermittent purr of the ringing signal.

This was the fourth time he had dialed Jackie's number this morning. He had first called her as soon as he had piled out of bed. After showering he had tried again; and again after shaving; and again after

dressing. He didn't understand this. Not there late last night when he had told her to expect him. Still not there early this morning. What was he to think?

He went out the side door, and as he was getting into his convertible a girl's voice called.

"Hey, Doug, hi-i! Welcome home!"

He swallowed a small groan, looking across the hedge, and tried to make his response sound as glad. Caryl Phillips, Hugh's kid sister, a breezy little redhead who lived just down the Drive with her parents, was sitting at a table in the patio with Celia. Both were tidily put together, spare and energetic. They were dressed for another hot day, Caryl in cool green shorts and blouse, Cee in blue. He answered that he was certainly glad to be back, but he had to rush now and he would see them again soon.

"Hey, wait, Doug." Caryl had bounced up and was hurrying toward him with her gamin face all alight, while Cee stayed in her chair looking preoccupied and a good deal less happy than usual. "It's been a long time. Won't you have coffee with us?"

He needed coffee, but not right now and not with Caryl. Her natural effervescence was hard to take at times; often, instead of stimulating him, as she probably meant it to do, it was so at odds with his own mood that it depressed him. He felt that effect already, just seeing her there so glowing with eagerness, and he was already too dejected. Besides that—

Caryl and her parents had moved to the Point from Palmport several years ago. Doug had dated her innumerable times, and it had begun turning into one of those taken-for-granted matches—"Doug and Caryl," always "Doug and Caryl" together. He had changed that. These past several months he had had very little time for Caryl but a great deal for Jackie.

"I really am in a hurry, Caryl." But he shouldn't tear away too abruptly. "Still like your new job?"

"Love it!" As a kind of second-string photographer, she covered the Gulf beaches for the *Palmport Tribune*. "Pictures of tourists and fish mostly, but once in a while something more exciting pops up."

He turned to Celia. "Kids off to school, Cee?"

Cee said, "Um," and swallowed coffee.

"How have you been?" This small talk must be gone through. He

liked these good neighbors of his, although he was itching to get away. "And Aunt Saralee?"

Cee shook her short-cropped head. "She's not too well, Doug. Tires very easily. Last night she took the children out to dinner, and the driving was too much of an effort. Dr. Draker says she must have three or four days of complete rest in bed or she might have another attack."

Doug said the expected things, but he said them sincerely; Aunt Saralee had won a snug place in his affections. He promised to look in at her soon and added as he turned away, "Hugh's all right, I hope."

"Condition normal," Cee answered quietly.

By that she probably meant Hugh was still abed with a hangover.

"Well——" he said. "See you soon."

Caryl walked beside him to his car. "Doug, it's really nice having you back. I was going to write to you today. I've something to tell you."

"Well?"

"You know Jack Harmsworth. He and I have been friends for years, casually—then all of a sudden something happened." She lifted her left hand to show him her engagement ring.

For this he had been utterly unprepared. He felt a sense of loss as sudden as the chop of an ax. It shocked and bewildered him—yet, after all, what else could he have expected?

He found himself talking volubly in order to cover his consternation. He said it all with too much enthusiasm, and Caryl thanked him quietly for his good wishes; then she stood there watching him with a peculiar wistfulness in her face as he backed his car into the Drive.

It's a damned strange thing, he thought as he swung off without looking back. *Caryl is the traditional girl next door—plus*. Everything about Caryl was good, the very best. Letting her go could have been the biggest mistake of his life. Well, it was too late now—he'd lost her, and by his own choice. Anyway, it was a damned peculiar thing how, every moment he had been with Caryl, he had wanted only to get away and find Jackie.

It was much too early in the day—the Blue Dolphin didn't open until noon—but he slowed as he passed, looking for Jackie's hardtop in the parking lot.

It wasn't there.

He drove on, southward on Gulf Boulevard between the rows of motels, watching the approaching cars and hoping to see hers. The sun, beginning to take on its summer intensity, was stinging hot on his face and arms. The familiar scene felt empty. The flat, narrow key with its low, pastel-tinted buildings, the parched palms and needle-shedding pines thirsting for the rains soon to spill down daily, the limitless openness, the vivid picture-postcard sky, the pervading atmosphere of torpid relaxation and recreation, the motorboats ripping across the satin of the bay, the mocha-brown fishermen in swimming trunks surf casting waist-deep in the Gulf—all this was as fresh and bright as the new day, but something had gone out of it, and the lack was bound up with Jackie.

He remembered how his father had bluntly asked him just what there was about this girl that had made her suddenly so damned important to him. Doug also recalled, with considerable chagrin, how unconvincing his explanation had sounded. Damn it all, why should his father find it so hard to accept? He had simply fallen in love, as men and women have been doing since the beginning of love, and it simply could not be calculated in the same way an engineer computed the stresses on a suspension cable. Doug could still believe his father would finally come to understand. It needed only one thing really—Matt Bradford's willingness to get to know Jackie and to let her draw him over.

Suddenly he braked.

He had been driving automatically, and he had recognized a car that was parked off the side of the boulevard—not Jackie's, but another, one even more familiar. It was his father's dark-blue Lincoln in a place where he never would have expected to find it.

He was still thirty yards away when he spotted the Lincoln sitting beside a white frame cottage, and at the same time he saw his father coming off the screened-in porch with a traveling case.

He stared as he rolled past. Ordinarily he would have beeped his horn and wagged a hand. Last night, at home, when finding that the white throw rug had been unaccountably returned to its accustomed place, he had felt a strange need for quiet. Now the same instinctive sense of caution had sent him on without a signal.

Looking back, he saw his father hurrying straight to the blue sedan with the case—one he recognized. Something about Matt Bradford's haste and lowered head suggested furtiveness—as the noises

downstairs had suggested it during the night—as if he wanted to get away quickly without being noticed.

The cottage, in need of painting and dry-rotted around the windows, was one in a run-down row. There were cardboard signs in the windows of two of them: *Vacancy* and *Low Summer Rates*. Just beyond, on the left, was a drive-in lunch counter. Doug swung off the pavement, turned still farther, and stopped. From this position, looking up the highway, he could see the rear of the Lincoln. His father had opened the trunk and was stowing the case inside.

Doug was approached by a teen-age waitress wearing a hip-length skirt and boots like a drum majorette's. Absently he asked for coffee. By the time it was brought, his father had gone back inside the cottage. Minutes later he was bewildered all over again. Matt Bradford had reappeared, one arm loaded with slacks and sport shirts on wire hangers and carrying in his other hand a small radio that belonged in his bedroom at home.

Doug's father did not return to the cottage again. Having locked his belongings inside the trunk, he slid under the wheel and drove off—northward, toward Belle Loma.

Doug gulped his coffee and peered after the Lincoln until it disappeared beyond a curve. He ought to go on, he warned himself—leave this alone. But he couldn't. He got out, left money on the tray hooked to the door of his car, and walked along the sandy shoulder of the road to the cottage.

He stood looking at it, not knowing what to think, except that it was a far shabbier place than he would choose to live in—unless, as a struggling writer, necessity forced him to it. Then, on sudden impulse, he opened the rusted screen door of the porch and stepped in.

The front entrance of the house stood open. The two small rooms smelled musty. The rugs were threadbare, the furniture nondescript and battered. Compared with the best Florida had to offer its visitors, it was a shack, the kind of place rented during the "season" by tourists with too little money to afford average comfort and taste, who asked for little more than plenty of sunshine and orange juice. Over the years probably hundreds of vacationing parties, one after another, had lived in it briefly and carelessly. It bore the scars of forgotten cigarettes and bang-about children. Its latest occupant had left the bed unmade, wet towels dangling from the rod in the bath, and two empty whisky bottles in a broken wicker wastebasket.

Doug heard the screen door squeak open behind him. A woman was shuffling in, ancient, scrawny in a faded print dress, and toothless.

"Young man?" She gummed her words, and her voice complained of her infirmities. "Looking for someone?"

He was embarrassed but determined to learn what his father had been doing here. "Are you the landlady?"

"That I am. Mrs. Horst. Live right next door. Something you wanted?"

"Is this place for rent?"

"Well, news sure gets around fast, don't it! Man who has it moved some of his things out just a minute ago. Don't know if he's gone for good, though. Didn't tell me so."

"He didn't leave anything. It doesn't look as if he intends to come back."

"Well now, he might. Been taking it by the week, you know. Paid another week's rent just a couple days ago. Might come back to use up the rest. Don't know."

"I see." He was sickened; he needed to escape into fresh air. "I don't think it would do anyway. Thank you just—"

"Oh, you'd like it here, young man. Nice place. Mr. Redman liked it. Stayed almost five weeks."

At the door he stopped short. "Who?"

"Mr. Redman, that man who just left."

Abruptly he jerked away and stepped out, his face stiff and bloodless.

Chapter 8

Doug wearily turned his car away from the tidy downtown section of Belle Loma. He drove slowly along Boca Palma Way, toward the yacht club. The sun was like an immense tangerine resting on the shelf of the Gulf; there was a blue fog of dusk in the eastern sky beyond the city of Palmport, and a few lights were already glittering in the marinas along the bay front. This day had been a void, an eternity, and the coming night depressed him with a promise of more miserable emptiness.

He left his car in the parking lot and walked around the club building to the piers. The *Beth III*, the family's express cruiser, was tied up in its usual place, and his father was aboard, tinkering with the engine.

"Been looking for you, Dad."

Matt Bradford glanced up briefly. He had removed his shirt, his strong, brown shoulders glistened with sweat. The exhaust burred steadily as he answered. "Thought I'd stop off here for a few minutes before going home."

"Had a short letter from Mother today, forwarded from North Lake. She says she'll be staying in Philadelphia at least two weeks longer. Her sister isn't recovering from the operation as rapidly as they thought she would."

"I know."

"Has Millie been keeping house for you all right?" Millie was a Negro girl who came in three times a week. "Good cook?"

"I've eaten out mostly."

"It must have been pretty lonely for you these past five weeks."

His father glanced up again, searchingly. "I've made out all right."

An awkward pause followed. He wondered what his father had implied. Nothing, probably. Instead, Matt Bradford seemed to be guarding himself against questions.

"Anything wrong with the motor?"

"Adjusting the carburetor, that's all."

"Anything wrong with *you*?"

Now Matt Bradford peered at him. "You asked me that last night. What makes you think something's wrong?"

He swung down to the deck. "Look, Dad, we're two grown men. I'm certainly capable of understanding whatever it is that's—gone on."

His father's face darkened. "What're you talking about?"

"I'm simply saying we ought to talk things over. You and I should be able to discuss anything at all, frankly and honestly."

If I can only get him to open up to me, it might become a new basis for a fine friendship.

"I mean—— If you're in some kind of trouble, Dad, I'd appreciate a chance to do whatever I can to help."

Matt Bradford was scowling. "You keep harping on that. Why? What are you driving at?" Giving Doug no opportunity to answer,

he asserted flatly, "I have nothing to talk over." Then, as if regretting his brusqueness, he added, "Thanks anyway, son."

Doug had been told to mind his own business; but he persisted. "Did anything unusual happen while I was away?"

Matt Bradford's hand clenched hard on the screwdriver. "No."

"All right. I know that if I ever got into a bad jam I could count on you, and I'd just like you to feel that if it were reversed, and you needed my help——"

"Doug. Thanks again. But I'm not in a jam. I don't need anybody's help."

It had been said tautly, almost with teeth-gritting endurance. He recognized this as a warning sign—the strained quiet before the storm. From painful experience he had learned that if he pressed a question too far he would get, not an answer, but an explosion. Already he had come dangerously close to that.

Wanting to avoid it, he was left with only one recourse, to tell what he had happened to find out. And what then? Stony resentment on his father's part, plainly enough, and probably a total shut-down of communications besides. Matt Bradford had no intention of explaining the cottage, or the false name under which he had occupied it, or his puzzling behavior of last night.

"All right, Dad," and with that he quietly let it go.

His father nodded shortly, still scowling, and triggered the carburetor. The violent roiling of the exhaust forced him to wait moments before he could make himself heard again.

"I rather expected you to ask me about Jackie."

Matt Bradford straightened to face him darkly. "What about her?"

"You knew I'd want to see her today. I told you last night I'm going to ask her to marry me. Well, I haven't done it so far—and there's a reason for that."

No answer. He thought it passing strange that his father did not ask him what had stopped him.

"I haven't been able to find her," he explained. "She was away from her apartment all last night and all of today too."

Matt Bradford stood still, saying nothing.

"I thought she might have gone to the beach early. Lonnie Nichols was there, but he hadn't seen her since she left the Blue Dolphin last night, earlier than usual for some reason. First morning she's ever missed, he said."

He realized his father had barely enough patience left to hear him through.

"She didn't come back to work this evening, and Marie hadn't had any word from her. Then, when I was coming back through Belle Loma just now, I happened to see her car. It was there in front of the post office and it had a ticket on it for overparking. I looked all around town, but—no sign of her. Nobody I asked even remembered seeing her in town today."

"That kind of girl"—there was a harsh strain in his father's voice—"would be no good for you, Doug. I gave you some sound advice last night. You'd be smart to forget her."

"I don't know what to make of it," he said, scarcely hearing. "I'm afraid something may have happened to her."

Matt Bradford threw the screwdriver into the toolbox—actually threw it with a resulting crash and clatter.

"I'm putting out now. Test the engine." An afterthought: "Come along, Doug?"

"No." He rose, hooked one hand behind a piling, and swung himself to the pier. "I can't let this ride—it's too important to me. I'm going back—to try to find Jackie."

Chapter 9

The report had come over the telephone to the sheriff's office in Palmport at 9:50 P.M.

At 9:55, in response, a gray sedan left the reserved parking space behind the County Building and turned west into Largo Avenue, the central highway leading toward the Gulf.

The pleasant-looking man slouched under the wheel was Deputy Sheriff Earl Porter. Roy Greer, another deputy, was sitting alertly beside him in the front seat. They were almost the same age, about thirty, but in point of service Porter, a native of Palmport County, was comparatively a veteran—he had already been working out of the sheriff's office almost six years when Greer was appointed two years ago.

Nothing marked them as officers of the law. They wore their

badges in their billfolds. They didn't carry guns. The city policemen were required to suffer with visored caps and other regulation attire guaranteed to keep them steaming, but neither of these young men owned anything in the shape of a uniform, and both habitually went bareheaded. Now that the humid summer was closing in for a long stay, the officials who could do so dressed as lightly as possible. New-comers from the north were often disconcerted to find themselves dealing with authority clothed in washable slacks and short-sleeved, open-neck sport shirts, but the law here preferred to operate in comfort. . . . Earl Porter's shirt was a plain beige, Greer's a Hollywood-conceived Hawaiian design in flamboyant red and green featuring, of course, coco palms.

"Hurry it up, Earl," Greer urged, tensely eager to get there. "We've got a night's work to do."

"E-easy, boy," Porter drawled. "It just ain't in my nature to rush at anything fast. I do all my rushin' nice and slo-ow, you know that."

"But man, this is a big case!"

"The way I figure, it won't go 'way," Porter answered imper-turbably. "It'll sure 'nough wait for us."

"Biggest we've had in three months!"

"Come along too soon to suit me. I just don't *enjoy* this business of people gettin' killed the way they do."

Porter maintained the same moderate speed the whole length of Largo Avenue while turning over in his mind the reflection that Greer was a two-legged gadfly who could make himself right irksome when he was of a mind to. This case that had just broken, if it was as bad as the chief at Belle Loma had said, would be right up Greer's alley. Porter was satisfied with being a good, competent, all-around officer, but Greer wanted every case to be exciting and spectacular.

Porter supposed you might say Greer was a career cop. Before coming to Palmport—for his hay fever, because of the low pollen count—he had qualified for the troopers' school of the New Jersey State Police, where he had worked up to being night station corporal, and after that he had taken the full twelve-week course of training at the National Academy of the FBI. He did experiments with casts of footprints and tire tracks and tested for bloodstains and the like. The lab he had set up in his home at his own expense was better than anything the county itself had. Porter, on the other hand, was un-

trained except for the practical know-how he had acquired here in his everyday job.

He had learned what to expect of Greer. Instead of working *with* Porter as he should, Greer would make the case a contest between them. Using all his apparatus and book learning, he'd try to outshine Porter, and then he'd crow over it. A satisfactory solution of the case wouldn't be an end in itself, not to Roy Greer; it would be a means of grabbing himself some glory, with his picture in the papers again. Yes, sir, Porter knew exactly what this boy was after. Greer was ambitious to take over old Ben McCardle's office as sheriff.

Porter swung into Gulf Boulevard, still without haste, and said, "See, Roy, we're gettin' there. Told you we would."

"Like a rowboat against the tide. Speaking of boats, do you intend to go on living alone on that old tub of yours?"

"Sure 'nough."

"Not natural, man your age, living off by himself."

"I like it."

"You afraid of women?"

"Hell no," Porter said mildly. "Women are my favorite kind of people."

"Then you ought to find yourself a nice girl and marry her." Greer was married, and like many husbands he disapproved of the independence of bachelors—either that or he envied it. "I thought you were pretty close to it a couple of months ago. What about that girl you were running a temperature over then?"

"Wasn't particularly runnin' any——"

"You were so. You damn well were. I saw the signs. You were going around looking moonstruck, and sprucing yourself up, and staying out late nights. I thought oh-oh, he's finally gone overboard all right."

Greer, irritated and resentful, had started talking for no other reason than to needle him into driving faster.

"Then it changed," Greer went on, smirking at him. "I could see your pressure going down like a punctured tire. What happened? Too slow for her, maybe? Faster guy cut you out?"

He wished Greer would shut up; but if he said so, Greer would just keep laying it on that much longer.

"Maybe she's the kind of girl who's afraid of deputy sheriffs." Greer laughed. "That it?" He laughed again sharply.

"Couple of cars parked on the shoulder up ahead," Porter said. "Headlights on."

"Who was she?"

"Man with a flashlight movin' traffic by. Prob'ly Charlie." Charles Kresh was the chief of police of Belle Loma. "Just inside the town line, looks like."

"Why were you so damn cagey about her? Never showed her off, never even talked about her. Why didn't you ever bring her around?"

"Told you we'd get there. 'Bout there now."

"She lives somewhere around here on the beach, doesn't she? Heard she works in one of the restaurants. Let's drop in on the way back."

"We got a night's work to do, remember?"

"If she's the one I think she is, the hostess down at the Blue Dolphin, she's sure a nice little armful."

Porter could feel his ears heating up. If Greer were as smart about handling people as he was about test tubes, he'd take that as a danger sign.

"Know what I think, Earl? You're carrying a torch for that girl."

For that he would like to clout Greer a good one.

"Still carrying a great big torch for——"

Porter stopped the car so abruptly that Greer was jounced forward and silenced. He slid out, banged the door shut, and strolled toward the man with the flashlight and the two cars that were parked off the pavement. Greer followed and passed him, hustling. Porter didn't try to catch up. He was the one who had taken Chief Kresh's phone call, which as a matter of practice put him in charge of the case, and he meant to *be* in charge, and no never-mind about it.

This part of the highway, approaching Belle Loma, was a black curve through wilderness. Before long some real estate people would probably come along and fill it with dredged shell and turn it into a residential development, as they had done in recent years with so many other marginal sections of the coast. People would move into the bright little homes and carefully tend their tidy zoysia lawns and never remember how it was tonight, a primitive, brackish tangle of cabbage palms and palmetto and mangroves.

One of the cars had been turned to direct its headlights into the thick of the roadside jungle. Chief Kresh, in his army-tan uniform, stood in the glow, looking bewildered but relieved too, now that the

deputies were on hand. The chief was fully equal to his routine tasks of emptying the nickels out of the parking meters and seeing that the taprooms closed on the dot of midnight, but whenever he came up against anything bigger than a misdemeanor his first move was to reach for the telephone with Sheriff McCardle in mind. Even then he didn't always get from under entirely. As often as not he took a dressing-down for doing something wrong. Greer was complaining to him now.

"Look at this! Looks like a couple of Brahmin bulls been milling around here. If there were any footprints, they're plenty messed up now. Look where you parked! Any tire tracks——"

"E-easy, boy," Porter broke in gently. "We're sort of backward here in the South. Just never got around to repealing the law of gravity. Me, I'm just like Charlie, never learned to walk three or four inches off the ground."

"It wasn't me messed up any footprints anyhow," Chief Kresh said. "Gang of boys was threshin' around here, makin' like Seminoles on the warpath or somethin'. That's how come they found the body. Hell, I couldn't just take their word for it, could I, a thing like that?"

"Had to see for yourself, Charlie, sure 'nough," Porter said amiably while Greer glared down at the trampled, sandy ground. "Now if I might kindly borrow that flashlight of yours it'll save me havin' to go back to the car for mine, and we'll just go——"

A splashy noise interrupted him. He aimed the flashlight. Eight or ten yards away, across a patch of scummy water, a girl was kicking herself loose from a thicket of palmetto while holding a camera high in both hands. A leather case slung from her shoulder by a strap was bumping against her bottom and the pockets of her shorts were stuffed full of flash bulbs and film holders. When she clambered onto the bank, Porter reaching for her elbow to help her up, her legs were wet to the knees and covered with adhering particles of swamp debris. She was short of breath and frightened, and she looked nauseated.

"Good Lord," Greer groaned to the chief, who was his elder by thirty years. "You should've known better than to let her. Tramping in and out like that, destroying evidence——"

"I've got a job taking pictures," Caryl Phillips said weakly. "I took a picture and I wish I hadn't. The paper won't use it anyhow."

"I guess we'll want that picture, though, Caryl." Porter knew her

as a friend, as he knew a thousand others in the county. "Better run along home now, honey."

"At least it's different, it's not another tarpon strung up alongside a grinning ape with a fish pole in his hand." Caryl pushed one palm across her hot face. "I think I'm going to be sick."

She went unsteadily to her car, and Porter smiled after her. Greer kept his scowl on. He tried impatiently to take the flashlight from Porter but didn't succeed. Porter shone it along the bank, found a series of soggy hummocks, and began leading the way across.

"Damn it all, man," Greer snapped, "watch out for footprints!"

Porter stopped, turned, and gave him a look. Its effect was lost. Greer was too busy watching out for footprints.

Porter's light led them onto a mound of overgrown mucky sand. Fallen palm fronds, a thick bed of them, crackled under their feet. This small hollow in the jungle, only a stone's toss from the highway, was thickly screened. The dead body, in red shorts and torn, reddened shirt, lay with its slashed, black-caked face twisted toward them.

Greer stared at it, then at Porter, and blurted, "She's the one—the one we were talking about!"

Porter did not speak. His answer was on his hardened face.

"Man, oh, man," Greer muttered. "Somebody sure hated that girl."

Porter didn't need Greer to tell him that. He didn't need to be any kind of a scientist to see that there could be no possible question of accidental death or suicide. This was out-and-out murder, thoroughgoing, passionate murder.

Chapter 10

A banging on his bedroom door woke Doug Bradford.

The dawn was like a blue-pink fog drifting outside the window. A dim opalescence filled the room until a lamp flashed on. He rolled his head and saw his father standing beside the bed.

Matt Bradford's hair was still uncombed; in his wrinkled pajamas he was a looming, bearlike figure. He held a folded newspaper in one hand and seemed about to proffer it, but he stood still with his

mouth working a little, bracing himself against the uncertainties of the next moment.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"Doug—— I don't know how to prepare you for this."

He sat up quickly—*Jackie!*—snatched the paper from his father's hand, and in his fumbling haste dropped it. Seconds had never seemed longer. When he had the *Tribune* spread out, his bleary eyes skimmed unseeing from headline to headline. He did not know what he was looking for, only that it was something that had happened to Jackie.

"Dad! Where——"

"There—the front page."

His father pointed—a finger of doom. —*Blue Dolphin*—— There it was *Hostess at Blue Dolphin*—— The next words struck his eyes like wind-thrown sand. —*Found Murdered*. Then it was only one word magnifying itself to a size so monstrous that he could not entirely encompass it. MURDERED.

He heard himself shouting, "For hell's sake, Dad, stop it, stop that stalking around!"

Matt Bradford kept pacing and watching him. His mind was flying to pieces. He remembered fleetingly a day when he was six, coming home from school, his father's awkward way of breaking the news that his little tan cocker Shorty had been run over. His father had been no more gentle or graceful about Jackie's death than he had about a puppy's. There was another time when he had tried to cram for an English Lit exam after having had a drink too many; the printed words had skipped and squirmed off the dulled pin point of his eyes. They were doing that now in spite of his efforts to stab them still.

—body found about 9:30 last night after Miss Burrows had been missing—— Acting Coroner Blake estimated her death had occurred approximately—— It is hoped the autopsy will show more closely——autopsy——

He found himself in the bathroom now, bending over the wash-bowl, slapping cold water into his face. He tried to hold down the upheaval in his stomach, and after minutes he won that fight. He towed his face hard, recalling how sharp a sense of loss he had felt yesterday morning when Caryl had told him of her engagement. This was not the same; it was far worse, because there was such a

terrible finality in it. Yesterday he had lost Caryl; today he had lost Jackie forever. He felt entirely alone in a collapsed world.

Finally he went back, met again the guarded intensity of Matt Bradford's gaze, and frowningly wondered why his father must keep watching him so strangely.

"Doug, if there's anything I can do for you——"

"I'm O.K. now, Dad. Sorry I barked. It hit me so hard I just hit back blindly."

"It's not the first time I've been caught in your line of fire, son."

He couldn't smile at that, although he was glad of the flow of warmth between them. . . . But why couldn't his father have shown him this small measure of sympathy weeks ago? It had come only after Jackie was dead.

"I knew something had happened to her. I *knew* it."

All that while—— With a dazed sense of wonder he realized that all the while he had been looking for Jackie she had been lying there in that jungle—he had driven past ten or twelve times, never dreaming——

"But this—— I can't believe it. Why should anyone have wanted to kill her—*why*?"

His father drew in a slow breath. "Haven't you any idea why—or who——?"

"I can't begin to understand it. Whoever did it must be crazy. Some crazy drunk. Or a sex maniac. It has to be something like that. She wasn't playing around. Every time I phoned her from North Lake she told me how lonely she was."

An acrid sound came from his father's throat. He looked quickly for its meaning. Matt Bradford was gazing at him pityingly.

"She did, Dad." He combed his fingers through his hair. "If I hadn't gone away, or if I'd come back sooner, it might not have happened."

He saw a painful tightness come over his father's face.

"I'm not blaming you for sending me upstate. I didn't mean that. I could have refused to go. I should have. If I'd stayed, it might have made all the difference somehow."

"It might." His father's voice sounded hollow. "But I doubt it. This didn't drop on her out of a clear sky. Probably it was a long time building up. Some part of it must have been her own doing. She must have had the makings of it within herself."

He stared. "Within herself?"

"She couldn't have been a completely innocent victim, Doug."

The warmth had suddenly gone. "Just what are you implying by that?"

"Implying? I'm making a plain statement. I've made it before, a dozen times. You knew too little about that girl. There were parts of her life here that you knew nothing at all about—there had to be, simply because you weren't with her every minute of every day and night. Who did she see when she wasn't with you? What did she do? How can you be sure she wasn't playing one man off against another—including you? Doesn't it stand to reason she must have done something to bring it on herself?"

"Not to my way of thinking, it doesn't!"

"Then ask yourself this question, Doug. Would it have happened if she had spent her nights at home alone, waiting for you—as you imagined she was doing?"

He snapped his answer. "How can you talk like that about her? You never knew her—never even met her!"

Matt Bradford flinched.

"You never tried to understand my feeling for her!"

At that he was alarmed to see rage swell into his father's square face. It was as if his accusation had cut a hidden cord, one of the cords binding Matt Bradford within himself, and some compressed thing had sprung into release, something he had never known was there. His father seemed about to blurt out a denial—but the moment passed and the rage went down again, under force.

"Doug, let's keep our heads on. I'm a plain talker. You've been fairly starry-eyed about this girl—that's understandable—but the sheriff's men won't be. Right now, while we're talking, they're digging for the facts about her, the facts that came together and killed her. Don't expect them to be pretty, not when there's murder in them. They'll be damned nasty, some of them, you can count on that."

"Good Lord, Dad, can't you understand how this has bowled me over? Go easy, can't you?"

"Face it, Doug. Sooner or later you'll learn things you never knew before about that girl. They may give you an even worse jolt than you've already had."

"What the hell are you trying to do, hurry it along?"

Matt Bradford said quietly, "I'm warning you, that's all."

"All right, you've warned me. Now lay off!"

A look of hurt and hopelessness crossed his father's face. Immediately Doug regretted his outburst. "Sorry, Dad."

"No apologies necessary, son. I realize I'm not being too tactful about this—but it's got to be said. The most important thing is to look at the facts, to see the position we're in."

Yes, that was certainly important. The trouble was, it had always been difficult for Doug to receive his father's kindness when it was offered in the shape of blunt, hardheaded realism. This warning disturbed him, because he could neither account for it nor answer it. It implied an estimation of Jackie too greatly at variance with his own. And also it brought a numb wonder.

"You've talked as if you know more about Jackie than you've ever said—as if you know something I don't."

His father blinked and swallowed. "I know people, what they are, and what to expect of them—except for you—and possibly myself." A rueful smile. "I want you to keep your eyes open, son, and your guard up."

Doug turned quickly and brought a pair of slacks from the clothes closet.

"This is a dangerous piece of business, don't forget that. You'll come out all right, I'm sure you will, but—— What are you doing?"

Doug gestured toward the newspaper on his bed. "It says Earl's in charge, Earl Porter. I want to talk to him."

"No, don't. Keep away from him. Good Lord, Doug, this is a murder case—you'd be a fool to walk right into the middle of it."

He paused stiffly, staring again. "How can I possibly keep out of it? I've got to know what's going on, what they're doing about it."

"They won't tell you."

"Why not? Earl's a good friend of mine."

"So is Ben McCardle my friend, and an old one. They'll make some allowances for friendship, certainly, but not much. They're officers with a job to do."

"I'll help them, all I can."

"Help them! How can you?" Matt Bradford's voice was harsh; for a second it was almost panicky. "If they want you, they'll come to you, don't doubt that. You won't do yourself any good by sticking your neck out. Don't do it!"

Here it was, here it was again for the ten thousandth time; he was

being ordered about as if he were a kid who hadn't enough sense to take care of himself. But even as he resented it, he saw the reasonableness of his father's stand. He had already compromised his whole family simply through having known Jackie. That in itself could be embarrassing enough. If he injected himself into the investigation he would only make it worse for them—the resulting publicity would hurt Matt Bradford personally and professionally and bring prolonged wails of anguished reproach from his mother. He ought to avoid all that if he could. He owed them that much.

“All right.” He said it disgustingly and dropped himself to a sitting position on the bed. “All right, I'll sit tight. Any other instructions? If Earl or some other deputy comes around asking questions, what shall I say?”

“Tell him the truth, that you hadn't seen Jackie in five solid weeks. It had already happened, a couple of hours before you arrived home from North Lake that night. Fortunately I can back you up there, Doug. That will put you in the clear, and then they'll let you alone. We can be damned glad it broke in just that way, damned glad.”

Doug lifted his head slowly, and for minutes after his father had left the room he sat still, staring out the open door. . . .

When he was rereading the news account for the tenth or twelfth time, searching vainly for hints between the lines, he heard his father's car start up. He frowned at the clock. Almost on schedule!—only a few minutes late. Not even the violent death of the girl he had loved, Doug thought bitterly, could for long turn Matt Bradford from the building of bridges.

The moment he stepped out the side door he realized, too late, that he had again stumbled into the breakfast routine of the Phillips household.

“Doug, dear!” It was Saralee Cooper calling across the hedge, her voice thin but still liltingly gay. “So ni-ice having you back. Come here right this minute and let me *see* you!”

Cee had said that Dr. Draker had ordered Aunt Saralee to rest in bed for four or five days; but there she was, seated at the table in the patio with the Phillipses. She looked wan and ill, but as always her manner was resolutely blithesome. During his long and anxious search for Jackie he had not taken time to visit Aunt Saralee, and suddenly he was ashamed of that. He hurried through the gate, kissed her smooth cheek, apologized for having neglected her. She must take the

very best care of herself, he said earnestly—she was so very important to all of them.

“But I feel *much* better today, Doug dear. I get so annoyed with myself, staying in bed, and I’m sure this beautiful sunshine will be better for me, much better than boredom, don’t you agree? Do sit with us and have coffee.”

Cee was already pouring coffee for him. Yesterday he had been impatient to tear away; today he accepted gratefully. There would be long hours to fill while he waited for more news in the paper or on the radio.

“Doug, you’re worrying about something, dear,” Aunt Saralee said solicitously. “I can always tell.”

He said no no, he just hadn’t rested very well last night—noticing that Aunt Saralee was clearly in better spirits than anyone else at the table. Cee was constrained and Hugh was also silent, in a morose, tight-nerved way. The whisky sour Hugh was having for breakfast evidently meant he was hung over again. There was an unhappy tension between the Phillipses—it was too obvious for Doug to miss, although Aunt Saralee was trying to pretend it wasn’t there.

Doug himself was on guard, expecting that at any moment they would begin chattering about Jackie. A murder in Belle Loma was certainly an exciting topic for discussion, yet Aunt Saralee talked on and on, brightly, without mentioning it. Cee, her coffee untasted, gazed out over the Gulf with her eyes blank. As for Hugh——

Twice Doug had lifted his head to find Hugh peering at him strangely, and twice Hugh had quickly looked down into his drink.

Hugh was dark and lean, boyishly handsome except for his weak chin—and, Doug knew, a deeply troubled man. He seemed to have an affinity for misfortune and, like his brutal hang-overs, some of it was self-made. An inheritance from his sister, which he had counted on heavily, was tied up in litigation in New York. Two years ago he had resigned as a junior partner of the law firm of Houston and Hayes, the most solidly established in Palmport, in order to set up an office of his own, and since then, thanks to his false hopes and laziness, he had fared badly. Also, something had gone wrong between Hugh and Matt Bradford—a business difficulty that had not been fully explained to Doug—and the long-standing friendship of the two men had deteriorated into a strained coolness. Did this, Doug won-

dered, explain the cloudy hostility in Hugh's red-shot eyes this morning?

Aunt Saralee's voice brought him back.

"Good morning, Caryl darling!"

Caryl was coming along the walk from the Drive. She had left her camera in her car—usually her equipment was a mad tangle on the back seat—but she was bringing a large brown envelope which evidently contained prints. Normally Caryl was all animation and good cheer, but this morning she was sober-faced. With her short cut red hair and her airy print dress she looked like a teen-ager who had taken a scolding for coming home too late from the junior high prom. She greeted them as a body, briefly and without a smile.

"Well, you certainly brighten up the group," her brother grumbled. "What's on your chest?"

"Nothing." Caryl slapped the envelope onto the table, perched on the edge of a chair, and received a cup of coffee from Cee. "Thanks."

"Caryl dear," Aunt Saralee said sympathetically, "something is bothering you."

"Disappointed, that's all. I've had words with Chet." Chet, they knew, was the picture editor of the *Tribune*. "I told him that now and then, once in a great while, say every six months or so, I'd like to get a picture printed which is not practically a rerun of the one they printed yesterday. It didn't do a bit of good. I'm still specializing in dead fish and grinning tourists," She tasted her coffee and added philosophically, "Although to be fair to Chet, I knew perfectly well when I took this one that he wouldn't use it."

"Whose picture, dear?" Aunt Saralee asked.

"That girl who got murdered night before last. Jackie Burrows." Caryl revised her answer. "Her dead body, rather."

She paused, expecting eager questions. They all gazed at her without speaking. Doug tightened, waiting. Aunt Saralee lifted her eyebrows a little.

Doug asked—taking care to ask it quietly— "A picture of her body—where it was found?"

Caryl slipped the print from the envelope and wrinkled her nose at it. "It won't do anything for your appetite, but have a look if you'd like."

Doug almost reached to snatch the picture from Caryl's hands. He drew back from it, resisting a wild impulse to destroy it. In his

confusion, forcing himself to look away from the picture, he found himself watching Cee.

She too had quickly looked away, but now, as if drawn irresistibly, she was leaning toward it. As she sat stiffly gazing at the print Doug saw a series of undecipherable expressions cross her face. Abruptly she pushed herself back in her chair, her eyes tightly closed, and she shuddered.

Caryl had not noticed Cee's revulsion. "Damn good shot, although a little gruesome. Anybody want to see?"

"No, thanks!" Hugh growled at her.

"Caryl dearest," Aunt Saralee said weakly, "I don't believe I—"

"Doug?"

"No."

He blurted it, feeling again an almost overpowering impulse to snatch the picture from Caryl's hands. Unless he got away from here now, right now, he would do exactly that—grab it from her, rip it to pieces. He pushed himself to his feet and heard himself explaining that he could not stay longer—aware that they were all gazing at him curiously.

Caryl spoke again, unconscious of the turmoil she had stirred up in him, as he hurried back to the gate.

"Working there at the Blue Dolphin, this girl Jackie Burrows met all kinds of people. Did you see her there, Hugh, ever?"

"Did I?" he heard Hugh answering. "Why, no. No, I never met her."

Chapter 11

Earl Porter came into the sheriff's office by way of the back door from the parking lot. It was just past ten o'clock and the new day's heat was steadily building up.

Ben McCardle was sitting at his desk, hands entwined on his great paunch, wheezing heavily, and doing nothing. The sheriff was alone except for Bailey in the radio room, where there was nothing stirring at the moment. Hogan, who handled Records and functioned as the sheriff's stenographer, had evidently gone out for a coke. If there were any reporters about, they were killing time in the waiting room

beyond, because, so far, McCardle's information on the Burrows homicide consisted of five minutes' worth which Porter had given him over the phone earlier this morning.

Porter ambled into his chief's private office, and Ben McCardle welcomed him with a warm smile and a nod. He sat low in a creaky Windsor chair, in no hurry to begin. The sheriff gazed at him with eyes the color of sun-faded blue denim and wheezed and waited.

Porter drew a deep breath and said appreciatively, "Doggone if this isn't the most peaceful place I know, except maybe church or out on the Gulf on a dead-calm night."

All around them in the County Building there was activity having to do with auto tags, marriage licenses, civil defense, mosquito control, maintenance of the parks, public health, the highway patrol, tax collecting, and the functioning of the circuit and juvenile courts; but none of the hustle-bustle penetrated.

Part of this placidity emanated from the person of Benjamin McCardle and the rest of it was conferred on him by his staff. He was an old, tired, and sick man. He could do little any more but listen and direct, and not very much of that. His deputies went about their duties without bothering him unnecessarily. His office had long been a sinecure; he had occupied it for so many years that it seemed there had never been any other sheriff of Palmport County. He would go on being sheriff to the end of his days. It was, in fact, all that was keeping him alive; but he could not hold on much longer. . . . The day when he would let go was, of course, the day Roy Greer was waiting for.

"Earl, you don't look just right," the sheriff said with kindly concern. "Not sick, are you?"

"Just kind of upset," Porter answered. "Pretty young girl gettin' the life knifed out of her like that, it kind of upsets me."

"Bet you didn't get much sleep. Cut yourself shaving. Had any breakfast?"

"Sure."

The fact was, hell, he hadn't had much time for sleeping or eating. Last night he had buzzed around with Roy Greer until past two, asking questions—or, rather, listening to Greer ask them. They had gone to Greer's home to get a little shut-eye, and it had been little enough—his junior deputy had routed him out of bed before six.

He had reminded Greer a dozen times whose case this was, but it hadn't seemed to make much of an impression.

"Well, to get into it, besides what I told you over the phone—— It happened night before last. Body was brought in a car, of course, and dumped. Andy guessed it'd been there more'n twenty-four hours, maybe as long as thirty-six, when those kids came across it. But Roy thinks it was less'n that."

One of Greer's running complaints concerned the county's lack of a trained medical examiner. Andy Givens, the acting coroner, was a justice of the peace. Greer considered himself far better qualified than Andy, and Porter had to admit he was probably right.

"So that gives us three things to look for. One, the car used to tote the body there. Two, the weapon—no sign of it so far. Three, the place where it was done. All we know so far is that it didn't happen in that garage apartment of hers."

"Didn't?"

Porter shook his head. "No blood there. At least none I could see. Roy might find traces, of course. He's there now, dabbin' around with his chemicals."

"Roy's a good man, Earl."

Yeah. And what was more, he was hell-bent on proving it.

"Found the door unlocked when we went there last night. Either she'd expected she wouldn't be gone long, or else she'd gone out in a big hurry. Her keys weren't on her body. Charlie found 'em in her car."

"Looks like she drove to somewhere around Belle Loma that night, Earl."

"Looks like it, all right. Must've been somewhere around Belle Loma it happened to her. Then her dead body was moved, but that car of hers wasn't the one that was used for that."

"Wasn't?"

"No blood stains again. Might be fingerprints, though. Roy's goin' to go over it for prints."

"Roy's a good, thorough man, all right."

Yeah. "Next question is how come that car got to where it was found, there in front of the Belle Loma post office. I don't figure she parked it there herself. She wouldn't've left her keys in the ignition. Somebody else put it there, most likely the killer, because he didn't want it left standin' too close to the place where she got

knifed. If so, then the place where she was killed ain't too far from the downtown section of Belle Loma. Within a fair walkin' distance, I'd say."

McCardle's only comment was another weary wheeze, but somehow it conveyed agreement.

"Before that was done—least, I guess it was before—her apartment was searched."

"You say searched?"

"Somebody poked into ever' little corner and cranny of it."

"Anything taken?"

"Can't say for sure, but prob'ly. Seems to me I should've been able to find more personal information about that girl'n I did. We've got her driver's license and Social Security card—we'll check through 'em, of course—but that's about all. No personal letters left around. No address book. Either it was stole, or else she never had one. Marie, over at the Blue Dolphin, says she never mentioned any of her relatives. She must have a family somewhere, but as it is we got no way of knowin' who to notify."

"Any money on her, Earl?"

"All the money she had was forty-odd dollars left behind in a billfold in one of her purses. No bank book—guess she never saved a dime. If somebody doesn't come forward, or if somebody doesn't take up a collection, she'll have to be buried in the potter's field."

"Earl, you aren't coming down with the flu or something, are you?" Sheriff McCardle asked heavily. "You sure aren't looking well today."

"Little tired, that's all." Porter squirmed in his chair, trying to get the sick look off his face. "Marie says Jackie came here from Columbus, Ohio. Worked there for a while as a receptionist. Marie doesn't know who for. There's another funny thing—Roy noticed it and checked. Some of Jackie's dresses were bought in New York City—store labels in 'em say so anyhow—but Marie says Jackie told her a couple of times she'd never been there."

"Had been, though?"

"'Parently."

"But didn't want to say so?"

"'Parently."

"Better check with the New York police, Earl."

"Will do."

"This girl—was she playing around with men?"

Porter squirmed again. "She liked men, and they liked her. Knew a lot of 'em, I guess. Something about her attracted 'em to her. Had plenty of dates, but as for playin' around——" He shook his head. "Don't know what to say about that right now. It seems to be the likeliest angle, but it needs mighty careful handlin'. This mornin'——"

McCardle's attention had wandered.

"You don't want me to load you up with all this, do you, chief?"

"Eh? Go on, Earl."

"Her phone rang while Roy and I were there last night. Man calling. Hearing a man answer seemed to upset him. Wouldn't give his name. Stammered around a minute, then hung up. His voice seemed familiar, though. I've got a pretty fair idea who it was."

"Good lead, Earl?"

"One we got to handle mighty careful. He——" Porter had spoken uneasily, and now he broke off. "Here's Roy."

The quiet of the office had been disturbed by the quick opening and closing of the back door. Greer always brought tensions in with him. He hurried into the sheriff's private office with several plaster casts in his hands. One looked like the sole and heel of a shoe, another like a section of the tread of an auto tire. Without an excuse-me or by-your-leave he brought them to McCardle's desk. Greer obviously thought them highly important, but Porter wondered. After all, there were a great many shoes and tires in Palmport County. He pushed himself to his feet before Greer could begin putting on a big show.

"See you chief."

"Earl, you take care of yourself now, hear?"

"I'm all right, except—— Thing that bothers me the most——" Porter could not keep his concern out of his voice. "This is a damn nasty thing and—— Hell, chief, I got a lot of friends here. Real good ones. Every time a dirty one comes along, like this case, I get to hopin' no friend of mine has got himself fouled up in it."

"If one of them has, Earl, you can't hardly let it make any difference, of course."

"It won't. Whoever did it, I'm goin' to get him." Now Porter's voice was quietly hard. "I'm goin' to get that killer *for sure*."

"That so?" Greer uttered his cutting laugh. "Unless I get him first!"

Porter, feeling his ears warming up, frowned at Greer.

"You'll have to move a lot faster than usual to beat me out on this one, man. Even if you have got personal reasons." Greer turned a knowing grin on the sheriff. "Did Earl tell you he knew that girl? He sure did, and not only that. He was plenty sweet on——"

"Hush your mouth, Roy!"

Porter said it softly, but still it carried enough of a sting to silence Greer. For a moment Greer looked startled and afraid; then he began to smirk again.

"We'll see, boy," Greer said confidently.

"Now, now, that'll do." Sheriff McCardle wheezed a question at Porter. "You say you got a good lead, Earl?"

"I got one," Porter said. "A hot one. So hot——"

Greer was listening avidly.

Porter closed his mouth, determined to keep his so-hot lead to himself, and strolled out.

Chapter 12

Doug had swum out beyond the sand bar, and now he was back, slogging through the slow surf. The water, blood-warm under the relentless sun, had no stimulation in it. He dropped himself on a beach towel and lay on his back with his eyes all but closed, watching a V of pelicans floating on motionless wings and, high in the zenith, a long frigate bird hovering like a great silver kite. Everything was still, waiting in emptiness.

It was early afternoon. Minute by minute Doug had expected Earl Porter, or another of Ben McCardle's deputies, to appear and question him. But no one had come. Why was he being ignored? He could not guess, but he felt there was something ominous in it.

He heard a rhythmic squeaking sound in the sand. Caryl was making the noise, kicking her heels as she walked toward him with easy, barelegged grace. Her swim suit was white, her hair dripping wet, and beads of salt water sparkled on her brown shoulders.

"I called to you a minute ago, Doug. Didn't you hear?"

He had been self-absorbed, lost in the blankness. He moved over

to give her part of the towel and she sat on it, hugging her knees and gazing at him intently. Her unnaturally sober mood was still with her.

"Doug, I have to tell somebody something. I can't hold it in any longer."

"Listening," he said disinterestedly.

"I saw her car."

He lifted his head. "Whose car?" *Jackie's?*

"That girl's, the one who was killed. I saw it, Doug. That same night, the night it happened."

He jerked it out: "Where?"

"Right here on the Point."

Abruptly he sat up. *Here on the Point?*

"I'd been at the yacht club, taking pictures," Caryl went on. "A fashion show. I ran out of film and came home to reload, and there it was—parked, lights out, nobody in it."

"But *where?*"

"In the lane right opposite my house." Caryl lived with her parents on the next corner, less than a block from the Bradfords and Hugh's family. "I had to pass it to get into the driveway."

"What was it doing there?"

"Just sitting empty, waiting. Why did she leave it at that spot, you mean? Your guess is as good as mine."

He was staring blankly. "How do you know it was—hers?"

"I didn't know, not then. I wondered whose it was—a cream-yellow hardtop with Ohio license plates and a dent in the rear fender, the right one."

Jackie's car, yes! He could not doubt it, yet he could not believe it.

"So after the fashion show was over, I took my shots in to the paper, and when I came back it was *still* there, Doug!"

He asked quickly, "What time was that?"

"About midnight. Had you arrived home by then?"

"Yes, but I——"

"So it was there when you drove past. You didn't notice it?" He shook his head in bewilderment, and Caryl hurried on. "Well, you naturally wouldn't, because it was twenty or thirty feet in from the Drive. And that isn't all I saw."

He had actually passed so close to Jackie's car?—Jackie's car inexplicably left alongside Caryl's home, of all places!

"Later I heard it start up. It woke me—my bedroom's on that side of the house. I looked at the clock and it was almost three. Then I raised up and peeked out the window as it was being backed away."

"Did you see who was driving?"

"I couldn't, because the headlights glared. Whoever it was, he tried to be as quiet as possible—at least that was my impression—but he didn't succeed too well, probably because he wasn't familiar with the car."

"He?"

"He or she, I don't know which, Doug—but we can be sure it wasn't Jackie herself. It *couldn't* have been Jackie, because by that time she was already dead."

He was hurt by Caryl's matter-of-factness. "But they can't fix it exactly," he heard himself protesting. "They're not sure exactly what time it was when she——"

"They *are* sure she was killed before midnight of that night, and not later. So it definitely *wasn't* Jackie who drove her car away. That's why I've been so upset all day, ever since Chief Charlie showed me that same hardtop in Belle Loma and told me it was hers. Suddenly it was brought so close to home!" Caryl's eyes were round with frightened realization. "Don't you see what it means, Doug?"

He had waited interminably for a glimpse of the truth, and here it was; yet his mind was shrinking from it.

"She had come to the Point for some reason, and under her own power." Caryl spoke softly, as if someone might overhear. "She must have been killed somewhere near here."

"I can't believe that!"

"But how else can you explain it? It *must* be true. She was killed here on the Point. Then her body was carried away—in some other car, not hers—and left in that patch of jungle. That had to be done under cover of darkness. Next, three or four hours later, somebody drove her car away and left it parked downtown. Both those things were done by the guilty person as a matter of self-protection—to confuse the police about *where* she was killed. Can you think of any other answer, Doug?"

He was numbed, unable to think at all.

"I can't." Caryl said suddenly, "I wish I hadn't seen it! I've kept this bottled up inside me all day long because I don't know what to do."

"You haven't told this to anyone else?"

"Not a word. I haven't dared. A fine reporter I'd make, holding out on my paper! I ought to tell them, or Earl Porter. But if I do—what then?"

"Don't tell them."

"But it's—it's illegal, Doug, not telling! Doesn't it make me an accessory after the fact or something?"

Her question was serious and he answered it seriously. "They certainly won't jail you for it. Anyhow, if that's the case, we're both accessories now. I don't intend to spread this around. It might get innocent people into trouble unnecessarily—and anyhow, Caryl, you can't be absolutely certain that the car you saw was—hers."

"But I *am*, Doug. I don't see how I can possibly be mistaken about it. That's what scares me. I get panicky, just thinking that—that right here on the Point—there may be a murderer almost next door to us."

"That's nonsense, Caryl! Stop and think. Is there anyone here, anyone at all among our friends and neighbors, that you can suspect of being a killer?"

She shook her head gravely.

"Then get that idea right out of your mind."

He was surprised by his own brusqueness. The force of it quieted Caryl without convincing her.

"O.K., Doug. So we'll just keep this between ourselves?"

"Strictly between ourselves," he insisted, because he was sincerely certain Caryl had somehow been led to the wrong conclusion—certain that Jackie had not known, except casually, anyone living on Belle Loma Point.

Chapter 13

The whir of a motor on the Drive had carried down to the beach. Doug lifted himself to look through the patches of nodding sea oats and saw Matt Bradford's blue sedan pulling into the carport. Surprising!—his father home earlier than usual—possibly with news?

Caryl had gone off a moment ago, still troubled and uncertain. Doug followed the path toward the house, bundling the towel as

he hurried. He was crossing the lawn when a second car, a gray sedan, appeared. It turned in and stopped directly behind his convertible. The young man with the blond crew cut who lazily slid himself out of it was Earl Porter.

Doug turned to Porter at once, feeling both relieved and apprehensive. *This is it, boy*—but at least the vacuum was finally opened.

He could be sure of one thing—there would be no rough stuff on Porter's part. Porter was a careful officer who didn't throw his authority around. Moreover, he was a good friend, one of Doug's best. Over the years they had spent many a night together out on the Gulf on Porter's creaky old cruiser—a gesture of fraternity which he offered to very few.

Doug called, a breezy greeting, and the deputy answered with a cool, unsmiling nod. At that Doug's heart dropped a beat. He had touched the edge of a new and unpredictable experience. This was an Earl Porter he had never seen before, the police officer at work, facing him across a question of crime.

"Doug, I'm mighty sorry about this."

"Can't say I haven't been expecting you, Earl—but you do look pretty serious about it."

"Homicide's a serious business. I phoned your dad half an hour ago to say I was comin' over. Figured you'd want him behind you in case you might need him."

Need him? For what? The question filled Doug's mind but he did not voice it. Inside Porter, for all the deputy's mildness of manner, he felt a fixity of purpose and a new quality of grimness that alarmed him.

Doug gestured Porter into the side door and followed with a frown. Matt Bradford was moving about the living room with his heavy, thudding step. He stopped short as they entered and greeted Porter almost gruffly, his face darkened and set.

"Now let's ever'body take it ni-ice and easy." Porter selected the softest chair in the room and stretched himself out in it with catlike appreciation. "Won't take long—I hope."

Doug's father scowled down at the deputy. "Doug's entirely in the clear. We can make that as plain as day in two minutes."

Porter shook his head slowly. "It ain't quite as simple as that. Reason I'm a little late gettin' here, I've been goin' around checkin'

on Doug—things like how much he was seein' of that girl Jackie Burrows and how serious it was between 'em.'

"That's no secret, Earl," Doug said. "You might have come straight here and asked me."

"Might have," Porter agreed easily, "except in a murder case folks are sort of inclined to minimize the importance of the most important things—such as motives."

The deputy had implied something there, but Doug chose to pass over it. "I liked Jackie very much," he said frankly. "I saw her as often as I could. As for how serious it was, I intended——"

Matt Bradford broke in. "All that's beside the point, Earl. Doug's feelings don't enter into your case. He was upstate on a bridge job—he hadn't seen that girl in five solid weeks. . . . What do you keep shaking your head for?"

"It just ain't so."

"*What* isn't so?"

"That he hadn't seen the girl in five weeks."

Doug's father glowered down at the deputy. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"No, sir. You're too sensible a man to try lyin' about it, and besides, it wouldn't do any good. I found out something you 'parently don't know 'bout. Doug didn't *stay* upstate all that while. He came back three different times—spent three different week ends down here, seein' that girl."

Doug gulped down a groan.

"What're you talking about, Earl?" his father said roughly. "Doug left here five weeks ago and didn't get back until night before last. I was here all along, I ought to know."

"Didn't say he came back to this house," Porter pointed out calmly. "Fact is, he stayed at a motel, the Azalea Court, a few blocks down the beach from Jackie Burrows's place. I'd seen his car there early one Sunday. They've got three guest cards with his name on 'em."

Matt Bradford turned on his son, startled, his scowl even darker, and Doug inwardly cringed.

"It's true enough, Dad."

He half expected to be grabbed by both shoulders, lifted out of his chair, and shaken. Instead, a question blasted at him.

"*Why?*"

Doug met his father's furious glare. "This is why, the way you're

acting now. You didn't like me to see so much of Jackie. You'd have raised a hell of a row about it, spoiled it. The long drive down and the long drive back gave me only a few hours with her each time, and I wanted to keep them pleasant. Who can blame me for that?"

With a growling sound Matt Bradford turned away; but at once he turned back to level a finger at Porter. Doug had seen him like this in the field, quickly accepting the fact of an emergency, quickly moving to resolve it from the most practical angle of attack. It was bewildering to Doug to realize that this time the emergency was himself.

"All right, Earl. So you've been digging, you've come up with something I didn't know about my own son. But what difference does it make? None. It's still a fact that he's in the clear. When he got back home from North Lake night before last that girl was already dead."

"You sure of that now?"

"Of course I'm sure. I was here. It was a little before midnight when Doug arrived. She was killed before then." Matt Bradford added quickly, "—according to the paper. And that settles that."

He had meant it to be a powerful point, but Porter was not impressed.

"Well-l, now," the deputy drawled. "I can't doubt that's when he reached home if you say so—but right there, 'parently, is something else you don't know. Actually he was seen down the beach some earlier'n that."

"Earlier! How much earlier?"

"He showed up at the Blue Dolphin more'n an hour before that, askin' for Jackie Burrows."

Doug's father drew in a breath for an angry answer; but suddenly the pressure went out of him. The implication of Porter's quiet statement left him stunned. He stared uncomprehendingly at his son. "You didn't tell me that."

"But it's true, ain't it, Doug?" Porter asked.

Doug felt helpless before the force of the revelation. He gestured, admitting that denial would be futile.

"I sure hate this, Doug," Porter said softly, "seein' a good friend mixed up in a messy murder, but I sure can't close my eyes to it either. You ain't goin' to make me grill it out of you, are you? Sup-

pose you tell me 'bout it—where you went that night and what you did.”

“Of course I’ll tell you.” Doug kept his eyes on Porter, conscious that his father was staring at him incredulously. “I’d phoned Jackie in the morning, before leaving North Lake, to say I’d see her that evening. I made good time driving down, and went through Belle Loma without stopping, and reached Jackie’s apartment about ten. She wasn’t there. Her car was gone, but the lights were on and the door was unlocked, so I waited, expecting she’d be back at any minute. But she didn’t come. So after twenty minutes or so I drove back to the Blue Dolphin, thinking she might be working late, but Marie said no, she’d left earlier than usual, between eight-thirty and nine.”

Porter’s nod signified that he did not question this.

“I couldn’t understand it—she’d said she would wait for me at her apartment. I was anxious to see her and it worried me a little——”

“So you went on to other places, didn’t you, tryin’ to find her?”

“I went back to her apartment, but she was still out, so I didn’t wait again—I came on home.”

“Without stoppin’ anywhere along the way?”

Doug’s guard went up. *They’re officers with a job to do. They’ll make some allowance for friendship, but not much.* He was beginning to realize what his father’s warning meant. All day Porter had been hunting down and sifting information about him. The deputy’s easygoing perseverance was something to fear.

“I stopped for a drink somewhere, I don’t remember where.”

Porter looked at him with hard reproach. “I can tell you where, Doug—but it wasn’t only one stop, it was four. You had a quick drink at each place, then went on to the next.”

“What of it?” Doug said. “I was tired, I needed a lift.”

“You were lookin’ for Jackie.”

“I wouldn’t have needed to stop to know she wasn’t at any of those places. If she had been, her car would have been there too.”

“Unless she was out with another man, in *his* car.”

Doug’s face was flushed with embarrassment. “Anyway, except for those brief stops I came straight on home.”

“Feelin’ pretty burned up about her,” Porter said softly. “Pretty hot and sore.”

Doug could not answer. Porter had hit the truth dead center. Bitter disappointment had spurred him along. He *had* looked for

Jackie's hardtop all along the way; he *had* suspected she had gone somewhere with another man and forgotten the time; he *had* felt the sting of blind, jealous conjecture. Although he had rebuked himself for it, the doubt had stayed with him. *Where had she been? Who had she been with?*

The ironic part of it was that, according to Caryl, he had actually passed within several yards of Jackie's car without noticing it—her car parked in the dark, only about a block from his home. But he was still unable to credit Caryl's story entirely; and squirming under the pinch of a new fear, he could not bring himself to repeat it to Porter.

"It's bad, Doug," the deputy was saying. "It's real bad."

Matt Bradford turned on him again. "What's so damned bad about it? Doug has accounted for himself. He's told you he didn't even see the girl that night."

Porter had slid low in the chair, legs extended. Now he pushed both hands against the cushion to hoist himself a little—regretfully, as if to meet the crucial question.

"Let's see how it shapes up now. Doug admits he was far gone on that girl. He was out and out in love with her and he sure showed it. Fact is, folks down the beach who saw 'em together say he was fixin' to marry her. . . . That so, Doug?"

He had begun with the intention of talking to Porter candidly. Now stiffly on the defensive, he felt himself forced into an evasion. "I—hadn't asked her to marry me. Does it matter?"

"Sure does, because whether she loved you back is another question. You probably thought she did, but it looks like she didn't. At least she didn't wait for you that night—she stood you up. Went off with another man, didn't she, Doug?"

"I don't know, and neither do you."

"I admit I don't know that for sure—but it ties in with another important question. What kind of girl was she? What kind did you imagine she was, and what kind was she really? Accordin' to the people who worked with her and watched her and knew her the best, she wasn't as sweet as she looked. Inside her, they say, was a hard core. A schemer, they say, a cold-blooded schemer who knew how to use men for purposes of her own."

"That's not true!" Doug blurted.

Porter shrugged. "The song says smoke gets in your eyes, boy,

and it su-ure does. You couldn't see her for what she really was—until that night when all of a sudden you found out."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

Matt Bradford echoed his son's indignant question. "Let's have it in plain talk, Earl, whatever the hell you're driving at."

Porter nodded slowly, looking pained, and directed his answer to Doug's father. "Here's a boy who was head-over-heels crazy about that girl. He's made a long, hard, hot trip hurryin' to see her again. When he finally gets to her apartment, all happy at the thought that now he can be with her, she's not there. She hasn't bothered to wait for him. He's hurt by that, hurt bad. He wonders, Where is she, who is she with now, who has she been playin' around with while I was away, who is it she's come to like so much better than me? He's sore clear through, real jealous. He has to find out about that other man, so he starts lookin' into bars. He has drinks, no less'n four quick ones. He's tired and bothered and they stir him up. Now he's so good and angry at that girl for two-timin' him that he goes out searchin' for her ever'where. And then he finds her."

"No," Doug said tightly.

"He sees her car. Maybe she's in it, or maybe she's in a house or a motel with this other man. What he discovers is the worst that could hit him, the worst. It tells him she's been lyin' to him and leadin' him on and makin' a great big fool out of him. He hates her for it and he's out of his head from the shock. Maybe he wades right in, or maybe he waits for his chance to get her alone—either way, he hits back and keeps hittin' in a blind rage, and when he stops she's dead." Porter looked up. "That's how a clean, decent boy who's in love with the wrong kind of girl can be goaded into killin' her."

Doug was almost too dazed to hear his own voice. "Earl—I don't know how it happened, except that it wasn't that way. I tell you I didn't see Jackie that night."

Matt Bradford spoke flatly. "It's damn nonsense, all of it. I saw Doug here a few minutes after he came into this house. There was nothing wrong with him. He wasn't excited or mussed up. The way he acted was entirely natural. It's damn nonsense to say he'd just finished murdering a woman in hot blood."

Porter's answer was made so softly as to be almost inaudible. "Couldn't expect you to say different. You're his dad."

"Listen to me, Earl," Doug said earnestly. "You've been checking on me very thoroughly, so you know I spent all the next day trying to find Jackie, and most of the next evening besides. There could be only one reason for that—I didn't even know what had happened to her. I kept phoning her apartment——"

"I know you did," Porter broke in. "I was there one time you called—recognized your voice. That's one thing that started me on you. But all that—the phone calls and the huntin' around—could be a cover-up."

Doug leaned back hopelessly—and the next moment he was sitting up again, staring, his whole body tautly still.

Porter, hoisting himself in the easy chair again, had found something wedged in the crevice beside the cushion. He brought it up absently, his mind elsewhere, and turned it over in his fingers—a cigarette case.

Jackie's!

One look was enough. It *was* the cigarette case with the built-in lighter that Doug had brought to Jackie on his last visit from North Lake.

He sat incapable of motion, too bewildered to believe it in spite of his certainty. A startled glance showed him that his father was paying no attention to it. Even more dumfounding, it meant nothing to Earl Porter. It was not monogrammed—the deputy didn't realize whose it was. Porter looked about for a table on which to put it, found none within reach, placed it on the broad arm of the chair instead, and forgot it.

"Before I decide what I'm goin' to do about you, Doug"—he pushed himself to his feet—"there's one more thing I've got to check on. Your car . . . Doug, do you hear me?"

His mind was spinning; he hadn't heard. He pulled his eyes off the cigarette case. "What?"

"If you don't mind, I want a look inside the trunk of your car."

"Why—why, sure. Why not?"

The next few minutes were a blur. Fumbling for his pocket, he realized he was still in his swimming trunks. He mumbled an excuse, stumbled up the stairs, found his keys, came back down. Next he was in the carport with Porter and his father, unlocking the rear deck of his convertible and lifting the lid.

Porter put his head inside for a close, unbearably long look; and

finally he straightened with a sigh of relief, satisfied that it was not Doug's convertible that had been used to transport the victim's body from the scene of the murder.

"That's good, Doug, good. I've got to bear in mind it's not conclusive, but it's enough to let me give you a break. If it was anybody else, I'd take him down to the office and grill hell out of him. But I know you won't run off and I'm goin' to let it go for now. Stick around until I want you again, hear?"

"Yes, sure, sure."

"Meanwhile I'll be givin' Roy Greer the time he needs to run down a lead on another man who's been seen around with Jackie—man name of Bart Redman."

Bart Redman!

Doug's eyes flashed to his father's—but Matt Bradford was staring stony-faced at Porter.

"Did Jackie ever mention Bart Redman to you, Doug?"

"No! No. She didn't——"

A force outside himself was pulling him away. His father stayed with Porter in the driveway while he went back to the living room. He picked up the cigarette case slowly, and the touch of it brought half-forgotten incidents tumbling to the fore of his mind. His peculiar feeling, the night of his return, that some sort of crisis had occurred in this house—his father's suppressed agitation—the strange sounds in the small hours of the night—the dampness in the kitchen—the white throw rug seen first in the hall, then unaccountably returned to its accustomed place—

He went to the foot of the stairs and stood staring at the rug. After a moment he reached down, took a corner of it between thumb and forefinger and turned it half over. The underside was blotched with a dark, adhering substance. His touch found the stuff hard, crusty. Dark brown—black-red. . . . Dried blood.

Chapter 14

The rug slipped from Doug's hand and dropped back into place, the incredible stains concealed again.

With it a veil fell off his perceptions. Since his return night be-

fore last he had brushed past a series of signs without reading their full meaning. At first he had been too disappointed and disturbed by Jackie's unexplained absence to realize they might be related; next he had been too shocked by her violent death. He had wondered endlessly where it had happened without once associating it with his own home. But now, as swiftly as the light glittering across the metal case, it had flashed in. Suddenly it was here, all around him, surrounding him inescapably.

Another forgotten detail snapped back to him, one which some mechanism of his mind, subconsciously defensive, had blanked out entirely: the knife.

Death resulted from multiple stab wounds, the first news report had said—without specifying the weapon.

Here in the kitchen of his own home he had found a knife, one that had been *used* and hastily washed, but not thoroughly cleaned or dried. A knife still bearing dark traces of blood?—Jackie's blood?

A surge of rage sent Doug toward the kitchen; and as he moved, the side door opened and his father came in—smiling.

He stopped, caught in a tangle of confusion. Matt Bradford's smile was comradely, as Doug had rarely seen it—a promise of steadfast support.

Earl Porter's suspicions of Doug had struck with unexpected force, but without hesitation his father had met the threat head on and had stoutly defended him. The pressure might increase, but no matter; Doug knew he could rely on Matt Bradford to resist at his side at every step. Jackie alive had brought a breach between them; dead, she had become a shared danger.

Here at last was the understanding loyalty that had been denied Doug; and now that he had it, he was repaying it with suspicions of his own. He felt pulled apart. The evidence he had found pointed straight to only one man, his own father; yet he was utterly at a loss to account for it. He could not believe Matt Bradford capable of a vicious murder, yet his suspicions were overpoweringly strong.

He stood still until his father came close and whacked his shoulder; then he pulled away.

"You're all right, Doug. Earl had to do that. It's just routine." Matt Bradford was following Doug into the living room. "He can't make trouble for you, not serious trouble."

"Why can't he?" Doug asked, tightly quiet. "Are you going to tell him?"

"Tell him what?"

"That you'd been seeing Jackie while I was away. Seeing her under a phony name. That you brought her here that night."

Matt Bradford's smile vanished. "How——?" He stopped.

Doug pointed to the cigarette case lying on the arm of the chair Jackie had occupied. "That was Jackie's. I gave it to her. She liked it, carried it everywhere. It shows she came here with you."

His father looked sickened. "No, Doug. She didn't——"

"Don't lie to me! There it is, the proof!"

He expected Matt Bradford's anger to rise swiftly, to outblast his own. Instead, his father answered with a strange gentleness.

"I haven't lied to you, Doug."

"Oh no? I've said to you, not once, but several times in the past two days, that you'd never met Jackie. But you had met her. I said you seemed to know something about her I didn't know, and that was true. But you ducked it, you wouldn't admit it."

"I held out, yes, because I hoped you'd never have to know. But I haven't lied and I'm not lying now."

"You've held out, all right!—held out the biggest thing of all, and the worst. She was here that night."

"Yes."

"*This* is where——"

The accusation pressed to his lips—"You killed her!"—but he could not bring himself to speak the words because he still could not believe it possible. The truth without that was shattering enough.

"She was killed here in this house and you've known it all along. All the while I was hunting for her you knew it, and you didn't tell me. You let Earl sit there and grill me—accuse me—and still you held back!"

Matt Bradford faced him squarely. "It wasn't necessary to tell Earl what happened. I hope it will never be necessary. But if it should come to that, I will tell him. Damn right I will, Doug! Until then——"

"Big of you!" Doug blurted bitterly. "You'll let your son go on being suspected of murder—saving your own skin—until the last possible minute!"

Now Matt Bradford's anger did well up. For one fearful moment

Doug expected to feel one of those big hard fists driving into his face. It cost his father a stiff effort to put down that impulse and another to speak calmly.

"So far you're not in too bad a spot, son. Earl has no case, none that will stand up, and he knows it. He may get one or he may not. If not, he needn't ever hear all this. But if you want me to tell him regardless—tell him first, even before I tell you what really happened—I'll do it right now."

In making that offer Matt Bradford had placed his son's security above his own. It disarmed Doug. He could not conceivably say to this man who had already defended him, who would go on doggedly defending him to the last, "Yes, do it, go ahead and incriminate yourself for my sake." The realization struck him that he had all but condemned Matt Bradford without a hearing. As black as the evidence was, his father should be given an opportunity to explain it. At least he should be allowed to *attempt* to explain it.

Doug began pacing. "Those five week I was away—— They're blank. When I left, Jackie was a stranger to you, and you wanted her out of my life. By the time I came back she'd become so much a part of yours——" He shook his head miserably. "I can't begin to fill it in. What *was* there between Jackie and you?"

He saw the question bring a twist of pain and disgust to his father's face. It startled him. It suggested there was something Matt Bradford dreaded to reveal—perhaps something he would continue to hold out of his story. Doug had told himself he must keep an open mind, but now, at this unwittingly given signal, he began watching his father distrustfully and listening with a new edge on his suspicions.

"It's hard to explain, Doug, even to myself. Let me get at it in my own way. . . . This morning, in your bedroom, you said I'd never tried to understand your feeling for Jackie. It's not true. I did try. That's exactly how all this started."

Now it was Matt Bradford who was tensely moving about; and he was avoiding Doug's eyes.

"The situation was all wrong, full of misunderstandings. Your mother was dead set against that girl even though they'd never met, and that was bad—but it wasn't stopping you. I was afraid you were walking blindly into plenty of disappointment and heartbreak, and I told you so—but you were going straight ahead regardless. Somebody was mistaken, badly mistaken, that was clear—and it could

be me. So I decided to find out what she was like and to try to understand your attachment for her." Bitter ruefulness hardened Matt Bradford's mouth for a moment. "I understand it now—too damned well."

There was anger in his father's face again, Doug saw, but it was anger at himself.

"She was just a name to me, a name without a face or a body or a background. I'd never seen her. You objected to being questioned about her, and, besides, she evidently hadn't told you very much about herself. So I had to find another source of information." Doug's father paused. "You won't like this, but it seemed to me the obvious move was to hire a private detective. I did that—a man named Malls in Palmport—and asked him to give me a report on her."

Doug felt his face flushing; but he reminded himself it was too late for resentment. More important, he thought, was this—his father seemed to be taking the long way around, to be evading or at least postponing an important disclosure. A painful one—perhaps shameful.

"Malls got acquainted with Jackie, pretending to be a business man. I won't go into details because almost nothing came out of it. Malls's reports were too routine, incomplete, and for the most part superficial. After four or five of them I realized he couldn't tell me what I needed to know—the kind of stuff Jackie was made of, why she appealed so much to you, how much you meant to her, how she would measure up as your wife. I saw then that nobody else could get the answers for me. I had to get them for myself."

"So you planned it like one of your projects," Doug said dryly. "Phase Number One, pack Doug off to North Lake to get him out of the way. Then? Phase Number Two——"

"I simply wanted to size her up, to estimate her character by observing her in action. For years I've done just that with the men I hire, and my judgment has proved itself over and over again—it's damned sound and I rely on it. I thought she wouldn't notice me particularly as a run-of-the-mill customer, and when I met her later, through you, I could easily pass it off. That was absolutely all I intended, Doug. But in the very first minute I bungled it, and after that everything went wrong."

The remembered beginning brought bewilderment into Matt Bradford's eyes.

"You and I don't look very much alike, and I'd counted on that.

But Jackie immediately noticed a resemblance. She even spoke of it—asked me if I was related to you. It rattled me. I thought, if I thought at all, that if I admitted who I was she might begin putting on an act. Then my chance would be gone. For another thing, my feeling toward her was one of resistance, rejection. She was already too close. I'd gone there hoping to find a good reason for getting her out of your life, and I felt that telling her the truth would only bring her closer into a relationship I damned well didn't want." Doug's father made a gesture reflecting the confusion that had swept over him at that moment. "I can't give you a better explanation. At any rate, I denied it—lied to her."

Doug was listening with a divided mind—willing to understand, yet skeptical because his father was showing a facet he had never seen before. This was a confession of dishonesty which might in itself be dishonest.

"Once that lie was told it was too late—there was no going back. I told her the second one—gave her a false name—in order to make the first one stick. I swore at myself over it, but afterward, thinking about it, I saw that it actually gave me an advantage—an underhanded one, but anyhow a better chance to judge Jackie as she really was. Remember this, Doug—I felt damned strongly that she wasn't the girl for you, and I hoped I could make you see it in time. If I could accomplish that, then she would never have to know who I really was. So I went back the next night and began getting acquainted. After that I saw her often—talked to her, questioned her, tried to sound her out about you——"

"And rented a shabby shack under your phony name so you could have a place to take her to!"

The scorn in Doug's voice brought his father to a surprised standstill. Matt Bradford did not ask how his son had learned this, and he did not deny it.

"I couldn't possibly bring Jackie here. For another thing, I couldn't spend too much time with her in public places, or even in her apartment, because someone who knew me might drop in. Besides, there was an all-important question in my mind. What was it she really wanted, you personally or the money in your family? That was why I passed myself off as a low-salaried salesman, and used a beat-up company car instead of the Lincoln, and rented a place that was, as you say, downright shabby. It was a test." Doug's father wagged his head.

"It didn't seem to make any difference to her—and that's when I began feeling I'd misjudged her."

Doug smiled wryly. "You were carrying it pretty far, weren't you—in my behalf?"

Matt Bradford peered hard at Doug. "Too damned far—except that it was the other way around. Now it was carrying me along. I didn't realize what was happening to me, how deeply I'd become involved. The feeling—*came*. It took hold of me. I knew it was dangerous, I knew I was being a damned fool—but it made no difference. I had no control over it. I tried to stay away from her, but I couldn't—I kept going back. Doug, I still can't explain it—but surely you can understand it."

"I can. You fell for her!"

Doug felt a wild urge to laugh. This was the man who had condemned Jackie sight unseen, who had demanded to know what was so fascinating about her! He had wanted to learn why his son was so attracted to her? Well, he had learned! . . . But Doug did not laugh or even smile. The impulse was stifled by the wretched look on his father's face.

"Your last night away, Doug, the night you were coming home—— I knew that had to be the end of it, absolutely the end. I couldn't see her again—never, not under any circumstances. I couldn't think of facing the two of you together. And if your mother ever heard of this—— Impossible, the whole thing. I'd gotten myself into an intolerable mess and I was desperate to pull out.

"There was only one way, only one that I could think of, half crazy as I was. That was for Jackie to go away from here, go to some place where neither of us would ever see her again. So I went to her apartment that night. I offered her money—begged her to leave. She flatly refused. She turned malicious, threatened me——"

The telephone was ringing. Matt Bradford had not heard; he made no move toward it. Doug, staring dismayed at his father, reached for it almost automatically.

"Yes?"

"Doug? Earl." There was a guarded note in the deputy's drawl. "I'm speakin' sort of off the record, as a friend. Thought I ought to warn you, Doug. This thing has taken a mighty ugly turn."

"What is it, Earl?"

"We just got the autopsy report. That girl was pregnant."

Doug stood stunned.

"Not long," Porter said quietly. "A month or six weeks as near as they can tell. So get hold of yourself, boy. That in itself is a big, powerful motive. There's likely to be some real rough goin' ahead."

The phone was sinking in Doug's hand like a weight too heavy to support. He was staring again at his father, heartsick and soulsick.

Chapter 15

Matt Bradford had taken the telephone from Doug's hand and had heard Porter repeat the message. With a growled word he disconnected. His face had stiffened against the impact, but there was no surprise in it. Had a section of the new bridge at North Lake collapsed, he would have reacted like this, realistically accepting it for the disaster it was without wasting a moment in deploring it. He turned and closed both hands on Doug's shoulders.

"Earl didn't say as much, but—he thinks it was you."

"It wasn't!"

"Who, then?"

Doug's mind was wrenched. What possible answer could he give to that? He pressed his lips together; but the unspeakable accusation was in his eyes.

His father read it and took a backward step.

"Doug, you're looking at me as if—— Listen. Keep your head. Don't jump to conclusions, least of all that one."

But this man had confessed to an attempt to buy Jackie off. An offer of money had not been enough to induce her to go. Then—having failed in that way to get rid of her——?

"From the beginning there was one thing I never forgot for a minute," Matt Bradford said earnestly. "This was the girl my son was in love with, the girl my son was thinking of marrying. That makes me the one man in the world it couldn't possibly be. Good Lord, Doug, you must see that!"

There was a naked sincerity in his father's face, a pleading for belief. No man, Doug found himself thinking, could look into his eyes with such wholehearted intensity and lie. The force of it quickly

drove out his doubts. For an unthinking moment he had judged his father capable of an impossible degradation. It *was* impossible; Matt Bradford had fallen into small deceits, but he was utterly incapable of this. Doug shuddered with relief and those big hands held him still until he answered.

"Yes, I see it, Dad. I know it."

He pulled away and dropped into a chair, feeling spent. The shocks had come rapidly, one after another, and the last blow, the most brutal of all, had shattered his image of Jackie. Until now he had kept it in spite of all his father's slurs and warnings. *She's no good for you, Doug. . . . You know too little about her. . . . Now they're digging for the facts about her. Don't expect them to be pretty. . . . Would this have happened if she had spent her nights waiting for you at home alone—if she hadn't been playing one man off against another, including you?* It hadn't mattered, any of it. He had held to his belief in Jackie's goodness, regardless. Now, in a tick of time, a few words spoken softly but carrying the power of a bomb blast had destroyed it.

"I'm sorry, Doug."

He lifted his head. "You said you'd made a fool of yourself over her. I was a worse one." Then he was frowning. "I can't even guess who it could be—the other man. While I was here she wasn't seeing anyone but me, so far as I know."

"It was the same way while you were upstate, Doug. A few casual dates, and on Sundays she saw you for a few hours, although I didn't know it then. But otherwise she spent most of her time with me."

They gazed at each other. Of all the moments of rapport with his father that Doug had ever experienced, this was the strangest—and somehow the deepest. Yet there was uncertainty in it—many unanswered questions—and danger.

"You realize, Dad"—it had struck Doug cold—"Roy Greer is looking for you under that false name you used!"

Matt Bradford nodded tightly. "If he manages to trace me, I'll be in a hell of a worse spot than you are. If he finds out what I did, he'll never believe the truth."

"What did you do? Did you bring her here that night?"

His father began pacing again. "I'll give it to you straight, step by step, exactly as it came. I've told you I went to Jackie's apartment and tried to pay her to go away, and that she flatly refused. We both

got worked up over it, and I slammed out. From there I drove straight home, badly upset. I unlocked the side door, but instead of coming into the house I went walking along the beach, letting off steam and trying to think of some other way to get her out of here. When I came back within sight of the house I noticed lights in the windows and thought you'd arrived from North Lake. I used that door and——"

Doug's father pointed to the entrance in the vestibule, on the beach side of the house, and paused.

"Just as I came in I thought I heard a sound. I called your name but there wasn't any answer. I'm certain now I'd scared somebody off. Somebody must have ducked out the side door in a hurry, but at the time I wasn't sure what the sound was or where it had come from. The hallway was dark, but the lamps were on here in the living room, so I came in and looked around. There was an ash tray on the arm of that chair with one crushed-out butt in it."

But no cigarette case? Had it already fallen into the crevice beside the cushion? Doug's father went on without mentioning the case.

"There was lipstick on the end of the cigarette. A woman had been in here, plainly enough, while I was walking on the beach, but I had no idea who she was. I puzzled over it, and emptied the ash tray into the wastebasket, then went back into the hall. There was something dark lying on the floor just outside the kitchen. I snapped on the hallway light. It was Jackie, her clothes ripped, blood on the floor under her."

Doug shrank in his chair. If he had stopped at this house instead of driving straight through Belle Loma—if he had not been so eager to reach Jackie at her apartment—he would have been the one to find her lifeless body here.

"She must have followed me from her apartment. It's the only way I can explain how she had come here. She'd begun to suspect I was using an assumed name. She'd threatened to find out who I really was, so she'd trailed me. She must have come in the door I'd left unlocked, and she'd waited for me to come back. I can picture her sitting there, smiling to herself in that gloating way she had sometimes, and figuring the angles. She'd sneaked up from behind and pulled my mask off. She had me then, and I can't doubt she meant to make the most of it. Blackmail? Probably. I didn't waste time wondering."

Whatever scheme Jackie had had in mind, Matt Bradford said as

he moved about in agitation, she could have made it damned rough for him; but her dead body in this house was a far worse threat. If found here it would bring disaster crashing down on all of them. Everything he had tried to keep concealed—the false name he had used, that whole shabby deception—would come out in the papers. It would be pressed heavily against him.

“You and your mother would have every reason to believe I’d killed her. So would my business associates—everyone. I looked at that girl’s dead body and saw every department of my life being wrecked, saw myself being convicted of her murder.” Doug’s father stopped to peer at him. “In my shoes, son, what would you have done?”

Doug did not answer aloud. He wondered if he would have had the power of decision and the courage to act as his father had acted. At that point the case against Matt Bradford had been fearfully strong; discovery would have made it conclusive. Matt Bradford had seen only one long chance to escape the oncoming calamity and he had taken the gamble.

“I was half crazy again, Doug, thinking you might turn up at any minute and catch me at it. I had too little time. I used the company car—carried her out and put her in the trunk. There were lights in the Phillips house, and I had to be quiet and careful. Once that much was done, I remembered that Jackie must have come in her car. Where was it? Wherever she’d parked it, I couldn’t leave it there—I’d have to move it too, the first chance I found. I scouted up and down the Drive and spotted it in the lane beside Caryl’s house.”

Doug’s father had known that Jackie’s hardtop must be sitting somewhere near by; but Doug, passing later, had missed it because he had not remotely expected to find it so near his own home. But if he *had* seen it there, what would he have thought, what would he have done? It was an empty wonder.

“I decided to leave it alone until later. Other things, more important things, had to be done first. So I came back here and started off——”

The telling had brought a look of pained urgency to Matt Bradford’s face.

“You know now where I took her. Traffic was light. I was able to get her out of the trunk, close the lid and carry her off the road into that patch of jungle before another car passed. I kept praying Charlie Kersh wouldn’t come patrolling along. Two more cars came—and

passed, thank God—before I could get back to mine and pull out of there. I'd been damned lucky. That was the worst part and it was done.

"When I came back along the Drive, Jackie's car was still there where I'd seen it before."

Speaking rapidly now, Doug's father told him of his nightmarish efforts to clean away the bloodstains in the kitchen. "Then my luck suddenly ran out—time was up. I heard you pulling into the carport. There was still a big blot left on the hallway floor where I'd found her. I managed to get it covered by a rug and to duck out the front just as you came in the other door.

"I felt licked, shut out. My clothes were wet and stained, such a mess that I couldn't possibly show myself. Then I remembered—a pair of swimming trunks I'd left hanging on the clothesline near the outdoor shower. I put them on, then went down and pawed a hole in the sand. Those clothes are still buried there."

Matt Bradford squared his shoulders. "Then came the toughest part of all, pretending to you that nothing had happened."

Doug could well understand the tearing strain of that and his father's revulsive outburst when he had stated his intention of marrying the girl who had died violently only a short time earlier in this same house.

"Later, after you'd been asleep for a while, I got up from bed to finish the job. It would be getting light soon and the first thing to do was to get Jackie's car out of the neighborhood. I'd have to take it some place farther away and walk back, and I couldn't let myself be seen. So I went out and down the Drive and——" Matt Bradford stared at his son. "I couldn't believe my own eyes. It wasn't there any more. Somebody else had driven it away."

"The murderer." Doug pushed himself to his feet. "Somebody who lives near here."

"Not necessarily. Someone might have followed Jackie here, just as she followed me. Finding her here might have given him the chance he'd been looking for." Doug's father lifted his arms and dropped them hopelessly. "I don't know, Doug—I'm damned if I know who could have done it or why. I haven't even a suspicion. . . . Have you?"

"No. But this much is fairly certain—the murderer knows about you. You and the murderer were working together that night—you moved the body and he moved the car. All he has to do now is sit

back until they track down a friend of Jackie's who called himself Bart Redman—and let you get nailed for it.”

Abruptly Doug turned away. His father followed him into the kitchen. They looked about. There was no visible sign of the bloodstains, but Doug knew they could not be eradicated completely. Traces remained in the cracks between the floorboards of the hallway and in the crevices of the cork tile in here. Police experts using chemical tests could bring them up unmistakably—even on the weapon.

Doug opened the drawer in which he had found the knife. He reached in—and his hand hung. Stooping, he looked deeper, clearing aside the culinary gadgets, making sure. He straightened, looking startled.

“Dad, did you do anything with the knife—get rid of it?”

Matt Bradford answered, his mouth twisting, “No. I haven't touched it since dropping it in there.”

“It's not here now.”

Doug had been on the beach most of the afternoon. His father had been in Palmport. The house had been deserted, the doors unlocked. Someone could have come in—someone from near by, knowing the way was open. Someone had sneaked in and out again with the knife.

But why? The instrument of murder, if the investigators found it here, would immeasurably tighten the case against either Doug or his father. For what reason, then, would the killer return and remove it—and at considerable risk of being surprised in the act? Doug could not think of an answer. The explanation was probably much simpler—it probably wasn't actually missing. Yesterday had been the maid's day in—very likely she had used it, then put it in a different drawer.

Doug was turning, intending to search farther for the knife, when his father's hand took his arm.

“Doug—— I've told you everything there is for me to tell. Before I began you accused me of protecting myself at your expense. In a way it's true. Earl doesn't suspect me at all so far, but there's no question that you're the top suspect on his list. I can change that. He'll cross you off once and for all the minute he hears this. If you still feel the same way, I'll call him back right now.”

“No!” Doug said.

His mind skimmed back. The case against Matt Bradford was open and shut. His father had confessed to every element of it except the

murder itself. It was an omission which a detective's mind could fill in easily.

The basis? A married, middle-aged man carried along by a runaway infatuation. Repeated secret rendezvous in a cheap "love nest"—a highlight made to order for sensational headlines. The motive? The girl's pregnancy—escape from blackmail or scandal. Opportunity, means? It was all there—and more. The most damning act of all—the transporting and hiding of the victim's body under cover of darkness—was one Matt Bradford could not deny.

Doug thought of Earl Porter and Roy Greer, the one slow-moving but thoroughgoing, the other quick and scientifically self-trained—both of them working steadily closer. The question of guilt would not lead them farther than this house. They would find their answer here—the wrong answer, but one they could prove beyond all reasonable doubt to be right.

"Hold off," Doug said. "Never mind me. I don't give a damn how much Earl may suspect me. We've got to hold off as long as we possibly can."

Chapter 16

The autopsy report lay on the sheriff's desk between Earl Porter and old Ben McCardle. The deputy had been the first to read it. In his unhurried way he had thought about it for a while before bringing it in to his chief. Sheriff McCardle had made faces over it, and wheezed, and wagged his bristly gray head. Finally he had pushed it away as if unwilling to touch it again.

"As long as I been in this office I've never got resigned to how almighty sinful people can be." The sheriff carefully tilted his chair back and enfolded his hands on his immense paunch. "Well, Earl? You went out of here this morning saying you had a right good lead, but you didn't tell me what it was."

Porter was stretched out in a chair facing his chief, grave-eyed and withdrawn. The cloistered peacefulness of the office had undergone an unpleasant change. The report lying on the desk was an evil thing, a contamination.

"Does this tie in with that lead of yours, Earl?"

Porter loved and respected that old-timer in the sheriff's chair. McCardle was as honest as daylight, and just, and incorruptible. He counted on those same qualities in his men. He was putting the question squarely to Porter, and Porter could not duck it.

"You'd gotten onto some man or other this morning, Earl," the sheriff insisted.

"Doug Bradford."

"We-el-l!" McCardle's astonishment was such that he ponderously tilted himself upright again. "Matt's boy. Well-l, now. I understand what you meant, Earl, when you spoke about having to be careful." His faded blue eyes seemed to dim. "I sure would hate it if it was Doug. Think it was Doug, Earl?"

"There are only two men in this case," Porter said soberly. "Doug is one. Roy's lookin' for the other, a man name of Bart Redman. The way it stacks up now, it's got to be one or the other."

"I sure hope it's the other then—that Redman," Ben McCardle said heavily. "I sure would hate having to go into Matt Bradford's family for a killer. . . ."

Porter had heard the outer door open. The quick footfalls in the general office and the tension brought into the air, told him Roy Greer had come in. He straightened and leaned forward to speak quietly to McCardle.

"We're not givin' this out to the papers, are we, chief—about Doug?"

"Why—— Not so far. Not till we have to."

"You and me, we 'preciate how a lot of bad publicity would hurt Doug and his dad. But Roy—— A big case like this, he likes to whoop it up. He wouldn't care."

McCardle blinked at Porter through a vagueness. The old man saw this, or half saw it, for what it meant—that his two deputies were working at cross-purposes—and he didn't like it. He teetered in his squeaking chair and wheezed and finally mumbled, "I'll take care of Roy."

Greer was hurrying in, again with plaster casts in his hands—this time only three. He put them on the sheriff's desk with an unmannerly clatter and, without invitation, pulled a chair close. Never mind if he had interrupted Porter; what he had to say was more important, and he was taking over.

"How're you making out, speedy boy?" Greer didn't wait for Porter to answer this jibe before adding another. "Thought this was a fancy waste of time, didn't you, boy?" He grinned derisively, full of self-satisfied achievement. "Well, as it turns out, what I have here is damn solid evidence pointing straight to our killer."

Porter permitted himself a mild grimace of distaste, but he kept quiet and let Greer have the spotlight. McCardle was not warmed by Greer's cockiness, but he admired Greer's skill, and such evidence as this promised results. With an effort he swiveled his bulk and studied it as he listened.

Greer, as eager as he was to start the show going, took time to turn a searching look on Porter. "Earl, you got any information on that man named Bart Redman?"

Porter shook his head.

"You sure now?" Greer asked with edgy insistence.

"You're fixin' to grab him by the tail, I know that much."

Greer plainly suspected that this was an evasion, but impatiently he let it go.

"All right. Chief, here's what I've got. The ground where we found the body was plenty messed up, thanks to Charlie Kersh's dumbness, but I *knew* a man couldn't carry a corpse in there without leaving some sign of himself. Starting out with fourteen casts, I put them through a process of elimination, and now there are only these three left—and they're the goods."

The one he picked up for purposes of demonstration, with a patronizing air, was the bottom part of a shoe.

"Man's size. That lets out the kids who found the body, and that fool girl who tramped around taking useless pictures. All leather. Earl was wearing crepe-rubber soles last night. I was wearing rubber heels and so was Charlie. Found this print back in there where she was dropped. Chances are thousands to one that this is a cast of the murderer's shoe."

He lifted the two others, each reproducing the tread of a tire and went on, obviously considering himself a man of whom the sheriff might well be proud.

"The car that made these tracks was pulled far over to the right. This one's the right front tire. Make Goodyear, inner-tube type, about a year old. The other one is the right rear. Make Firestone, also inner-tube type, same age."

Greer had looked it up in a book, of course.

"Notice this transverse mark, a cut left by a piece of glass or a sharp shell. All this is as individual as a thumbprint. Chances are thousands to one, again, the car that left these tracks is the murderer's. It's somewhere around. It can be found."

"Big order," McCardle muttered—but Porter could see the sheriff was impressed.

"You're jumpin' at a conclusion, there, ain't you, Roy?" Porter could not resist the question, although he asked it mildly.

"A trained technician doesn't do that." Greer sounded offended. "A trained technician states facts. It's a fact that this car was there that night, in a position showing——"

"Sure 'nough, but you're assumin' the man who dumped the body is the same man who killed her. Might not be so. Might've been two different men. Not bein' any trained technician, I'm just keepin' in mind that people have surprisin' ways of gettin' themselves mixed up in things."

The point disturbed McCardle, Porter noticed. It complicated the problem. It also underscored a growing antagonism between his two best deputies.

"No matter," Greer said impatiently. "No matter if it was one man or two or six. When I find this car I'll have the case practically cracked."

"Big order, Roy," the sheriff muttered again. "It'll take a lot of looking."

"Not the way I'm going after it. I started with the assumption—I admit it's an assumption, but it's a good solid one—that this car might belong to that here-again-gone-again friend of Jackie's who called himself Bart Redman."

"What do you mean, Roy—here-again-gone-again?"

"He showed up out of nowhere about five weeks ago. Since the murder nobody's seen him around."

"Ah?" McCardle said, stirring himself.

"In between," Greer went on enthusiastically, "this Redman saw Jackie pretty damn often. A character who works at the Blue Dolphin, a piano player named Lonnie Nichols, told me that Redman was nuts about her, real gone on her. It looked good, so I went after him, and it began looking better and better. I think Redman is our man, especially because his name isn't Redman."

“Isn’t?”

McCardle was coming alive to this case. Porter hadn’t seen him so alerted in years. Greer’s briskness and efficiency were having a re-vivifying effect on him; and in turn the sheriff’s encouragement was stimulating Greer.

“What gives you the idea Redman isn’t his real name, Roy?”

“He drove an old black sedan with Florida license plates—couldn’t get the number from anybody unfortunately—but there’s no Florida car registered in that name. I checked all the lists—tax records, credit bureau, telephone company, public utilities, and so on—and nothing. He gave out that he was a grocery salesman, but no grocery wholesaler anywhere around here ever heard of him. None of the chain stores or other big retailers either. So the name’s a fake. It drew a blank every single place I asked, except one.”

McCardle had forgotten Porter. He was going right along with this. “Except one, Roy?”

Greer, smiling smugly, was ready to play a trump card. “One place paid off. That same piano player, Lonnie Nichols, said Redman had a place not too far from Jackie’s—she’d told him so. I began dragging up and down the beach, and I found it. One of a row of cottages down in El Centro. It was taken by a man who paid his rent in cash by the week and gave his name as Bart Redman.”

“Good *work*, Roy.”

Greer obviously agreed. “The landlady is a Mrs. Horst, lives in the cottage next door. What the old witch told me fills in the picture. Redman stayed there five weeks. Two or three times a week he brought a girl in, and Mrs. Horst is sure it was Jackie. She heard him call the girl that. It was always fairly late in the evening, after Jackie’s quitting time at the Blue Dolphin. She never spent the night there, though. If she had, Mrs. Horst would have known it. The old hag is an insomniac and a snooper.”

“Another thing she said, Redman never slept there either. Sometimes he’d drive off with Jackie, evidently to take her home, and he’d stay gone the rest of the night. Other times Jackie would drive herself off, then a little later Redman would pull out. Wouldn’t come back until the next evening. That happened every time. See what that means? This man, alias Redman, has a home somewhere else. He was renting that cottage especially for those cozy little evenings with Jackie.”

"Roy—— Could that place be where she was killed?"

"No. Naturally that was the very first question I asked myself. But no sign of it."

Greer's tone of voice had implied he would rather not be interrupted by unnecessary and obvious questions; he had already thought of them all. Porter wanted to smack him for that—although it seemed to have passed over McCardle's tired old head.

"Then I picked up one more important thing," Greer went on rapidly, keeping well ahead of the sheriff's routine thinking. "Redman moved out in a hurry the morning after Jackie was murdered."

"Moved out before her body was even found, Roy?"

"Damn right he did. That means plenty—shows guilty knowledge. He didn't use his old black sedan that morning, either, probably because he was afraid to be seen in it again. Why would he be afraid? Only one reason, because it was the car he'd put Jackie's dead body into. Evidence of it could be found, such as dried blood and hairs in the trunk. The car he used that morning, when he moved out, Mrs. Horst said, was a big blue one. She couldn't tell me the make, and naturally"—this condemned the poor old woman for her stupidity—"she didn't notice the license number."

"What else, Roy?"

Greer stared at his chief, then at Porter, as if to say, *What else! How much more can you expect of one day's work?* He wagged his head, holding it in with a pained effort. "That's all so far. But I'm close. Brother, I'm *real* close."

McCardle swiveled back to wheeze at Porter. "Looks like it, Earl, looks like it for fair."

Greer was peering at Porter for confirmation. His bright expectancy became clouded by a frown. "What's the matter with you, Earl? Sour grapes? You've sat there without opening your trap once."

"You don't need encouragement from me, Roy, any more'n a hound pup trackin' a coon."

Greer eyed him suspiciously. "There's something about your attitude that bothers me. Has, ever since this case broke. Seems to me you're walking on eggs. How come?"

Porter shrugged.

"Earl have you any idea who Bart Redman really is?"

"I already answered that," Porter reminded him mildly.

Greer pointed a finger. "Not to my satisfaction, you haven't."

He had pulled off a praiseworthy performance, and he knew it, and it had gone to his head. "I want it in plain words, whether you've got any idea who Bart Redman really is."

"Can't say, Roy."

"Damn it, Earl, that's still not an answer! Yes or no, do you *know*?"

"E-easy there," Porter drawled. "Don't you go throwin' your weight at me. Not unless you want me throwin' it right back at you."

"Now, now," McCardle said quickly, lifting his palms to caution them. "We're all working together here."

"Are we?" Greer said with a snap. "I'm not so damned sure of that!"

Greer was suddenly afraid that Porter knew or at least had a good inkling of the answer he was striving toward—that was the trouble. He had made a lot of progress, and he'd made it fast, and he wanted full credit for it. Now he was afraid he had talked too much in front of Porter—he might have given the other deputy the inside track, and Porter might beat him to the finish line. Greer's show of jealousy sickened Porter a little—after all, this wasn't a kid's game; this was murder and the penalty would be the guilty man's life. Except for the seriousness of it Porter would have been amused, because he hadn't the faintest idea who Bart Redman really was.

"I'm not so damned sure we're working together," Greer insisted to the sheriff. "I think Earl's holding something back."

Porter pushed himself upright in his chair. His ears began to grow warm. "Just how do you mean that, I'm holdin' something back?"

"About Redman. You won't answer."

"I've answered."

"Then about Jackie," Greer challenged him. "Have you told the chief how well you used to know her? Have you opened up about that?"

"There's nothin' to tell."

Greer bounced to his feet. "The hell there isn't. There's something damn funny about the way you've stayed clammed up. There must be a damn good reason why you're being so cagey about that—that tramp."

Porter stood slowly, reached to Greer's shoulder slowly, and gripped it hard. "Roy, I'm goin' to pop you a good one."

"Here now, here!" McCardle heaved himself up from his chair, grasped Porter's wrist and pulled him loose. "That's enough of that."

Earl, this isn't like you. You sit down, Earl. Roy, you listen here. None of my men holds out important information in a homicide case. If he does, and I find it out, it'll go almighty hard with him. You leave that to me, Roy, and tend to your part of the job."

"At least I've put my cards right out on the table," Greer said rancorously. "There's nothing sneaky about the way I work."

"Earl, you keep your hands off him. Roy, you'd better be more careful how you talk."

"Damn if I'll take it back. I still think—— All right, chief. All right, to be open and aboveboard about it, I'll tell you right now exactly what I'm going to do. I've got these plaster casts that will identify a car. I've got this other cast of a man's shoe. Also I've got a good description of Bart Redman himself. I'm going out to find a man to match all that evidence. I'm going out and hunt him down. I'm going to keep on hunting night and day until I find him. And when I've found him you'll know it in a hurry."

With a defiant glare at Porter, Greer turned about and marched out. McCardle, overtaxed by the exertion of restoring order, lowered himself wearily into his chair. Porter was still standing, rubbing his hot ears.

"Earl——" the sheriff said with a kindly sternness, "wouldn't ask you this if Roy hadn't—— Well, is there anything in what he says? Anything about this case you haven't told me yet, but you ought to?"

Porter looked at a spot in the air above McCardle's gray bristle of hair. "When Roy came in I was just about to say I'd been checkin' with the New York police. They've got no information at all about a girl named Jacqueline Burrows."

"Might not be her real name. Got any idea whether it's her real name or not?"

Porter shook his head, looking down.

"Anything to add to that, Earl?"

"No-o-pe."

"Roy said you were well acquainted with that girl."

"Wouldn't say well, chief. 'Bout the same as I'm acquainted with fifty-sixty other women workin' at various jobs up and down the beach. Just casual."

"Is there anything you can tell me about her that would bear on this homicide, Earl?"

Now Porter peered at the ceiling. "Nothin', chief."

"All right. You oughtn't to let Roy make you so mad. For all your quiet ways, Earl, you're more of a hothead than he is. Now let's forget it."

McCardle gazed after his deputy with his shaggy gray eyebrows lifted. Porter had left the office with surprising haste.

Chapter 17

Doug stepped back to the center of the kitchen, his eyebrows puckered together in perplexity. He had searched through every drawer in every cabinet without finding the knife.

There could no longer be any doubt about it—someone had come secretly into this house and had taken the weapon away. But—assuming it had been the murderer—with what purpose? Doug could not guess. The feeling of a prowling presence stirred his fears, yet he was glad the knife was gone. He had intended to get rid of the knife, and now he had no need to do so because—an oddly disturbing thought—the guilty person had already done it for him.

Who? He shook his head and thought back again. There were other pieces of evidence which might easily lead to his father's arrest. Jackie's cigarette case was a minor one—he could easily hide it somewhere. Matt Bradford's bloodstained clothing, buried in the sand of the beach, was more of a risk. It might be uncovered by children at play, or routed out by a curious dog. After dark, Doug decided, he would dig up those clothes and burn them—along with the tell-tale rug.

The company car was a major hazard. The trunk would surely betray the use to which it had been put. It must be thoroughly cleaned—if it *could* be cleaned thoroughly—as soon as possible. As for the invisible traces of blood left here in the kitchen and in the hallway, nothing could be done about them—except to hope that Roy Greer would find no reason to get busy here with his kit of testing chemicals.

Matt Bradford had returned to the living room and was using the telephone. Doug went in as he disconnected.

"I just called Hugh Phillips. We're going to talk all this over with him."

"That company sedan, Dad—where is it?"

"In town, in the parking lot behind the office. I kept the keys."

It brought a whirl of relief to Doug's mind; it meant no one else could have used the car—or opened the trunk—since the night of Jackie's death.

"May I have the keys?" As his father fished them out of a pocket and handed them over he asked, "Hugh? Why?"

"The sooner we get a lawyer behind us the better. Hugh's waiting at his office now."

Doug said, "I'll be with you in a few minutes," and took up Jackie's cigarette case. The touch of it moved him, not with grief now, but with a numb wonder that he could have been so mistaken in her. The Jackie he had known had been an artifice; the Jackie who had been murdered was someone he had not really known. He felt a driving desire to tear down the screen of false appearances behind which the real Jackie had hidden. There, in the dark, lay the source of the danger that threatened them both—Doug, and, even more sharply, his father.

He carried the cigarette case up to his room and tucked it under a stack of shirts in a drawer. That would do for now. He showered quickly. While dressing he glanced out the window and saw the Phillips children, little Saralee and Toby, splashing about in the gentle, warm waves while their mother and Aunt Saralee sunned themselves on the beach—so pleasantly unaware, he thought ruefully, that a murder had been committed in the house next door.

He hurried down the stairs to find his father listening to a news broadcast. The announcer was saying, ". . . the sheriff's office has given out no information regarding the suspect beyond the fact that an intensive search is being made for a man whose name is being withheld in order to avoid impeding the investigation."

Doug Bradford's whereabouts was known. The sheriff's quarry was "Bart Redman."

Matt Bradford's mouth was hard-set as he snapped off the radio; he said nothing. Leaving the house with his father, Doug felt a new appreciation of the self-sufficiency of the small towns situated along the sweep of the Gulf. They were contiguous, yet each was a separate community enjoying a contented isolation from the others. A long-time resident of one might be comparatively a stranger in another only six or eight miles away. For Matt Bradford there was a certain degree of safety in this—it accounted for the fact that he

was a familiar figure in Belle Loma but almost entirely unknown in El Centro where the Blue Dolphin was located—but it was a thin barrier, easily penetrated. A chance encounter, now that Sheriff McCardle's men were on the hunt for him, could suddenly and disastrously identify him as Bart Redman.

Doug's father turned the blue Lincoln southward on Belle Loma Drive.

"Dad, is Hugh the best man for it?" Doug asked uneasily. "Why did you pick him? There's been some sort of trouble between you two lately."

"Not trouble exactly."

"You haven't told me very much about it."

"It was a miscalculation on Hugh's part. While he was a junior partner with Houston and Hayes he handled all my company's contracts and other legal business. Somehow he got the idea, without any encouragement from me, that if he pulled out and opened an office of his own, he'd go on handling it—I'd turn it all over to him and he'd get a fat yearly fee out of it. When it didn't come through right away he asked me for it point-blank. I simply couldn't do it; I felt honor-bound to stay with Houston and Hayes. Hugh—instead of blaming himself for misjudging the situation—has held it against me."

"He must have counted on it pretty heavily. Without it, he's had hard sledding."

"He should have waited and made sure first, of course. There's a strange streak of destructiveness in him—he seems to have a special talent for pulling the roof down on his head and on others' heads too."

Hugh had committed the same mistake, Matt Bradford explained, following the death of his older sister, Editha Powell, a widow, in New York two years ago. Editha's will had named Hugh, Caryl, and their parents as legatees in equal part. In anticipation of this bonanza, not waiting until it was well in hand, Hugh had immediately begun lavishing money about. But Editha had left nothing to the relatives of her late husband who had bequeathed her his considerable estate, and a baker's dozen of them were contesting the will on the grounds that Editha had been of unsound mind and subjected to undue influence by Hugh. The claims might have been arbitrated, but Hugh had insisted on fighting them all. As a result the estate was entangled in expensive and seemingly endless litigation.

Hugh, Caryl, and their parents were waiting interminably for their diminishing bequests.

"He has borrowed every cent he can, on the house, on his life insurance, everywhere possible, until now he can't get another loan anywhere. He's foundering and drinking too much, and all this has caused trouble between him and Cee."

"I've seen signs of that," Doug said.

"Hugh gives himself more of a beating than he can take. He's in such a mess now that he might try to run out—chuck everything, leave Cee and the kids high and dry. One thing that may be holding him back is that he still wants very much to land my firm as a client. In fact, it would save his neck."

"That's entirely up to you, isn't it, Dad—whether he lands it or not?"

"Yes. He'll have a good chance if he can hold out. Both Houston and Hayes are more than old enough to retire. When they do, and it may be soon, Hugh will be next in line because of his previous experience. He'll get it almost automatically, provided things don't turn too sour between us personally."

"That's why you think Hugh's the best man for the assignment? He'll work hard for us because there'll be plenty in it for him if he does a bang-up job?"

Doug's father nodded, slowing the car as he turned it into a parking space. Gulf Boulevard bisected the trim little town. The building of the Belle Loma National Bank, the tallest this side of Palmport—three stories—stood on a central corner, blinding white in the sun. The windows of the second floor bore the golden legend, *Hugh Phillips, Attorney at Law*. Matt Bradford led the way into the automatic elevator in the lobby and touched the button.

"Look Dad," Doug said as the panel closed. "Leave yourself out. Don't tell Hugh about your part in it—not yet, anyhow."

"Why not? Hugh's an old friend, and he's trying to get back on a profitable business footing. We can trust him."

"Of course we can, but it's possible, because of some point of law involved, or professional ethics, or in order to avoid implicating himself, that Hugh might have to tell the police you're the man they're looking for. Let's not run any unnecessary risks. I'm the one who's under suspicion now, so put it on that basis—you're worried

about me." Doug added wryly, "There's good enough reason for that."

Matt Bradford smiled. "That's quite a change of sentiment, son."

It was true, Doug realized, that their antagonisms had vanished. They had been brought close by a common cause. It was difficult for Doug to think of his father as a man in need of belief and support, but it was true; and at this point, stranger still, he alone could give it.

They pushed through double swinging doors into the law office of Hugh Phillips. It occupied the entire front of the building. The inner doors were wide open, and its windows afforded a panoramic view of the Gulf on one side, the Bay on the other, and the pine shaded town below. It was an expensive suite, richly furnished, air-conditioned—and silent, devoid of activity.

Hugh had been waiting alone. He rose from his desk to welcome them, his manner characteristically casual, his smile boyish yet slightly sardonic. Doug detected liquor on his breath, but he was alert and self-composed.

"Grace has left for the day—my secretary," Hugh said—a little too lightly, Doug thought, probably because Grace's was a part-time job. "Our privacy is complete. My time is all yours, gentlemen. Which of you has the problem?"

"It's all mine." Doug said it quickly before his father could speak. "You've read in the paper, Hugh, about the girl who was murdered night before last?"

"Yes," Hugh said, clasping his well-kept hands together on his desk. "I've read about her."

"I knew Jackie—knew her well."

Hugh nodded thoughtfully. "Someone mentioned, some time ago, that you were seeing something of her. I forget who it was."

"Earl Porter questioned me about her this afternoon. With good reason. I came back from North Lake that night, before the time of her murder. I expected to find her in her apartment, but she hadn't waited for me there, so I hunted for her up and down the beach, having a few drinks along the way. Earl thinks I found her somewhere under circumstances that drove me to kill her. In Earl's mind it adds up neatly enough, particularly because the autopsy found her to be pregnant."

Hugh lifted his eyebrows, and Doug took it as a question. He shook his head emphatically.

"I had no reason to kill her. After she was dead it came as a damned nasty shock to learn she'd been intimate with another man. The affair had evidently been going on all the while I'd known her, but I hadn't seen a hint of it, and I still know nothing about the man."

Hugh pursed lips for a moment. "Nothing?"

"Nothing——" Doug was about to add, "—except that he probably lives somewhere near us on the Point," but he checked himself, realizing that this might later be used against his father. He said instead, "Nothing at all."

Hugh rippled his polished nails on the desk top. "Bad spot, Doug. If you weren't Matt's son you'd be under arrest by now. If it comes to that even so, I can't stop them."

Doug's father said bluntly, "We can stop them by finding out the truth about that girl."

"McCardle's men are looking for it now," Hugh reminded them, "and are looking damned hard, you may be sure of that."

"But we can beat them to it," Doug's father insisted. "We have a head start. Two months ago I hired a private detective. Doug's interest in that girl worried me, so I paid an operative named Malls—he has a one-man agency in Palmport—to watch her and look into her background. He wasn't able to learn much, but that very fact must mean something."

Hugh looked doubtful. "You think, Matt, she was keeping something about herself under wraps?"

"I'm sure of it. Nobody around the Blue Dolphin knew anything about Jackie's family or anything about her background beyond her last job as a receptionist in a beauty parlor in Columbus. She wouldn't talk about where else she'd lived or what else she'd done to earn a living, not even to Doug."

It was true, and Doug was amazed to recall how little it had mattered—until now.

"Malls was able to trace her to several small jobs she'd held previously in other parts of Ohio. She was a file clerk here, a waitress there—work easily learned, calling for little or no experience and no references. That aroused Malls's curiosity, because it suggested she might be a fugitive, so he got her fingerprints, a fair set off her car, and checked with the FBI."

Matt Bradford shook his head. "No record. None anywhere. Still,

she was damned secretive about her past—certainly she was hiding something.”

Doug asked himself pungently, “*Aren’t we all?*”

“Also, Malls couldn’t find out what her reason was for coming to this part of the Gulf Coast. She was evasive—said she’d always wanted to live in Florida, that sort of thing. Maybe, but I doubt it.”

“People do come here without any particular place in mind,” Hugh said. “They just find themselves in a spot they like and stay on.”

“But it was Malls’s impression that Jackie had had a special reason for coming here instead of another part of the state. She hinted at it, vague hints that she was working up a big deal for herself, but nothing could induce her to say just what she was up to.”

“Catching Doug as a husband, perhaps?” Hugh asked, smiling cynically.

“No. It was something that *brought* her here. And in some way Doug served her purpose. In letting it appear that she might marry him, she went just so far and no farther. That might be why, whenever he arranged to bring her home to meet his mother and me, she always slipped out of it.”

There might be a simpler explanation, Doug thought. For other reasons of her own, Jackie might have wished to avoid being seen in the neighborhood where she was later killed.

“In other words, she was *using* Doug.” Matt Bradford paused there, and his son could see him thinking. “*Just as she used me after Doug had gone upstate.*”

Hugh’s mouth took on a peculiar quirk. “Using Doug? How?”

“She had become intimate with this certain man. To him, at first, she may have been nothing more than a diversion. To her it was probably more than that—a way of hooking him into marriage. This could have been her big project, the big surprise she was planning to spring. There may have been obstacles in her way, for example the fact that he already had a wife. If so, she had to put added pressure on him, and that’s where Doug came in.

“Doug is single, highly eligible, and probably younger than the other man. By making Doug seem to be a serious rival, by leading the other man to believe he was about to lose her to Doug, she aroused him, made him want to take her away from Doug and marry her in order to keep her for himself. It’s one of the oldest tricks in a woman’s book, Hugh, and it works.”

Slowly Hugh sat back, his face unreadable. "Ah?" he said. "Possible. Yes, possible."

Doug faced it. "I wouldn't have believed this a few days ago, Hugh, but I'm afraid Dad's right."

"But why," Hugh asked in a politely puzzled tone, "do you settle on this one unknown man? A girl of that sort would play around with many men."

"She didn't," Matt Bradford said flatly. "There's plenty we don't know about Jackie, but that's one thing we do know definitely. Doug figured in Malls's reports because he was seeing her, and being seen with her, almost every night after the dining room closed. Now and then she had a casual date with someone else, but only a few. She was working on an important project, remember, doing nothing to endanger it but instead building it up."

"The unknown prize catch," Hugh said, a skeptical note in his voice. "Come now, you're guessing, aren't you?"

"Not in the light of the autopsy report," Doug's father reminded him grimly.

"Yes, of course." Hugh rippled his nails again. "But you never saw him, Doug?"

"No, not once—at least, not to my knowledge."

"Matt, did this detective of yours ever spot him?"

"No, probably because I let Malls go too soon or because he didn't stay on the job late enough at night. Jackie went to work at noon. She came off duty at two, went back at five, and stayed until nine. She had plenty of free time for carrying on an affair secretly, some of it very late at night, after Doug had left. If she didn't go out afterward to join this man somewhere"—Matt Bradford hesitated there, thinking, Doug knew, of the cottage he had rented—"then he must have come to her apartment at a time of the night when he was least likely to be noticed."

Doug put in, "You can see, Hugh, how important this is to me. The sheriff's office is off on the wrong scent. This is the right one, it must be—but so far McCardle's men seem to know nothing about it."

Doug half expected Hugh to answer, "Then let's tell them"—but he didn't. Instead, Hugh asked quietly, "You think this man—even if we do manage to find him—will admit it?"

"Once we've got him, we'll turn him over to McCardle."

"But now that the girl's dead, he's lying very low, naturally," Hugh pointed out. "We've nothing to go on, nowhere to start. Besides, Matt, he may not be the one who murdered her."

"We'll see about that after we've found him. Damn it all, Hugh, he wasn't invisible. He must have been seen by somebody at some time or other, or his parked car, either there at Jackie's or somewhere near by. Surely there's a lead to him somewhere. A topgrade private detective can smell it out—not Malls, but a better man, the best we can find."

Hugh pursed his lips again, and for a long moment he was thoughtfully silent. "I advise against it, Matt."

Doug's father frowned at that. "Why?"

"I'm glad you talked with me before going ahead, because it's too dangerous."

"Dangerous how?"

"A smart and reputable private detective co-operates with the authorities. He knows that if he's caught off base it will cost him his license. If he should happen to pick up some piece of evidence incriminating to Doug, he'd lose no time spilling it. Besides, his findings aren't privileged. The county prosecutor could call him before the grand jury and make him talk." Hugh shook his handsome dark head. "There's a better way. Are you retaining me as Doug's attorney in case of possible criminal action against him?"

"Certainly, Hugh. I'll give you a check right——"

Hugh waved a hand. "No hurry. The point, of course, is that essential communications between an attorney and his client *are* privileged. They can't get any damaging information out of me."

"You mean," Doug asked, "*you'll* handle it yourself—the job of finding that other man?"

"After all," Hugh answered with a reassuring lift of his fine eyebrows, "it's simply a matter of asking questions in the right places. Just leave it entirely to me."

"Fine, Hugh!" Doug's father said decisively. "Go after it, with no time wasted, regardless of expense."

"Right." Hugh's face glowed. "As an old friend and neighbor, you know you can depend on the best that's in me, gentlemen."

Hugh asked questions and jotted down Doug's answers in neat, concise form—Jackie's address, the names of her employers and of other employees at the Blue Dolphin. He underscored that of Lon-

nie Nichols when Doug mentioned that the entertainer's apartment was located just around the corner from Jackie's. In a manner of intent, helpful interest, Hugh pressed his inquiry until Doug had no further leads to suggest. He rose then and extended his hand.

"I'll get to work on it right away. I'll find this man for you, count on that—if he can be found."

They clasped his hand warmly. Conducting them to the door, he gave them further reassurances. Doug felt now that he had underrated Hugh. They had come to the right man after all; they were already making progress.

As he went along the corridor, toward the elevator with his father, with Hugh gazing after them, Doug glanced back. He caught a smile on Hugh's face, a smile that vanished instantly. It left Doug disturbed and wondering. Why? Why should Hugh Phillips reveal, behind their backs, such marked self-satisfaction and sardonic amusement?

It was probably, Doug decided, because Hugh felt he had come closer within reach of the Bradford Construction Company's legal account.

Chapter 18

They paused together beside the Lincoln. Many of the town's shops and offices had closed for the day. Home-going cars were streaming into Gulf Boulevard. The late afternoon mail had arrived, and the post office was at its busiest with a line of tourists waiting their turn at the General Delivery window. It was there, just across the street, that Jackie's car—impounded now—had been abandoned in the early hours of the morning, presumably by her murderer.

"I should have confided in Hugh regardless," Matt Bradford said uneasily. "There's something else I could have told him. It might have helped him along. That night, when I went to Jackie's apartment, I saw her with a man—although I doubt that he's the man we want to find."

Doug asked quickly, thinking at once of the search being pressed for Bart Redman, "Did he see you?"

"No, neither of them. This man had phoned Jackie at the Blue

Dolphin. I saw Marie answer the phone at the cashier's desk and call Jackie over. Jackie immediately made an excuse and left. That message was the reason she cleared out in such a hurry. She drove straight home. The man was already there, waiting for her near the apartment stairs."

"Why do you think he's not the one we're looking for?"

"It was hardly a romantic meeting. Friendly probably, but in a strained way. This man had something to tell her—unwelcome news, or possibly a warning of some kind."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know. It was too dark to see. They talked for a few minutes, then the man walked off across the yard to the next street where he'd left his car parked. What he'd told Jackie left her boiling."

Doug grasped at it. "Could you hear what **they** said?"

"Only a little. It didn't mean anything at the time. He began by mentioning a name." Doug's father was making an effort to remember the incident accurately. "Jane Dorne. He asked Jackie if she had ever heard of Jane Dorne. . . . Have you?"

Doug shook his head.

"Nor I. I couldn't hear her answer. He seemed to be speaking about certain knowledge he had just come by. His words were, 'The old man saw it but it didn't register.' He said he was willing to give her a break and keep it out of sight."

"'Old man saw it—keep it out of sight?' Then it was something written or printed."

"He arranged to meet her **again the next day and talk** it over. He implied that what he might do about it after that would depend on Jackie."

"A shakedown of some kind."

"Possibly. He left then, and once he was out of sight Jackie almost exploded."

"Evidently he'd learned something that was dangerous to her, something we haven't been able to find out. I mean he'd gotten hold of something that Malls couldn't reach. Where did he find it, and how? . . . He may be still around somewhere, Dad. Can't you describe him at all?"

Matt Bradford shook his head. "He stayed in the shadow. I couldn't see what he was wearing. His build—about average, I'd

say. He kept his voice low. There seemed to be something distinctive about it, but the wind was noisy and I was confused. Doug, I couldn't honestly identify that man if my life depended on it. He could have been anybody."

"Not quite anybody. He's someone who's in a better position than we are to pick up hard-to-get information."

Doug saw a familiar car nosing into a parking space down the block.

"I'm going to get to work on that. Dad, it would be a good idea for you to stick close to home until——" Doug left it unfinished and his father nodded soberly. "Caryl just pulled in. I want to talk to her. Don't wait—she'll probably give me a lift."

His father entered the blue sedan and smiled acridly out the window. "Better expect Earl to come back at you before long, son. Watch out for yourself."

"That goes double, Dad."

As the Lincoln turned into the busy traffic lane, Doug hurried along the sidewalk. Caryl was feeding pennies into the parking meter. She greeted him with a harassed look—obviously her worries were staying with her. He could not keep back a smile. She had had a wearing day; her red hair needed combing and her shiny face a soaping. Her manner was that of a world-weary woman, but in appearance she might easily have been mistaken for a school kid.

"You haven't told anyone?" he asked quietly.

"About seeing—what I saw?" She glanced about almost furtively. "No, and now I'm too scared to breathe a word. And anyhow it's too late—my paper would scalp me for it and I'd probably get juggled besides." She came closer and added cautiously, "To make it worse, I've found out something else, and the two things fit together."

"What were you about to do?"

"Have a long, cold coke. Join me?"

"Later. Right now we need privacy."

He took her arm and hustled her back inside her car. Her photographic equipment was, as usual, a tangled pile in the back seat. Before speaking again they made sure no one was within earshot.

"What did you find out and where?"

"Roy Greer told me. Off the record, although he was itching to get some publicity out of it. I think he was fishing. There's good reason to believe she was killed somewhere near here, and I live here

and might have heard something, so he fished—but I didn't bite."

"What fits in with what?"

"I told you about that car of hers. When I saw someone backing it out of the lane alongside my bedroom it was a little before three in the morning. Well, not long after that—at about a quarter of four—one of Jackie's neighbors who happened to be up saw that car parked in front of her apartment."

Doug was startled. "That was risky. Somebody had driven her car straight from your place to hers."

"Must have. This same neighbor told Roy the lights were on in Jackie's apartment and someone was up there, moving around."

"Doing what?"

"Searching the place, apparently. The neighbor went back to bed, not suspecting anything was wrong, and didn't see anything more. But then a little later, that same person, whoever it was, must have driven back to Belle Loma and left the car here."

"But searching for what?"

"Roy says they don't know except that it was probably personal information about Jackie. When Roy and Earl looked through that apartment the next night there wasn't a shred to be found. No pictures of Jackie, no letters, no address book, nothing to show where she'd originally come from or who her relatives are, if she had any."

The purpose of the search had been, then, to cut the line of investigation between Jackie and her family as a whole or some particular member of it?

"It's a question whether there *are* any relatives, Doug, because there hasn't been a word from anyone since the story broke."

This could be accounted for in another way, Doug reflected—if the name of Jacqueline Burrows was false, one that had been assumed without the family's knowledge.

"So it's a complete circle," Caryl said in a hushed tone. "After Jackie was killed that night, her car was driven from the Point down to her apartment, then back here to this very same street which is within walking distance of the Point. Doug, who could have done it? Roy said they didn't find any clear fingerprints on the car except Jackie's, but it *must* be true that the person who killed her lives close to us." Caryl shuddered. "I won't sleep tonight. I'll bolt myself in."

"But don't tell the police," Doug said earnestly.

The information would bring them back to the Bradford doorstep

—not Earl alone this time, but Roy as well—and no doubt they would come with a clear description of Bart Redman.

“Caryl, I have something to ask you strictly between ourselves.”

“Lordy, Doug, this strictly-between-ourselves stuff has me twitching already.” She asked almost plaintively, “But will it help to clear it up—get it over with?”

“Maybe. Does the name of Jane Dorne mean anything to you?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Never mind, honey. Please trust me. This is important.”

“To you? Why? Is there some connection?”

“That’s what I’m in a hurry to find out.”

“But why are *you* beginning to poke into——”

“Because I’m as scared as you are. Please leave it at that, Caryl, and answer my question. Does the name of Jane Dorne ring a bell with you?”

Caryl gazed along the street and far out across the enameled surface of the Gulf. “Faintly. Very, very faintly. But I can’t place it.”

“Maybe you saw it in the *Tribune*?”

“Could be.”

“Does the paper have some sort of index? Could you look it up in the files—right now?”

“But I just came from there! I’ve been chasing around like mad all day. I need a bath. I’m hungry.”

“Please, Caryl, the sooner the better. Go in right now and look. As soon as you get back I’ll buy you your dinner with cocktails and all the trimmings.”

Caryl estimated him soberly, almost warily, and without further protest she pressed the starter button.

“It wasn’t the bribe that sold me. It was the look on your face. . . . When I get back, you said. Where’ll you be?”

“Good girl.” Doug smiled gratefully. Caryl really was the most of the best. “At the Blue Dolphin. Please drop me off there.”

Caryl swung her little car off the pavement and Doug slid out.

“I won’t dally, starving as I am,” she promised. “The dinner I’m going to eat will set you back plenty, boy.”

He gazed after her until she turned her car into El Centro Causeway. As he crossed to the Blue Dolphin his smile faded. This visit would arouse curiosity and gossip; it was his first since the finding of Jackie’s body. Undoubtedly some of those who had worked with

Jackie here and others who frequented the place believed he had killed her. It gave him an odd sense of guilt. As he pushed in through the swinging glass doors he felt conspicuous, although no one was noticing him, and the innocent act of entering the restaurant seemed suspicious even to himself.

The dining room was moderately busy. Marie was hustling from table to table with menus in her hands. Evidently no one had been hired to take Jackie's place as hostess. Doug waited uneasily at the cashier's desk in the foyer. When Marie saw him her hard face turned harder. She came with an aggressive directness, no sympathy in her eyes.

"Well, I haven't got enough trouble! No. Cops in my hair day and night, customers wanting the inside dope. Talk, talk, talk." She said it accusingly; it was all his fault. "I'd rather you'd stay away from here."

"I know how it is, Marie—I've had a fair share of it. We both want to see it cleared up. You can help. There's something you can tell me."

"Oh no, I can't." Behind the counter now, she narrowed her eyes spitefully. "Those two deputies, Earl and Roy, that first night, they kept me up till all hours asking questions. They keep coming back and asking more questions, asking them over and over. I'm fed up to here. I got no more answers for anybody."

She turned away. He touched her arm quickly.

"Wait, Marie. The last night Jackie was here somebody phoned. You answered, remember, and called her over? Do you know who it was?"

On the point of pulling away, Marie paused. "Well, I must say that's a new one anyway. That's one Earl didn't ask."

"Who was it that phoned Jackie?" Doug persisted. "A man, of course. Did he give you his name? Did you recognize his voice?"

She lifted her bottle-blond head stubbornly. "I don't remember, Mr. Bradford. I don't remember a thing about it. All I know is, I'm having enough trouble and I'm busy."

She hurried back into the dining room. Doug had sensed a small spasm of fear in her. Fear had prompted her to evade the question. She knew the man who had telephoned Jackie that night—Doug was certain of it. But he was also certain, helplessly certain, that she would be adamant in her refusal to answer.

He could do nothing—nothing now, at least, while Marie was sur-

rounded by dozens of people. He left the lobby and began walking aimlessly around the parking lot. A breeze had sprung off the Gulf and the sun was low. The neon signs along the boulevard were already blazing. More cars were pulling in; soon the Blue Dolphin would be full to capacity. The summer tourists, especially the elderly, at a loss for something to do, liked to dine early. They had so much time on their hands; Doug had so little, and he was forced to wait.

He stopped, gazing at a young man who had just stepped out of the Blue Dolphin's side door. It was the entertainer, Lonnie Nichols. Doug remembered that Jackie and Nichols had regularly spent the late morning hours on the beach together, browning themselves and talking. Jackie had confided in no one fully, but Doug suspected she had probably revealed more of her inner self to Nichols than she had to anyone else.

Nichols, glass in hand, leaned against the fender of a car and watched Doug approaching, squinting his narrow-set eyes in the glare of the lowering sun.

"Hello, Lonnie. Listen. I think you can tell me something I need to know. There was——"

"Ha." Nichols sucked quickly on his drink. "You need to know something? Sure. Same way with the law's boys. They need to know everything. So I told 'em. Already told 'em a dozen times. I'm sick of talking about it, and my nose is sore from trying to keep it clean."

"This will help get me into the clear, Lonnie. I wasn't top man with Jackie. It looked that way, but actually I was a sort of smoke screen. So was this Redman I've heard about. She——"

"Ha. Call it what you like, friend, that Redman was in a pitiful state over Jackie. I saw him that same night. Burning bright, desperate. For my money, he's it. When they catch Redman they'll have themselves a killer. So if you're smart, friend, you'll just sit back and let 'em."

It ground on Doug's nerves. Sit back? Until they caught Redman! It was the one thing he could not do.

"No, Lonnie, listen. There was a third man. Jackie had him hooked for something she wanted in a special way, something big. She wasn't being seen around with him at all, because she was planning to spring it as a big surprise. A few times I was at her apartment when he phoned. She never spoke his name and she must have had a prear-

ranged signal—he always got off the line quick, because I was there. This much is practically all I know about him, but you——”

“Lemme give you a friendly little tip. Do yourself a favor and leave it to the law’s boys. I already told ’em what little I know, which is no more’n you’ve already got. She never told me that man’s name, or who the woman was she had it in for, or——”

Doug picked it up quickly. “Woman? Jackie had it in——? Was this woman the man’s wife? Was she——”

“You wanted me to tell you something?” Nichols interrupted, sounding nettled, rattling the ice in his glass. “So I’m telling you this—I’m keeping my big mouth shut.”

“Lonnie, this is damned important. About this woman——”

Nichols turned away with a scowl. “That’s all, friend.” He opened the door, paused, turned back. “Except there’s one funny thing you ought to know. That deputy who keeps coming around—Porter?”

“Yes?”

“Real funny, the way he’s going after you. Because when Jackie first started working here, see, he was right taken with her.”

“*Earl Porter?*”

“He was real far gone on our Jackie. If it had stayed that hot, there’d be other cops on *his* tail the same way he’s on yours.” Nichols drank again and grinned. “But it didn’t last long. Jackie cooled out on him in favor of another guy she met a little later.”

Doug was too dumbfounded to voice the obvious question. Nichols asked it instead.

“Know who it was? You, friend. You’re the lad who cut Porter out with Jackie.”

Nichols went in then with his emptied glass and his ironic grin, and Doug stood staring.

Chapter 19

The sun had pressed itself into the Gulf and Doug was still pacing restlessly about the parking lot when Caryl’s little coupé came buzzing off the causeway. He turned toward it as it turned toward him; but at the first intersection it met a red traffic light and stopped.

Lonnie Nichols’s revelation had shaken Doug strangely. The

deputy sheriff, the friend who had accused him in Jackie's death, had himself been, in Nichols's words, "real far gone on" her—and "If it had stayed that hot, there'd be other cops on *his* tail the same way he's on yours." But how could Nichols be sure it hadn't "stayed that hot"? And if it had, wasn't it possible that Earl Porter was bearing down on Doug as a means of covering himself?

Doug realized that a dull anger was pushing his thoughts out of line; he wasn't thinking straight. Many men had been drawn to Jackie; it should not have been so surprising that Porter had been one of them, particularly because his job took him up and down the beaches continually. He was single. If Jackie had chosen, she could have kept him on her line indefinitely, or married him, but obviously he hadn't served her chief purpose. The easygoing Porter was content to work year after year on a low salary, and Jackie, in her selfishly ambitious scheme of things, couldn't have considered him a prize catch. Even if she had continued to play him along, she wouldn't have needed to keep their relationship hidden—unless—— The fact that Porter was a deputy, added to the fact that Jackie's past was obscure and suspicious, might have, in some way, made secrecy necessary.

But this was pure supposition. It left out altogether Nichols's cryptic mention of the "woman that Jackie had it in for." In the hope that Caryl was even now bringing light to the question, Doug told himself impatiently to stop guessing.

Caryl had hardly stopped again in the gateway before Doug pulled the car door open. He slid onto the seat beside her, expecting an outburst of information. She didn't greet him. There was no light in her face. Instead she seemed glum, even resentful; and she avoided his eyes.

"I've never been so famished. I may not live long enough to shower and change."

"What did you find out?"

Caryl swung the car back onto the pavement before she answered.

"Nothing."

"*Nothing?*"

She drove with her gaze straight ahead.

"Look, Caryl, you said you remembered seeing the name of Jane Dorne in the *Tribune*."

"I said faintly, maybe. I was mistaken."

"Are you sure you looked in the right places—in all of them?"

"I'm sure," Caryl said shortly. "Right places. All of them."

"And nothing at all?"

"Drew a complete blank."

Doug sat back, sharply disappointed again—and puzzled. In attempting this piece of detective work, instead of making headway, he had only added to his own perplexity. As for Caryl, he had never before seen her so cool and distant. He could not account for it, but he tried again to break past it.

"If you hadn't seen that name in the paper, you must have heard it somewhere. Try to remember——"

"No idea."

"But that name *did* mean——"

"Let me alone, can't you, Doug?"

"What's the matter with you anyway?"

"I'm bushed, starved, in a rotten mood, that's all."

He subsided, watching her. The disturbance in Caryl went deep, and she was trying hard to conceal it. Now that he had left off questioning her, she seemed relieved. There was only one explanation for that. She *had* found something about Jane Dorne in the files, and for reasons of her own she was keeping it to herself. Frustration added to frustrations! First Marie, then Lonnie Nichols, now even Caryl. Doug felt himself trapped within a square of closed and bolted doors.

"Caryl, you're holding out on me," he said quietly.

"Look who's talking!" She snapped it at him. "You wouldn't tell me why you want to find out about that Dorne female. Will you tell me now?"

It squelched him. "No."

Doug himself was another closed door. His father also. So, probably, was Earl Porter. Certainly Jackie's murderer was another. Closed doors, all of them, all sealing their secrets against one another.

Caryl had driven several miles, edging over the speed limit, before he spoke again. "When are you and Jack going to be married?"

"We haven't set a date."

"Make it ten years from now," he said impulsively. "Caryl, about you and Jack—are you sure?"

"I don't believe in long engagements," Caryl answered matter-of-factly, "or broken ones either."

With that he felt routed. He slid low in the seat, leaned his head

back, and let the miles pass. A turn to the left meant they had reached the outskirts of Belle Loma; another turn, to the right, took them into the Drive. Caryl's home was directly ahead.

"Stop at your place and I'll walk on," Doug suggested, his spirits dragging. "Back in, say, twenty minutes?"

Another swing and they were in the lane alongside the house, where Jackie had left her car, never to return to it.

"Twenty minutes," Caryl agreed, and the brakes screeched.

"After dinner," Doug said, eyeing her, "I'm going into town and look up Jane Dorne for myself."

A sound of exasperation broke from Caryl. She alighted quickly, as if wishing to escape from him, and hurried into the house. Doug walked thoughtfully as far as the Drive and paused. Caryl had gone in empty-handed, leaving her photographic equipment in her car—and her handbag too?

He shifted aside to a corner of the house, where he was out of sight of all the windows. Lights came on in several—Caryl's bedroom and the adjoining bath. A rattling sound told Doug she had lowered the venetian blinds. He stood still in the deepening blue twilight, waiting until he heard another sound, a steady hissing. Caryl was taking her shower.

He turned back to her car. There on the back seat, topping the pile of leather cases and cameras, as he had expected to find it, was her handbag. He poked into it, feeling like a thief, not knowing exactly what he hoped to find. It contained the usual feminine clutter, nothing else.

He went on to the leather cases, opened one, then another. In the third, stuffed under a pack of film holders, he found the clipping.

The little liar!

Doug could dimly read the headline but none of the smaller type below it—there was too little light. Matches? He found a folder in his pocket. The first match he struck, and the second, fluttered out at once—the breeze off the Gulf was strong. He slid onto the front seat of the car and tried again, leaning forward, shielding the small flame with one cupped hand.

The news story had been cut from the columns of the *Palmport Tribune* and rubber-stamped with the date of publication—April 11, last year.

The headline: *Rollie's Trial to Open Tomorrow.*

It was an Associated Press dispatch from New York City. Doug had read about the case at the time—it was sensational enough—although he had forgotten the details. The Rollie of the headline was Roland Stoker, twenty-five, a familiar figure in the midtown night-club belt. The report dramatized him as the heir to a “five million dollar lingerie fortune”—his father, with several partners, owned and operated a chain of shops selling women’s wear.

Doug read on while another match flickered. The news item was brief, only seven or eight inches long, and he had already skimmed through almost all of it without having found Caryl’s reason for filching it from her paper’s files. But in another few seconds he had it.

The district attorney’s office has not relaxed the search for a young woman known as Jane Dorne, who is known to have fled the city just prior to his arrest. Following Miss Dorne’s disappearance, the district attorney publicly charged that she had been warned by an “inside tip,” but an investigation uncovered no such “leak.” Law enforcement agencies throughout the country have been circularized with a description of the missing witness.

The name of Jane Dorne is believed to be an assumed one. Friends of the young woman, when questioned by police detectives, said she had come to New York from Baltimore where she was known as Jenny Dorboro.

The match dimmed. Doug dropped it and stiffened up. The name of Jane Dorne had meant nothing to him, but Jenny Dorboro—— He had heard *that* name somewhere, or had seen it. *Where?* Dorboro—Jenny Dorboro——

He was startled out of his absorption by a dark flash of movement. The car door had been jerked open. Caryl was standing there bundled in a green terry-cloth robe, barefoot, her hair dripping wet, her face white. She snatched the clipping from Doug’s fingers. With furious quickness she tore at it, and she closed the bits inside a small, tight fist.

“Caryl! Who——”

“I loathe you for that, you snoop.”

She turned away, then turned back.

“I’m not hungry any more.”

She went into the house with stiff, stalking steps and slammed the door hard.

Chapter 20

Doug came into the shadow of the carport. The rising moon was bright in the southeast, but clouds were scudding in from the Gulf where the sky had blackened with the promise of a thunderstorm. Along the Drive the windows were gratefully open to the strengthening breeze. Through the nearest, that of Saralee Cooper's corner bedroom, Doug saw his father. Matt Bradford was visiting Aunt Saralee, and Cee was there with them. It was a good thing for him to have done, Doug felt—better than waiting alone to be tracked down, not knowing how close the man hunters had come.

Doug brought a flashlight from the glove compartment of his convertible. Without using it he crossed the lawn. Just beyond, the rank sea oats, as tall as his head, were bending and rustling in the wind. Doug switched on the light and searched for a recent disturbance in the sand. There had been no rain to smooth it over; it would still be noticeable.

Within a few minutes he found it—a small mound.

He tucked the flashlight into his hip pocket, looked all around carefully, then dropped to his knees and began digging with his hands. . . .

He turned back with the crusty clothing bundled under one arm—a pair of slacks and a shirt, both no doubt marked with the identifying symbols of the dry cleaner and the laundry.

As he reached the cook-out fireplace at the edge of the patio he came to a wary halt. A motor had started up near by. Now a car on the opposite side of the Phillips house was backing into the Drive. Doug stepped aside to avoid the swing of its headlight beams until it had passed.

Hugh probably. Hugh off to begin his search for the unknown man?

As the car hummed on Doug placed the clothing on the hearth. He had already brought the stained white rug from the vestibule. In a weatherproof cabinet beside the fireplace there was a bag of charcoal briquets and a can of kerosene.

The flames were dying down. They had been as bright as a floodlight during the worst of it, and there had been billows of stenchy smoke. Doug used a poker to break up the last of the charred fragments. Within half an hour the cherry-red bed of charcoal would turn into dead gray ash, and if it should rain hard during the night, the hearth would be washed clean by morning.

He returned the flashlight to his car—his father, he saw, was still talking with Aunt Saralee in her room—and went directly in to the telephone. The number he dialed was that of the sheriff's office in Palmport.

"Earl Porter there? This is personal."

"Not here."

"Where might I reach him?"

"He rang in about an hour ago to say he'd be working the beaches. Expect he'll call in again 'fore long. If you'll give me your name I'll tell him you——"

"Thanks, I'll find him."

Working the beaches? Looking for a surer way of pinning a murder charge on Doug Bradford? Nosing around the neighborhood below Jackie's apartment where a man using the false name of Bart Redman had rented a hideaway cottage? Bloodhounding after his suspects while, to Doug's way of thinking, Porter himself was justifiably in line for a grilling!

Doug went out again, to his convertible. He turned it into the Drive and started off slowly. One house sat between his home and Caryl's. She was still there—lamps were burning in the living room—but she was no longer alone. A rakish sports car, fire-engine red, was sitting behind Caryl's coupe in the lane—Jack Harmsworth's. No doubt Jack had come because Caryl had called him. Reinforcements! . . . Doug passed, picking up speed.

Jenny Dorboro. That name meant something important to Caryl certainly. It must relate to someone who was very dear to her—but who and how? Could it possibly apply to her parents, that quiet, gentle couple? Highly unlikely, Doug thought. Then it must point into Caryl's next closest family, her brother Hugh's.

Doug was driving along Gulf Boulevard now, looking for a gray sedan belonging to the sheriff's fleet of cars, while his mind's fingers plucked at the knot of Caryl's silence.

Hugh's family. Cee? What had Cee's name been before her marriage? . . . Several more miles were behind him when Doug finally pulled it out of his memory. Field. Before becoming Mrs. Hugh Phillips she had been Celia Field.

He was nearing the Blue Dolphin. Slowing, he looked at the cars parked in front of the restaurant, then in the lot alongside. Porter wasn't there.

Saralee Cooper then? It seemed Aunt Saralee could have no secrets; at least she had reminisced freely and entertainingly about her experiences as an actress. She had loved the theater; "but my dear, it seemed to be dying at last, the magic had simply gone out of Broadway." Many of her old friends in show business had been scattered into the hinterlands by the new straw-hat circuits or had disappeared into the limbo called Hollywood. She had married fairly late and had been a widow for six or eight months when she came to Florida with Cee "just for a short visit" about twelve years ago. Cee had met and married Hugh, and Aunt Saralee, almost a mother to her, had lived with them ever since. . . . Saralee Cooper's maiden name or her stage name? Doug couldn't remember.

He thought of them all, the two Phillips families and Aunt Saralee, all his old friends and good neighbors, all the nicest sort of people. How could he put among them Jenny Dorboro, later known as Jane Dorne, a fugitive from a vice investigation? Doug felt sickened because he could not tell himself that a relationship was impossible. Caryl by attempting to conceal it had proved it.

Now Doug found himself driving more slowly. The next cross street ahead was Casablanca. How many times he had turned off the boulevard here, eager to join Jackie! Drifting past the corner, he looked in that empty direction. Abruptly he braked.

A light was glowing in the window of Jackie's apartment.

Doug eased his car off the pavement, walked quietly along Casablanca Street, and paused, looking up.

The moonlight was dimmed by a veil of overcast, and the wind was noisy in the pines. If there was any sound in the apartment above the garage, it was blanketed out. The venetian blinds were lowered. The door at the stair landing was open an inch but Doug could see nothing through it.

He moved to the base of the stairs and began climbing quietly. When he was halfway up them he jerked himself to a stop. The light

inside the apartment had vanished. Almost simultaneously another light above the landing had flashed on. Doug stood motionless in the full glare of it as the door opened. A man stepped out—Earl Porter.

The deputy frowned down at Doug. "E-evenin'. Sort of surprisin', seein' you here. In your shoes, I'd figure this was a good place to stay away from."

Doug turned back without speaking. Porter followed him unhurriedly and at the bottom of the stairs snapped a switch. Heavy blackness closed in on them, and at the same moment thunder rumbled far out over the Gulf.

"It's sure workin' up a storm. Sort of early in the year for it." Porter's easy manner was a little *too* easy, Doug thought. "Was it anything in particular brought you, Doug?"

"I was looking for you."

"That so? Why?"

"I've learned something that may surprise you. Something suspicious that will interest you particularly, and your chief even more."

They were two dim figures facing each other under the stirring trees. It must have been much like this, Doug thought, the night his father had overheard a faceless man talking secretly with Jackie in almost this same spot.

"Doug, you oughtn't to go pokin' your nose in where you got no business," Porter said. "You only make it look worse for yourself, doin' that. It's the way a guilty man acts when he tries to cover up."

"We all have something to keep covered up, haven't we, Earl—the guilty and the innocent both?" Doug went on quietly, "You were searching the apartment again just now. What for? Afraid you'd overlooked something the other two times?"

Porter echoed, "Other two times," sounding puzzled.

"The second time was when you and Roy went through it together, after Jackie's body was found. The first time you did it alone—and that was the same night she was killed."

Porter considered that for a moment, and when he answered his voice had lost some of its softness. "Little mixed up, ain't you? I couldn't've been here the same night she was killed because I didn't hear what happened to her until almost twenty-four hours later."

Doug passed over the point without argument. "But there was something else you knew about her that same night, and earlier. You knew who Jackie really was."

He felt it jar Porter. . . . The realization had struck Doug while he was in the midst of the furtive business of destroying his father's bloodstained clothing—the little pieces had suddenly fallen together in his mind. *Something written or printed . . . Law enforcement agencies throughout the country have been circularized with a description of the missing witness. . . . "Earl Porter was real far gone on our Jackie." . . . Keep it out of sight. . . .*

"You knew who she was, Earl," Doug insisted. "The first 'Wanted' circular showed up in the mail last year, long before Jackie came here, but remembering faces and names and aliases is part of your job, and those three names are similar, as aliases often are. Jenny Dorboro—Jane Dorne—Jackie Burrows. Jenny Dorboro—Jackie Burrows."

Porter was peering at him.

"The New York police kept trying to find her because the Stoker trial is coming up soon. They sent out more circulars just recently—didn't they, Earl? One of the new ones came to Ben McCardle, of course, but McCardle's anchored to his desk—he'd never been near Jackie."

"The old man saw it but it didn't register."

"You saw it too, and you kept that circular out of sight so no one else there would find out. Then you phoned Jackie at the Blue Dolphin—a first warning."

Porter had not asked Marie about that call because he had made it himself; and Marie had probably recognized his drawl.

"You met her a little later, right here, because you couldn't safely say very much over the phone. Instead of arresting her you let her go. You protected her by keeping quiet."

Porter had listened without interrupting and without moving. Doug's eyes were adjusting to the darkness, but the deputy's face was still a blur. It was the tautness of Porter's silence that told him he had hit the mark.

"You kept quiet about her to everybody, including your chief."

Suddenly Porter strode off, smacked his fists together, came back. His cloak of gentleness had dropped off. Doug could feel the heat of his temper.

"How'd you find out about this?"

"You were overheard talking to Jackie."

"By you?"

Doug parried it. "How else would I know?"

Porter looked over one shoulder, then the other, fearful that someone might be eavesdropping now.

"Once you'd begun covering for Jackie you had to keep it up," Doug went on evenly. "It's a fact that her apartment was searched a few hours after she was killed. Every scrap of private information that might have helped to trace her was taken away. You couldn't let it fall into someone else's hands—Roy's, for instance. You had your own skin to save. And when you began getting rid of that stuff in such a hurry you *knew* she was dead."

"I didn't do that, Doug. I tell you I didn't know she was dead until her body was found the next night. I couldn't've been the one who did that."

"Then who did?"

"I don't know. Listen, Doug. About the rest, you better understand how it was. It's true I got to know Jackie right after she came here. But I had no idea then she was wanted. I didn't find out until day before yesterday, just a few hours before I came here to tell her."

"Not until then?" Doug asked skeptically. "Your office was notified more than a year ago. It's your job——"

"Hell, I'm no genius with a photographic memory, I'm just a workaday cop. That first circular, the one they sent out last year, was nine or ten months old when Jackie came here, and it had no picture. It was on the bulletin board for a few weeks, then it was filed to make room for others. Those three names are something alike, I see that now, but I didn't see it then. Later they found a picture somewhere, in some model agency. The new circular, the one that came in the mail the other day, had that one. She'd looked different then—her hair short and light, more make-up, kind of theatrical—but I couldn't mistake her. That was the same day, you hear?—the same day I warned her I might have to arrest her."

"Might?" Doug said wryly. "It was your duty to arrest her. Why didn't you?"

"Because I'd liked her a lot once, and I still liked her. She'd gone wrong, but now she was straightened out, workin' and behavin' herself. If she got sent back to New York, if she was made to testify the way those other girls did, it would undo all the good, wreck the rest of her life. Besides, they didn't need her to get a conviction. I just couldn't bring myself to do that to her. I had to give her a break."

"Damned generous of you," Doug said acridly, "considering the risks you were running."

Porter stepped closer. "What d'you mean by that?"

"I don't need to spell it out for you. You knew what the danger was. Somebody else might spot her. Copies of that circular had gone to the other sheriffs' offices all around us. Officers from those other counties come through here fairly often, and FBI men. Any of them might see Jackie and recognize her. Then you'd have questions to answer. Why had you been so blind? What had become of McCardle's circular, who had destroyed it? You knew all right, how far you were sticking your neck out."

"It doesn't matter any more. It was right after I talked to her—only a couple hours later—she got killed."

"It still matters, a hell of a lot. You can still lose, because you still haven't told McCardle what you know about Jackie—have you?"

"It's too damn late to tell him. Roy got suspicious and accused me of holdin' something back. The chief asked me point-blank if it was so, and I had to say no."

"Does Roy know how much you liked Jackie? . . . Does he, Earl?"

There was a sound in Porter's throat, a sound of rage. Doug thought again of all the sealed doors. Porter *had* been another.

"What will McCardle do when he finds this out about you—how one of his most trusted deputies protected a fugitive and went on covering up for her and concealing evidence after she became a victim of murder?"

Porter had been pacing. Now he stopped, facing Doug squarely. "How's he goin' to find out? Nobody else knows about this—just you. Are you goin' to tell him?"

"No. Not unless you force me to."

Porter closed his hand hard on Doug's shoulder. "This is plain crazy. I'm an officer of the law. You're a suspect in this murder case. And here you are threatenin' me! Don't think I'm goin' to stand for that!"

His grip tightened. "Doug, I could've jailed you on suspicion right at the start. I could've worked harder'n I did to build up a case against you. When Roy got on the track of another man I was glad of it, because that meant I could ease up on you still more. I was even backpedalin', givin' Roy a good chance to beat me out. You can't say

I haven't given you the breaks all along the line. And this is how you thank me for it—by turnin' on me and accusin' me!"

"Earl—— What else could I do? I'm simply trying to clear myself." Doug could not say that even more than that he wanted his father out of danger. "I had damned good reason to corner you with this."

"You got a reason all right. That's what I want to hear. What're you after? Are you aimin' to hold this over me? What d'you want?"

"Time," Doug said. "Freedom to move around. A chance to prove I didn't kill her."

"And to prove I did! That's what you want, a chance to pin it on me!"

With an angry gesture Porter silenced Doug's protest. He went on speaking rapidly and flatly, a rasp in his voice, his drawl gone.

"You did a wrong thing, tryin' to get tricky with me. Now I've stopped goin' easy on you. From here on in I'm pushin' this case, you hear? I say there are only two suspects in it, you and Redman."

"No! There's another man——"

"All we know about that other man is some vague talk from a drunk. Who is he? Where is he? Nichols can't say. Nobody knows. Did *you* ever see him with Jackie?"

"No, but there *is*——"

"*Nobody* ever saw him with Jackie as far as I've been able to find out. So he's not a man, he's just talk, and I can't arrest a piece of gossip. But you, you're real enough, and so is Redman. I'm a hardheaded cop who says it's got to be one or the other, either Redman or you."

Doug groaned at him, but again he gave Doug no opening to answer.

"You tried to intimidate me. You came here to warn me to lay off you or you'll break me. You can do it. That club you're holdin' over my head, you can pass it on to my chief and he'll use it to break me for sure. But that won't help you any because it won't stop me. Better understand that, Doug—it won't stop me."

This was Porter's pride speaking in a fury of resentment. He had mistaken Doug's purpose, yet he was deadly sure of his stand.

"This shows just one thing—you're hidin' something and scared of gettin' caught." It was like the repeated blows of a lash. "Hidin' something and scared I'll find it. Well, I'm *goin'* to find it, whatever

it is, and when I do I'm goin' to hit you with it. I'm goin' to get you for a sneakin' woman-killer."

The deputy turned his back and walked straight away through the darkness—across the lawn and toward the next street, as he had done the night of his furtive meeting with Jackie.

Doug felt pulled after Porter by an earnest desire to argue, to try to make him see—— But the impulse died quickly in hopelessness. *Hiding something and scared.* It was all too true, and Doug could not possibly explain that his deepest concern was not for himself, but for his father. . . . He let Porter go.

Chapter 21

Back in his car, Doug sat with both hands tightened on the steering wheel. This was not the first time he had seen the easygoing Porter violently aroused. He remembered the kidnaping of an ailing baby several years ago, and the rape of a six-year-old girl last year, both of which had all but turned the deputy into a mob-minded lyncher. Porter's animosity had been a terrifying thing to the prisoners who had caught the force of it. Now, unexpectedly, thanks to a misunderstanding born of fear and resentment, it had hit Doug. He had asked for time and co-operation and had gained neither. Still worse, he had made an enemy.

Doug U-turned his car, looking at the others parked along the boulevard. It wasn't likely that Porter had simply gone off in a blind rage. He was probably watching Doug. There was no sign of him, but that wasn't to be trusted; Porter when alerted was clever. Doug drove at a leisurely speed, watching the rearview mirror, expecting to see a car swing into the highway behind him. . . . None did.

He turned into Largo Causeway. The wind was gusting and the water below the cement railing was a black agitation. As soon as he was across the Bay, Doug swerved to a stop in front of a fruit stand that was closed for the night. Now and again a car rolled off the causeway—traffic was light because of the approaching storm. He could easily spot Porter if the deputy had set out to tail him.

Doug did not feel he was unfairly suspicious of Porter. His reasons were as sound as Porter's for suspecting him.

In spite of the deputy's denial, he might have learned that Jackie was a fugitive soon after meeting her. That in itself would have required an *apparent* breakup between them, and afterward they would have gone on seeing each other secretly. In that case both of them had lived constantly under fear of exposure, and each had held a destructive power over the other.

But Jackie's power would have been the greater—she could have used Porter as a tool for her own purposes, legal or illegal. Perhaps she had gone too far, and he had rebelled. Then how could he have broken completely her grip on him except by killing her?

Doug realized with a shock that the theory which Porter had applied to him applied equally well to Porter. Moreover, the deputy was in a perfect position to protect himself by pressing a convincing case against an innocent man.

After five minutes of waiting Porter's gray sedan had not appeared.

Doug started his car again and drove along Largo Avenue. The business center of Palmport lay miles ahead. This was a residential section and the speed limit was thirty-five. Doug held his speed down to thirty. Two cars had appeared behind him and were drawing closer.

He watched them cautiously in the mirror, staying in the right-hand lane and letting the speedometer needle swing down to twenty. One of the cars passed immediately—a green sedan. The other continued to follow him until, two blocks farther on, it also swung around him—a station wagon. The avenue behind Doug was clear again.

He pressed the accelerator, feeling certain now that Porter was not trailing him.

Earl Porter had seen Doug's convertible start across the causeway.

He was standing at a rear corner of a roadside tavern called the Sombrero, in shadow. As Doug's car moved from sight he turned back. His official sedan was parked behind the pink cinderblock building. Pausing beside it, he reached in to the two-way radio; but then he stood frowning and thinking there was a better way, and without having touched the handset he turned to the back door of the taproom.

He entered quietly and unhurriedly. This was a place he knew well, a beer parlor like a hundred others which could be counted on for a fracas fairly regularly. The jukebox was thumping out a tune,

and a few men were standing at the bar. Porter wagged a greeting in passing to Max, the bald barman, then closed himself inside the telephone booth and dialed a Palmport number.

"Police headquarters."

"Give me Radio." He recognized the voice of the man who answered next. "Evenin', Pete. Earl callin'. How 'bout a little official co-operation this evenin', Pete?"

"Reckon we might oblige."

"Got a car anywhere on the west end of Largo?"

"Prob'ly have. I'll check."

There was a wait. Porter could picture Pete consulting the chart table which showed the courses of all cruising radio squad cars. He heard Pete speaking into a microphone, then the tinny loudspeaker answering.

"Got one headin' west into the forties."

"Just what I wanted, Pete." The softness of Porter's voice belied the hardness of his purpose. "Ask 'em to look for a Pontiac convertible, two-tone blue and tan, top down, travelin' east. Driver's alone, man about thirty, dark hair."

"Pick him up?"

"Nope, and don't follow him either. Let him go wherever he's goin'."

"Anything you say. Keep ahold, Earl."

Porter would keep ahold all right. He wasn't thinking of Doug Bradford as a friend any more, but as a dangerous prowling animal to be tracked down. He'd meant every word he'd said about that. What a damn fool he'd been, going easy with Doug the way he'd done!—just as he'd been a double-damn fool to get mixed up with Jackie in the first place. He sure had let himself in for plenty of grief. Plenty, man, plenty! But he wasn't going to stand and take it, not while he held the power to hit first and hit hard, with a charge of murder. Not when he had so much at stake—his job, his——

"Earl? Spotted your man. Like you said, movin' east down Largo. You say you want to know where he's goin'? We got another car ahead of him, farther down Largo, in the twenties, like-wise headin' east."

"Ask 'em to park and look for him to pass."

"Callin' 'em now."

Another wait.

It was easy for people to be mistaken about Earl Porter. They thought that because he was quiet-spoken and slow it meant he was soft. Well, he guessed he was, up to a certain point, but when that point was passed, once he got sore clear through, he could fight like a barrellful of mean old bobcats. When he had a reason to, like the reason Doug Bradford had given him tonight, he could tear into a man and keep tearing until——

“Hey, Earl, you called your shot that time. Our car parked between Fifteen and Fourteen. We just now saw your man turnin’ right off Largo into Twelve. So what’ll you have next?”

A glitter came into Porter’s eyes. “Nothin’. That tells me. I know right where he’s bound. Thanks, Pete.”

“Landin’ yourself a big one, boy?”

“Big one,” Porter said. “Big as they come.”

He smiled thinly as he disconnected.

The southeast corner of Largo Avenue and Twelfth Street was occupied by a white two-story building. A sign painted across the front of it read, *Bradford Construction Company*.

Doug turned into Twelfth and passed it slowly. He had seen a squad car standing at the curb a block and a half back. It had given him a twinge of alarm, but the men in it had seemed to be taking a breather; they had shown no interest in him. Relieved now, he curbed his convertible just beyond the Bradford building and turned off the switches.

Lightning flashed and a cannonade of thunder boomed in the West. The storm had been holding off, but it had moved in over the beaches now, and it would hit Palmport soon.

A burst of wind brought a brief spatter of raindrops. Doug raised and secured the top of the convertible, meanwhile watching both ends of the block to make doubly sure he had not been followed. No official car appeared. He was alone in the street. He had taken every precaution, he assured himself; he could go ahead safely now. . . . This, in fact, was undoubtedly his last chance to move about unseen. As soon as Porter could arrange it, Doug suspected, one or another of the sheriff’s men would begin keeping him under constant surveillance.

Flashlight in hand, he walked into the dark alleyway connecting Twelfth and Eleventh streets. The Bradford building was broadly U-shaped; it had its own private lot for the storage of light supplies

and the company's cars. A high wire-mesh fence separated the court from the alley. In the fence there was a double gate which was kept closed and padlocked after office hours. Doug used his key, opened half the gate part way, and went in.

He swung the beam of his flashlight. A flatbed truck and three sand-colored sedans sat on one side of the lot. In one outside corner there was a head-high stack of used planking and four massive machines covered with tarpaulins. Another flatbed truck was drawn up alongside, and beyond sat a black sedan. Doug turned to the black car. As he paused behind it another burst of lightning filled the court with brilliance, and thunder bounced between the walls.

Doug had brought the keys he had taken from his father. Even before opening the trunk of the black sedan he could be certain it held telltale traces left by Jackie's body. He had thought of several things he could do. He could remove the rubber floor mat, take it away and burn it. If the lining of the trunk itself was bloodstained, it would be a worse problem. But there was an outside water faucet in the court; he could fill a bucket, find a rag or a brush, and scrub the marks out.

He hadn't overlooked the possibility of tire tracks. This car might have left impressions in the sandy shoulder of the road where Jackie's body was found. All the sedans here, Doug knew, were the same make—he could take off the black car's wheels and switch them around among the others. It would be a risky job, but once it was finished the connection between this car and Jackie's murder would be broken; and Doug's only opportunity was to do it now, under cover of the coming rainstorm.

He slipped the key into the lock of the trunk—and froze.

A beam of light was glaring along the alley. A car traveling rapidly had turned in from Twelfth Street.

Doug snatched the key from its socket, dodged past the black sedan, then skirted along the wall to the nearest corner of the court. He reached the shadow behind the stack of lumber just as the car's brakes wailed. It had stopped directly at the gate, broadside, blocking the way out.

The car door clicked and a man's footfalls came in slowly. Doug held himself tightly still, out of sight, but he knew it was Earl Porter. He was overswept with consternation; he could not think how Porter had spotted him so quickly and so surely; but Porter was here.

The footsteps stopped, then went back. A rasp of weathered hinges meant that Porter was opening both sides of the gate. Next he returned to his car. He maneuvered it directly into the gate and stopped when it was halfway through. He switched off the motor but left the headlamps burning. They shafted straight in, reflecting from the white rear wall of the building and filling the court with an almost shadowless glow.

Doug crouched down, feeling trapped, listening to the deputy's movements. Porter was in no hurry; he seemed certain of himself. All that illumination wasn't enough for him; he had brought a flashlight. Doug glimpsed its beam darting as Porter shifted about the lot. He slipped around the corner of the stacked planks, escaping it by half a second; then he slipped back as it swung in from the opposite side, narrowly missing him again.

Doug warned himself that this was hopeless. Porter would surely come in after him. A closer look would either flush him out of hiding or back him into the corner. Doug numbly waited for the final move; yet Porter didn't make it. What had stopped him? Suddenly Doug knew. The deputy had found the black sedan.

Porter said aloud, exultantly, "Be damned! . . . Billy be damned!"

Doug edged forward soundlessly, far enough to catch a glimpse of him. He was stooping, shining his light on the right rear tire. Now he advanced to the front of the black sedan as if to check further information in his possession. He was intent; momentarily his attention was pin-pointed, and his back was turned.

Doug grasped the advantage—ducked low and scurried. For twelve or fifteen feet the tarpaulin-covered machinery screened him. Now he had an equal distance to cross in the open. He chanced it, moving rapidly without a backward look, and stopped, hardly breathing, behind the nearest shelter—Porter's car.

The swift noise of his shoe tips on the cement had seemed appallingly loud to Doug, but Porter hadn't heard. Here behind the car Doug was blacked out by the glare of the headlights. With more luck he might be able to get out of the alley. He was poised to make a run for it when Porter straightened and returned to the center of the court. Doug's opening was lost—if he moved now, Porter would certainly hear and find him.

The deputy began circling the lot, shooting his light inside the

other cars, under the trucks, into the corner behind the lumber. He was searching for Doug.

Porter made a grunting sound of disgust, turned again, then came straight to the gate. Doug crouched lower behind the deputy's sedan. On his fingertips and almost on his knees, he listened to the deliberate footfalls coming closer. At the opposite side of the car they stopped.

Porter spoke, startling Doug into a tighter stillness. "H'lo, Bailey. . . . H'lo, Bailey. Porter callin'. . . . Come in, Bailey."

He was using the two-way radio. There was a rasping sound in the receiver. The sheriff's office had answered.

"Porter callin' from the lot behind the Bradford buildin', Twelfth and Largo. I want the tow car. . . . You heard me right, the tow car."

Something in Bailey's answer irritated Porter. "Find it, wherever it is, and get it over here. Smiley too. . . . Smiley, Smiley, the locksmith. That's what I need, Smiley and the tow car."

Porter listened to another rasping answer. "O.K. Sure 'nough I'll wait. I'd wait a hundred years for this, man. One other thing. Roy there?" Rasp. "Well, next time my old buddy-boy rings in give him this little message from me. Tell him he can quit runnin' now, on account of I've got this case sewed up, all sewed up ni-ice and snug." Porter laughed sharply, imitating Greer. "Signin' off, Bailey."

A hard note of triumph in that laugh brought heartsickness to Doug. He had led Porter to that black sedan, had actually led him. Porter had it now, evidence as conclusive as he could possibly have hoped for, and nothing could take it from him.

Porter laughed again, quietly this time—a sound of supreme self-confidence. He did not seem to care that he had not found Doug with the car—the car alone was enough for now. He moved off with almost a swagger, as if thinking that the rest would be simple and easy—only a matter of a little time. . . . He was strolling along the alley, toward Twelfth Street where Doug had left his convertible.

When the deputy reached the cross street and turned out of sight, Doug whirled away in the opposite direction and ran. At the corner of Largo Avenue a tearing current of wind caught him. The sky was overloaded with blackness overhead, and in another few minutes the rain would spill down. He ran again. There was a taxi station at the corner of Ninth, a taxi waiting.

He dropped into the seat and gasped in a breath.

"Belle Loma. Step on it!"

Chapter 22

They had run through the thickest of the rain before reaching Largo Causeway. The storm was blowing eastward and the worst of it had already passed over the beaches. Reaching the Point, they found it settled into a steady, moderate downfall. The gutters of the Drive were running full, and the drenched palms were rattling in the wind pouring out of the vast blackness of the Gulf.

Doug felt he was coming home in abject defeat. His nightlong series of frustrations had culminated in a disaster. In Marie and Nichols he had been balked by self-interest, in Caryl by an unreasoning guardedness, in Porter by a perverse pride and resentment. All too human, every one of them!—Doug included. He blamed himself for delivering the black sedan into Porter's hands, but, actually, he realized, he had not bungled. In grasping what he had believed to be his final chance to destroy that link of evidence he had been outplayed. He was no match for a pro. The best of his efforts had backfired, and time was running out.

The taxi stopped at the Bradford driveway and Doug put money in the driver's hand. When he reached the shelter of the carport the taxi was already pulling away.

In the Phillips house next door all the downstairs rooms were lighted. Looking into Mrs. Cooper's window, Doug was amazed to see his father sitting beside the bed, talking to Aunt Saralee. Was it possible Matt Bradford had been there all this while? Ever since—— He stared at his strap watch and tried to realize that he had left this house less than three hours ago.

How little time had they left? The storm, centered over Palmport now, would delay Porter's operations. The deputy must first wait for the tow car, the black sedan must then be hauled out of the heavy rain and into a garage somewhere, the locksmith must work to open the trunk, and Porter would be thoroughgoing in his examination of the evidence. Doug could not guess how long all this would take, but he could be sure that once it was finished Porter would come confidently to this house to cap his success with a

formal charge of murder. And he could make it stick—on the wrong man.

Doug's father must be prepared for that.

He went through the gap in the hedge and across the Phillips's patio to their kitchen door. Knocking and stepping in, he found Cee turning from the dining alcove with dinner plates in both her hands. She looked cool and neat in her white jersey and green shorts. At first glimpse her small face was pinched with strain, but the lines brightened with her spontaneous smile.

"Hi, Doug. We talked Matt into staying for dinner, and we wanted you to join us, but you'd gone. My special pot roast too. There's some left if you haven't eaten."

Dinner. He'd forgotten entirely. "Thank you, Cee, but I've something important to talk over with Dad."

"It may not be easy to get him away from Aunt Saralee, she enjoys him so." Cee smiled as she went on clearing the table. "I think she's a bit miffed because you haven't come to visit her too, Doug, so you'd better butter her up a bit."

"I'm sorry," Doug said. "I've—been busy."

A good dinner, friendly conversation, a household running pleasantly through a normal routine—to Doug it seemed strangely unreal.

Saralee Cooper had heard his voice. "Doug, dear!" she called from her bedroom in her lilting actress's voice. "Come right *in* here and talk to me." And as he went in, "How nice to see you at *last*, you bad boy."

She was sitting up, pillows stuffed behind her back, wearing a lace bed jacket over her nightgown. Her blue-white hair was a jaunty touch. Her face shone with pleasure but in it Doug saw the grayness of her illness. As he took both her tiny hands into his, apologizing for not having called sooner, he looked at his father. He meant his eyes to convey a warning. Matt Bradford caught it, nodded, and rose.

"Oh, please don't go, Matt," Aunt Saralee protested. "I haven't finished telling you——" and she went on chattering volubly and entertainingly about one of her experiences behind the footlights.

Doug turned a frown around the room. Caryl's secretiveness, he reminded himself, was an expression of her loyalty to the family living in this house. A connection existed between some member of it and a murdered woman who had used one assumed name, then

another, after abandoning her own. Hugh, a native Floridian, was the least probable. Cee then, or Aunt Saralee? Inescapably it was one or the other, or possibly both. The answer lay somewhere in Doug's memory, so deep he had been unable to reach it. Then where, in the first place, had he seen it or heard it?

He was gazing at a wall almost entirely covered with framed playbills, mementos of Aunt Saralee's career in the theater. The most recent were dated almost fifteen years ago, the oldest were time-yellowed. While the talk went on behind him Doug looked quickly down one cast of characters after another. . . . He turned back with dismay in his face. He had found it not once but several times.

Aunt Saralee, young then and unmarried, had made her earliest appearances on the stage under the name of Saralee Dorboro.

Cee had come to the bedroom door.

"Matt, I noticed a car stopping in the Drive a minute ago. A man got out of it, looked at your name on the mailbox, then got back in. He's still there, waiting, and I thought you ought to know."

Doug and his father glanced quickly at each other. *One of McCordle's deputies?*

Matt Bradford said, "Thanks, I'll see what he wants," then good-by to Aunt Saralee, not hurrying it, and went out with a thumping step.

At the window, Doug saw the gray sedan sitting in the rain with its lights out. His father crossed the Drive, spoke to the man inside it, and after a moment turned away in agitation. With a quick stride Matt Bradford went straight to the side door of his home and pushed in. The car did not move. All too obviously Porter had ordered another deputy here to watch the Bradford house. Porter was making certain of his catch.

There were noises in the kitchen; Cee was washing the dinner dishes. Doug closed the door quietly, then sat beside Aunt Saralee's bed. He gazed at her without speaking, sick with a reluctance to begin.

"Doug, your face—so strange. What is it, dear?"

"There's no help for it, Aunt Saralee. It will have to come out, and the sooner the better. About Jackie or Jenny— What was she to you?"

Mrs. Cooper seemed to shrink a little. Her eyes, usually so bright and alive, took on a dull, haunted look. When she answered it was almost a whisper.

"She was my niece."

"Cee's——?"

"Stepsister."

"You know she'd come here under the name of Jackie Burrows."

The grayness in Aunt Saralee's face seemed to grow darker. "Not at first. Not until a little more than a week ago."

"She'd come without letting you and Cee know in advance?"

"Yes."

"And even after she'd begun living here she didn't tell you?"

"No."

"But why?"

Mrs. Cooper reached for Doug's hand and held it tightly. Hers was cold but surprisingly strong. "Doug dear—must you?"

"Yes. Believe me, Aunt Saralee, I have no choice. There isn't time to explain, except that Dad and I are both under suspicion and Earl Porter is sure to make an arrest tonight. He has a strong case, too damned strong as matters stand—unbeatable. I hope you can help. Something you know about Jackie may lead to the right answer—something you can tell me."

She released his hand, straightened against the pillows, and gazed at him in silence. Aunt Saralee was another closed door, but one which must be opened, and quickly.

"I'm very tired," she murmured. "Suddenly so very tired."

Doug reminded himself that her seeming vitality masked the fact that her heart ailment was a serious threat. Her doctor had ordered complete rest, but she had been up and about regardless.

"I've overtaxed myself, Doug, I'm afraid."

It was undoubtedly true; but even if she were using her illness as a means of evasion, Doug could not press her.

Was she protecting someone? Cee was dearer to her than anyone else on earth. Cee and Hugh and their children were her family, all she had left. They had given her a home, loving care, and security. It was asking far too much of Aunt Saralee to speak a single word that might turn the danger toward them.

Doug had almost given up his last hope when Aunt Saralee spoke again.

"Doug dear—— You're my good friends, you and Matt, and if you need my help I can't withhold it. But it's an ugly story. Jenny made it so from the start—the vileness in her——"

She hesitated there, recalling it with repugnance as she slowly smoothed the coverlet with her small hands.

"Our family home was in Baltimore. Jenny was the only child of my brother Frank and his wife Mona. She was a peculiar little girl, very hard to understand. As she grew older she seemed to develop two separate natures—or, rather, her appearance belied the inner child. She looked like a little dark angel, but in her nature she was a little she-devil. A troublemaker, malicious—I could give you many instances. But I didn't begin to know Jenny really, for what she was, until after Frank and Mona were divorced.

"Her father was a hearty man, handsome and charming, but domineering. Jenny's emotional attachment to him was strong—much too strong. It wasn't a child's normal fondness for her father—I don't believe Jenny was ever capable of a normal, warm, out-giving love. It was an unnatural, unhealthy bond, an utterly selfish possessiveness. No one realized that actually it was a kind of mental illness. Several years after the divorce, when Jenny was in her teens, I found out what a dreadful, dreadful thing she had done.

"I had gone to New York with my dreams of a career on the stage and I'd gotten a good start by then. The play I was appearing in went on the road, and when it came to Baltimore I called on Jenny's mother. Mona had not remarried. She was still in love with Frank, a miserably lonely woman, deeply embittered and proud. She had learned—too late—that it was Jenny, her own daughter, who had destroyed her marriage.

"Mona herself hadn't realized at the time how intensely jealous of her Jenny had been. Again it wasn't a normal, childlike jealousy which soon passes; it was consuming, destructive. In her own mean, warped mind, Jenny had become her mother's archrival for her father's love. She had actually schemed up ways of getting her mother out of her father's life so she could have him all for her own. She had spread lies about the neighborhood, rumors that would be sure to get back to her father in roundabout ways—how her mother was secretly meeting other men and carrying on one affair after another. It led naturally enough to poisonous suspicions, quarrels, violent accusations, until Frank became so outraged and Mona so driven to distraction that they separated. Then, when he divorced her, Jenny was happy—her awful victory was complete."

Gray lines had appeared around Aunt Saralee's eyes and mouth.

There was sorrow in her face. She was lost in the dark tracteries of the past. Doug did not speak or move.

"Jenny had won her victory by destroying another's happiness, her own mother's. But it didn't last. Frank—very much against Jenny's wishes, of course—soon married again, a sensitive, lovely woman, a widow. Her name was Florence Field and Celia was her daughter.

"Jenny resented her stepmother from the first, and Cee even more, although she was careful to conceal it. Jenny was rather plain and had no talents, except for attracting men. Cee excelled Jenny in every way—she was prettier and more intelligent, unaffectedly affectionate, and she possessed naturally all the graces that Jenny scorned. Jenny's father developed a deep and warm fondness for his little stepdaughter. With that, and without being aware of it, he turned Jenny's maliciousness on Cee full force. But Jenny was too sly to show it outright—she held it in, waited, and schemed."

The rain had freshened and was spattering on the window sills, but Aunt Saralee had not heard.

"Then a frightful accident happened. Frank and Florence had been out late at a party. Florence never touched liquor, and Frank had asked her to drive, as he always did after having had a few drinks. They had almost reached home when another car ran through a red light and crashed into theirs. Frank was killed and Florence badly hurt. Her father's death brought out the worst of Jenny's viciousness. She blamed Florence for it, blamed her cruelly. Florence should have recovered from her injuries, but—— They say people don't really die of broken hearts. But Florence died. I believe Jenny's vindictiveness destroyed her will to live.

"After that—— I left the stage and I married, partly for love and partly to make a home for Cee and Jenny together. From the beginning there was no happiness in it. Jenny never relented in her enmity for Cee. She kept it concealed, she seemed so friendly and so innocent, but I knew. Cee lost one beau after another to Jenny, and as soon as Jenny took them away she dropped them. Once Jenny even encouraged Cee to become engaged, then she let Cee find her fiancé making ardent love to her. It became perfectly plain to me that Jenny meant to make Cee's whole life a wretched series of losses and defeats. Cee was too good, too decent, to cope with her. I was at my wits' end, and I tried to solve the problem by sending Jenny away to a boarding school.

"Jenny swore she wouldn't stay, and so it worked out. During her first semester there I received a phone call from the headmistress. She asked if Jenny had come home. Jenny hadn't. I went to the school and learned what had happened. Jenny had soon taken a spiteful dislike to one of her teachers, a woman. Now there was a scandal involving the woman's husband, who was also a teacher, and Jenny. I wasn't given the details, only that they had been caught together in what the headmistress called shocking circumstances. Of course it was Jenny's doing. She was expelled—a formality, since she had already skipped out, having had her revenge and done her damage.

"Later I learned indirectly that Jenny had gone to New York City. I didn't hear from her. I didn't *want* to hear from her. She was a blight, a living evil. I hoped she had gone out of my life and Cee's forever."

Doug had listened with a chill fascination. He could not reconcile this dark portrait of Jenny with the Jackie he had known; yet it bore out, without a single conflicting detail, the picture of Jackie he had pieced together since her death. Aunt Saralee had painted her as scheming, destructive, remorseless. A virulent envy and vengefulness had been at the core of her; it had demanded victims. Particularly, because of her distorted and thwarted attachment to her domineering father, she had wished to debase men. That had been the unconscious psychological drive in Jane Dorne.

Aunt Saralee looked wretchedly worn. Her breathing had quickened under the strain. She saw the concern in Doug's face and managed a wan smile.

"I'm quite all right, Doug dear. Don't worry. I must finish, so that you'll understand."

She listened to make sure Cee was still busy in the kitchen before she went on.

"There was no news of Jenny for years—none at all until about a year ago, when I saw her name in the paper. She had been involved in that Stoker case in New York. I tried to keep this from Cee—it would do her no good to know. If Cee read about it too, she never said so; she probably hoped I hadn't seen it and wanted to spare me. There was nothing more until about a month later, when a letter came.

"It was addressed to Cee in care of me, and it had been forwarded

through Actors' Equity. I still keep up my membership, a bit of vanity. I recognized the handwriting. It upset me—I kept the letter from Cee and opened it.

“Jenny had written from a small town in Ohio, using the assumed name of Jackie Burrows. She said she was out of work and badly in need of money. She left out the truth, that she was in hiding. It was fantastic to begin with that Jenny, who had caused us so many heartaches, should even think of asking us for help. I had no funds of my own, and I couldn't ask Cee—it would worry her, and, besides, Hugh was having serious money troubles of his own. I did the best I could—kept quiet about the letter and mailed Jenny what little cash I had in my purse, twenty dollars, with a note of explanation.

“Then an answer came, a blistering thing, bitterly denouncing Cee and me—but mostly Cee. Jenny said she'd heard, she *knew* Cee was married to a rich man and could easily spare the money she needed so desperately. She promised she'd make us eternally sorry for failing her in a time of need. It frightened me. I knew how unforgiving she was, how utterly lacking in a sense of guilt.

“I sent her more money from time to time, small sums. She kept it but never answered again. Then, months later—— Doug, it was so utterly unexpected I almost dropped in my tracks. I happened to see her on the street in Belle Loma.

“By that time she had already been living not far from here for more than two months and was working as a hostess in a restaurant. She was being very careful, she said; there was nothing to worry about. She had told no one she was related to Cee and me. She wanted nothing to do with us because we had let her down at a very bad time; all she wanted was to be let alone. I tried hard to believe it, Doug. After all, she had every reason to behave herself and keep out of trouble.”

“But you were afraid she might do something harmful to you?”

“Yes, of course I was afraid—yet there wasn't any indication of it. Still, I worried simply because she was so near. If the police should happen to catch up with her here, it would mean an ugly scandal and endless nasty gossip. I phoned Jenny several times and tried to make her appreciate the danger, but she insisted she was perfectly safe, there was no need for her to go away, and we had nothing to fear from her. I thought of the children. I hoped she might change

her mind for their sake if not for ours. I took them to dinner at the Blue Dolphin the other night so she could see them." Aunt Saralee smiled ruefully. "It was a feeble gesture. And a futile one—I had tried to appeal to virtues which Jenny didn't possess. I should have known she wouldn't be touched."

"You hadn't told Cee you'd found Jenny here?"

"Poor Cee was already terribly unhappy about finances and Hugh's drinking and other problems—it would only have worried her more."

Aunt Saralee was silent again and Doug waited. She was gazing at him with a feverish intensity. She leaned forward and her hand closed hotly on Doug's.

"You must believe me—that Cee didn't know. You remember yesterday morning, at breakfast in the patio, when Caryl came with the picture she'd taken. Cee looked at it—and did you see how sickened and revolted she was? She had recognized Jenny. That was when she learned, Doug, then and there. Until then she hadn't known." She squeezed Doug's hand imploringly. "Whatever else you may think, Doug, you must believe that."

Aunt Saralee gasped. She fell back against the pillows, fingers raised to her throat. Doug sprang up in alarm.

"Aunt Saralee, what can I do?"

She shook her head and swallowed hard, forcing down a knot of pain. "It's not serious, Doug, really. I'm just—horribly tired. But—would you ask Cee to come? There's medicine—she knows——"

Doug snatched the door open and hurried into the kitchen. The sounds of his quickness had already sent an alarm to Cee. She went past him quickly, into the bedroom. Doug damned himself for having let Aunt Saralee become exhausted—damned himself twice because actually it had done nothing to help fortify him or his father against an inevitable charge of homicide.

Cee came from the bedroom long enough to say, "She's all right, Doug, don't worry, she just needs rest," and immediately went back.

Doug scarcely heard. He was staring. Cee had finished tidying the kitchen; it was spotless and gleaming. Brightest in Doug's widened eyes was a row of knives clinging in orderly arrangement to a magnetic holder above the counter. Four knives of graduated sizes, a fine set with black bone handles and hollow-ground blades. And the smallest——

After a stunned moment Doug went closer and took the smallest

knife into his fingers. He remembered the dark line he had seen across the base of the blade. It was sparkling clean now—the last trace had been thoroughly washed away. He told himself that these knives were made in a factory in quantity, that there were many others exactly like this one, some of them probably to be found in other homes near by. There was no proof, no proof at all—but the certainty was inescapable that this was the weapon of murder.

Chapter 23

There in his living room Matt Bradford stood still, his face hardening as he listened. Doug was telling his father rapidly what he had learned about Jackie, and of his discovery of the knife. It was painfully clear to both that this turn had brought them up against a barbed entanglement, a scarifying roadblock. If proof of their innocence was possible to find, then it must be found in the guilt of one among their closest friends and neighbors.

“Somebody in the house next door?” Doug said incredulously. “One of those three?”

Or Earl Porter? . . . No. Doug was willing to suspect anyone other than Cee or Aunt Saralee or Hugh, but the knife ruled Porter out, and with that an escape for Doug’s father was closed. . . . The unknown man for whom Hugh was searching? Also eliminated by the knife. And there was no other possibility left.

One of those three had come after Jackie knife in hand, had stabbed her to death in this house, had almost immediately been frightened off by Matt Bradford’s return, had probably watched from the darkness while Doug’s father in self-protection removed the dead girl’s body—then later, when the house was deserted, had secretly returned to take the weapon away.

That knife must have posed a dilemma for the murderer. If abandoned, being one of a set, it would be missed and its absence would be questioned. In addition, it might become leading evidence in the hands of the police. If Matt Bradford disclaimed it, and he was believed, a brief search would match it with the set in the Phillips kitchen.

Returning it would also be dangerous—it might be seen and recog-

nized in its exposed place, as Doug had recognized it—but that had been the lesser risk, because there would be no final proof it was the same knife that had been used to kill Jackie. The murderer, probably hoping that no other evidence would parallel it, and that the case would go unsolved, had chosen to safeguard himself or herself against suspicion within his or her own home. And this, finally, meant that among the three persons living next door, the innocent two were in all probability unaware of the guilt of the third.

The sound of a car turned Doug's eyes quickly. The rain was a continued splatter and the car, splashing through puddles, was slowing. Porter? . . . No. It went on until it turned into the driveway of the Phillips home. Hugh had returned.

The gray sedan was still sitting in the Drive, the deputy inside and watching. No doubt he had used the two-way radio to report to Porter that both Doug and his father were here. Porter had no need to hurry, but he was certain to come before long. Time was draining away; there was little left.

"Listen, Dad. Jackie followed you from her apartment. It was an unpremeditated move. No one could have known in advance she would come. But someone found out she was here. How?"

"I don't know, Doug, unless someone saw her coming in."

But there had been no noise of a motor to attract anyone's attention. Jackie had left her car almost a hundred yards away, in a dark spot where Doug himself had missed noticing it. She had come ahead on foot, wearing soft moccasins, had sneaked into this house. Had she been seen from one of the Phillips's windows?

"Dad, you came to the side door, unlocked it, then went down to the beach. Did you leave the entrance light burning?"

"No."

Then it was unlikely that Jackie had been seen. She had come here unexpectedly, to a place where she had never been before, her purpose to spy on the man she had known as Bart Redman. She had used stealth, had entered the house in darkness. Then how could anyone have known she was here?

"And what did she do after she came in?" Doug asked himself aloud. "She looked around, of course. She sat in that chair and smoked a cigarette, evidently waiting for you to come back. What else?" He snapped his fingers, suddenly remembering. "She may have used the telephone."

He went quickly to the desk beside the piano. Here he had found the directory lying open. Opened to a certain page. What page? He had noticed at the time, he recalled that much. Only night before last——

He picked up the book and leafed through it, scanning the index codes at the top outside corners of the pages. . . . He stopped, began again. It was coming back to him. Somewhere in the P's. *Pet*. That was it—*Pet*.

He ran his eyes down the columns. Names beginning with *Pet*, with *Pey*, with *Pf*, with *Phe*, with *Pbi*——

He straightened and turned a startled look at his father.

He dialed a number.

"Hugh?" he said when it answered. "Doug calling. Could you come over right away? It's important, very important."

They were waiting.

"It's pulling together." Doug moved about as he tried to think it through. "Lonnie Nichols mentioned a woman, a woman Jackie had it in for. That would be Cee. Who else but Cee? Jackie had thought Cee's husband was rolling in money, and she'd asked Cee for help when she was in a desperate spot. Cee hadn't even answered that letter—Aunt Saralee had kept it from her. Jackie felt she had been let down badly and she was intensely bitter about it. She'd sworn she'd make them everlastingly sorry for that." Doug snapped his fingers again. "That's why she came here!"

"To get back at Cee?"

"It's exactly in pattern, envious and vindictive and relentless. When she promised Aunt Saralee she would make no trouble, she was lying, concealing her real purpose. Her scheme was to do to Cee exactly what she had done before, but this time it would be a far worse defeat, one that would leave Cee completely crushed. *That* was Jackie's big project, *that* was the big eye-popping surprise she was planning to spring!"

Doug's father was scowling. "Take Hugh away from Cee?"

"Hugh and the money she thought he had. She meant to maneuver Hugh into divorcing Cee, then take over Cee's fine home, her position, every part of Cee's life that she could strip away—then spring it as an accomplished fact and laugh at her. And she was succeeding, she was well along the way to it." Doug pulled himself

up short. "We've found him—Jackie's lover, the unknown man. Right next door—Hugh."

Matt Bradford said quickly, with a warning gesture, "He's here."

Hugh came in with a tired step, squinting in the light. His linen shirt and coffee-brown slacks were rain-spotted, and a few drops had caught in the dark waves of his hair. He looked at them with foggy, cheerless eyes.

"You want a report on progress, I imagine."

Matt Bradford answered pungently. "That's it, Hugh. Making good headway, are you?"

They watched him soberly as he dropped himself into a chair—the same chair Jackie had occupied just before dying. They saw plainly enough now that by asking Hugh for help they had warned him against their efforts and that Hugh had answered their appeal with a wily piece of duplicity. His true reason for advising them not to hire a competent private detective had been his own fear of discovery—he had been protecting himself at their cost. "Just leave it to me—as an old friend and neighbor, you know you can depend on me, gentlemen," and behind their backs he had smiled with sardonic self-satisfaction and amusement.

"Headway?" Hugh said. "Well—— I've been asking questions around the neighborhood where the girl lived. The man you want must have left his car parked somewhere near there, of course. I thought some of the neighbors might have noticed."

"Logical," Doug's father said laconically. "Any luck, Hugh?"

"It's going to be a long hunt, I'm afraid. So far, nothing."

"No idea who that man may be?"

"None," Hugh said.

Doug was eyeing him. "He was cagey about it all right, and so was Jackie for her own special reasons. They were damned careful to avoid being seen together, so naturally the man never came to her apartment during the day. While I was dating her I never left before midnight and often it was later. That probably means they met after I'd gone. Do you agree, Hugh?"

Hugh heard the note of irony in Doug's voice, frowned and tried to overlook it. "Very likely. That's probably what makes it such a tough proposition. So few people are up and about at that time

of night—few if any possible witnesses. I'm afraid it's hopeless—although I'll keep on trying, of course."

"Do that," Doug's father said grimly. "I don't feel it's entirely hopeless, though. Take it from the man's angle. He had a problem in his own home. We can safely assume he's married and living with his wife. Would he be able to leave the house in the middle of the night and come back without her knowing it, or without at least arousing her suspicions?"

Doug took it up quickly, watching the subtle play of tensions in Hugh's face. "He might, Dad. If he and his wife slept in separate rooms, he could have left the house without disturbing her. If he'd wanted to avoid using his own car, because of the noise, he could have walked a block or two. Jackie could have picked him up there and brought him back later."

Hugh squirmed and his frown deepened as Matt Bradford carried it along.

"He might have used his own car even so. If his wife's bedroom was in one corner of the house—say like Cee's—the noise of the starter wouldn't have been enough to waken a sound sleeper if the carport was on the diagonally opposite corner—like yours, Hugh."

Hugh pushed himself to his feet. "What is this? It sounds—— I think you're baiting me."

"I'm merely being helpful, as a good friend and neighbor should," Matt Bradford said with a bite in his tone. "It's a pretty tricky job, tracking yourself down—or rather, letting yourself get away."

A sick pallor spread over Hugh's face. He peered from one to the other and his lips twitched, as if he dreaded to ask them, or even to ask himself, how much they had learned. He tried to smile in a feeble effort at bravado. Doug's father squashed that effort at once.

"You can't duck it, Hugh," he said bluntly.

He gestured twice, jerkily, before he found his voice. "This afternoon—— You didn't know."

"We know now."

"How——?"

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that you're through covering yourself at our expense. Thanks to that, we owe you nothing—no consideration whatever, not one damned particle." Matt Bradford's face was a dull, angry red. "You probably have plenty to say for

yourself—you're never in the wrong. I don't want to hear it. There's a deputy coming. Save it for him."

"No, wait——" Hugh gestured again in dazed anguish. "You came to my office, accused me—without knowing it, but you did accuse me—— In my shoes what would you have done?"

Matt Bradford did not answer. His contempt was in his eyes. It brought a sound of despair from Hugh's throat. As suddenly as if his legs had been cut from under him he dropped back into the chair. Doug's father turned away in disgust.

"Doug—— Matt's not being fair about this. I've been a stupid fool, I see it now, I admit it, but—— Something's wrong. Matt's assuming too much. This isn't——" Words failed him again.

Doug stood over him. "Understand this, Hugh. I feel sorry for Cee and Aunt Saralee, but not for you. You were willing to throw me to the police. You deserve the same treatment."

"No, listen——"

"All right, I'll listen. For just one reason. We all have one thing in common—we all have our skins to lose. . . . Go ahead, explain yourself if you can. We were right, weren't we, about the way you and Jackie were meeting."

"Yes, mostly. I didn't realize what a horrible mess I'd fallen into. Jackie was a—a sort of escape." Hugh twisted his soft mouth, smiling mirthlessly at himself. "An escape from the frying pan into the fire, as it turned out. Looking back, I can't quite understand—how she led me into it."

He pushed himself to his feet again and began speaking more rapidly, as if glad to find release. "The first time I saw her— She came to my office looking for a job."

Another step in Jackie's scheme. She had sought out Hugh, of course, her real reason one he had not suspected.

"I had no place for her, but she seemed so much in earnest I wanted to be helpful—suggested other offices she might try." Hugh's mouth twisted again. "Over lunch. Somehow she made me forget my troubles. I wanted to see her again and I did. That was three months ago—nobody remembers now, because after that we never showed ourselves in public. . . . I don't need to tell you the rest. It began as simply as that."

Abruptly his attitude changed to one of attack. "Wait a minute. I'll take my medicine, my share of it. But I'm not alone in this. You,

Matt—— Jackie was going to get money out of you. What made her think she could?"

Doug's father turned back on him. "Jackie get money out of me? How did you know she meant to try?"

"She told me so. That night. She phoned me at home, all about a wonderful new plan for us to go to New York together, and she said she was going to make you give her all the money we'd need. I begged her not to try, warned her you wouldn't hold still for it, but she wouldn't listen—just hung up, intending to go ahead with it regardless. I had to try to stop that, so I left the house. I had to make her see——"

"You didn't have far to go," Doug said quietly. "You knew just where to find her."

Hugh stared hard at him. "Wait a minute," he said again. "Let's get one point clear. What you've found out about Jackie and me is true as far as it goes. But that doesn't mean I killed her."

Neither Doug nor his father considered the denial worth an answer.

"The fact is, I didn't know where she was. She hadn't told me where she'd phoned from. I'd assumed she'd called from her apartment, so I drove straight down. She wasn't there, and that hung me up—I didn't know where to look next."

His voice was thin, lifted; he was straining to persuade them.

"You think I killed her. I didn't. I don't even know where she was killed. I know *when*, but only because I read it in the papers. That's how I can prove I didn't kill her."

"Prove it?" Matt Bradford demanded bluntly. "How?"

"Not by alibi witnesses, because nobody saw me, at least nobody that I know of. I can prove it by what *I* saw—and Doug can corroborate it."

"*Doug can?*"

Hugh was summoning up some of the self-assurance he had lost. "Yes, Doug can. As I told you, as soon as Jackie hung up I left the house to look for her. First I went to her apartment, and because she wasn't there I waited outside. Before long Doug showed up. I saw you, Doug. You went in but you didn't stay. After a minute or two you came down to your car."

Yes. It had been Doug's second visit to Jackie's apartment. Between the two he had gone to the Blue Dolphin to inquire.

"Jackie had told me she was expecting you back and it would probably be an unusually late evening—that was why she couldn't see me that night. I thought there'd been some sort of mix-up between you about when and where you were to meet her. I thought you might know better than I did where to find her, so when you went off I followed you."

Now Hugh had regained his sardonic smile. "You doubt me? You won't when I've finished. By accounting for your movements I can account for my own at the time Jackie was killed. You drove up the beach and you stopped at four places. I'll name them for you—first the Penguin Inn, second Chuck's, third the Emerald Club, fourth Palm Island. Then you gave up and came on home, and so did I. I pulled in less than a minute behind you." He lifted his head, a gesture of vindication. "I couldn't possibly know this if I hadn't been right behind you all the way. Can you doubt it?"

They couldn't possibly doubt it. No one could be more certain than Matt Bradford that Jackie had died more than an hour before Doug's arrival at this house. No one could be more certain than Doug that Hugh had been far afield at that time.

"You realize what you've done," Doug's father said forcefully. "In giving yourself an alibi you've also alibied Doug."

"I have—for whatever it's worth. But I also realize how much this is costing me. I still have considerable to lose, meaning what's left of my marriage and my practice. I don't intend to lose it if I can help it."

"Meaning exactly what?"

"Whatever else may have happened between Jackie and me, I had nothing whatever to do with murdering her—I've proved that. There's no need for any of this to come out. I've admitted a great deal to you, but whether I'll admit it to the police is quite another matter. As a matter of fact, I'll deny it. It will be your word against mine. You'll have nothing at all to back you up, and as the situation stands the police won't be inclined to believe either of you. So much for your alibi, Doug. You won't get one really—not from me."

Hugh's was suddenly the upper hand. He was making the most of it.

"As for you, Matt—— Even if the police should manage to force it out of me, remember this. I can testify that Jackie herself told me she was blackmailing you. . . . Creates a nice little problem for you, doesn't it, gentlemen?"

He walked from the room. Neither Doug nor his father made a

move to stop him. They had felt utterly convinced that they had reached the end of the question of guilt. The sudden reversal left them stunned. Still unmoving, they heard the side door opened and closed. Hugh was gone and the assured answer with him. Still worse, he had disarmed them, and his threat had made him untouchable.

Chapter 24

A sweep of wind threw raindrops hard as hail against the windowpanes. Lightning burst over the Gulf and thunder split a new opening in the storm. Through the clattering of the palms Doug heard the sound of another car on the Drive. It slogged to a stop opposite the carport. Without needing to look Doug knew it had brought Earl Porter.

Matt Bradford had also heard it. His face lifeless, he stood waiting for the door buzzer to sound.

Doug felt like a man clawing at a wall too high to climb. "What can we do?"

Hugh was eliminated. Only Cee or Aunt Saralee was left. One of the two must be guilty, her guilt unknown to the other. It had come down to this: if Doug or Matt Bradford were to clear himself of a charge of murder, his last hope was to incriminate a good friend.

"What can we do, Dad?"

Doug's father did not answer.

Her guilt unknown to the other. Was it necessarily true? Why had Aunt Saralee insisted so earnestly that Cee had been unaware of Jackie's presence? Didn't that in itself show knowledge of Cee's guilt and a motherly anxiety to protect her?

And before that, beginning with Jackie's letters, exactly why had Aunt Saralee kept so much from Cee? "It would only worry her"—but Aunt Saralee might have had a stronger reason. She was so devoted and partial to Cee—in her account of Jackie's malevolences she had not once given a hint of Cee's reactions. Cee had spirit, too much spirit to submit and suffer without end—there must be a limit to her endurance. Had Aunt Saralee feared that Cee would finally crack under the weight of the last straw and strike back in desperation?

Doug told himself that Cee had had more than enough provocation—if she had known.

Aunt Saralee had been unaware that Cee's stepsister was living nearby until, by accident, she had seen Jackie on the street. Couldn't Cee have happened on her somewhere also? Wouldn't she have suspected her husband was carrying on a clandestine affair with another woman—wouldn't she have learned of Hugh's stealthy comings and goings during the night? If so, a woman as intelligent as Cee was, as painfully educated to Jackie's malice as Cee had been, could easily have put two and two together and read Jackie's purpose.

Doug, feeling compelled to push it through, realized with a start that Jackie might have unwittingly betrayed herself to Cee. She had used the telephone to call Hugh at his home. There was a phone in the Phillips living room and an extension upstairs. Cee could have listened in, could have heard Jackie springing her trap on Hugh. A weighty last straw! So much to lose unless Jackie was stopped, unless——

The rasp of the buzzer was a surge of electricity along Doug's nerves. His father moved into the hallway, heels thumping. The sounds were so commonplace yet so final—the door opening, men coming in—two men. Earl Porter entered first, Roy Greer behind him. Doug's father followed.

The two deputies soberly closed in on Doug. Porter's manner was quietly commanding, Greer's subdued. Doug understood that—Porter had taken the show away from the overly eager Greer. He saw also that they had come prepared. Greer was carrying a black case like a doctor's—evidently it contained the reagents used to detect traces of human blood.

"No need to waste words over it, Earl," Doug said. "I know what you found."

Porter nodded, coolly self-assured. "That's how come your convertible was clean. You knew better'n to mess it up. So you used one of your dad's company cars instead."

Matt Bradford blurted, "No! No, he——"

Doug cut in quickly. "Don't say it, Dad. Don't say anything at all. Let him try to prove I used that car."

"Sure 'nough I'll prove it." Porter patted his hip pocket. Several folded papers protruded from it. "You're damn right there's no need

to waste words. I got warrants here. No good kickin' up a fuss now. Let's just go."

"Hold it, hold it, Earl." This was Greer speaking almost breathlessly. He had dropped off his hangdog air and was staring round-eyed at Matt Bradford. "Maybe you haven't been quite so smart about this as you think, boy. Could be you're still on the wrong track. Sure, this man's son could have used that black sedan to get rid of the body, but it's a hell of a lot more likely that he used it himself."

"Roy, you hush your mouth. I'm remindin' you for the last time, I'm in charge of this case. Right here and now I'm takin' Doug in and——"

"You're sore about something, you're mixed up," Greer interrupted impatiently. "You're too blind to see what's right in front of your eyes. Black sedan—that man who called himself Bart Redman drove a black sedan. And *he*"—Greer leveled a finger at Matt Bradford—"he answers Redman's description."

Porter turned abruptly on Doug's father. A look of stupefaction crossed his face, then a look of dazed realization. Greer had called this shot precisely. Porter had failed to see, and now, suddenly seeing clearly, he was amazed at his own failure.

"You've been thinking too hard along the wrong line, that's why it never dawned on you," Greer asserted. "Me, if I ever saw this man before I don't even remember it, so now it clicks. The description's a perfect fit. I say this man is Bart Redman."

Porter was still too jarred to grasp it. He needed confirmation. "That true, Matt?"

Doug put in quickly, "Don't answer him, Dad!"

"Hell, boy," Greer said confidently, "it'll be easy enough to clinch it. We'll take him down to the Blue Dolphin right now. We'll take him on to that cottage and let the landlady, that Mrs. Horst, have a look at him. They'll identify him all right. Then I'll start testing right here, all over the place, to see—— Hey, wait!"

Matt Bradford was moving toward the hallway, taking rapid, heavy steps. Greer dropped the case and sprang to block his path. They came to a standstill facing each other.

"Get out of my way," Matt Bradford said.

With a sweep of one arm he thrust Greer aside and trudged on. Greer collided with a chair, almost toppled to the floor. Blustering

profanity, he found his balance and scowled after Doug's father. "That man's crazy. He can't get away."

Doug said tersely to Porter, "He's not trying to get away. Neither am I, but I'm going with him. Don't try to stop me, Earl. Don't make a damned fool of yourself twice over. Neither of us killed that girl. We're simply doing what you've forced us to do—to try to prove it."

He hurried past Porter, past Greer. As he went along the hall he heard them coming after him. Without looking back he strode out into the rain. Of course it would be hopeless to make a break for it. Porter's gray sedan blocked the carport. Only one road, the Drive, led off the Point; it could be quickly barricaded. Doug felt that Porter was realizing that no chase, no violence would be necessary. But they stayed behind him, watching him, as he ran through the hedge and across the patio to the Phillips house.

His father was at the kitchen door.

"Dad—— It's Cee."

"Cee?"

"Yes. She's the one who——"

"No, not Cee."

"But—— What?"

"I saw Cee. That night when I went down to the beach to walk. I saw Cee come out of this house. She was upset—she didn't notice me. She ran a little way and I thought I heard her sob. She went on farther than I did. She was on the beach as soon as I was, and longer. No, Doug. It couldn't have been Cee."

They went in quietly. The kitchen and the living room were deserted. There were voices upstairs, Cee and Hugh talking together. Doug went slowly with his father to the door of Saralee Cooper's bedroom.

She had left her bed and was standing near the window that looked toward the Bradford home—a wispy figure in her lace bed jacket, her long cotton nightgown. Her tiny feet were bare, her pale hands clasped together. She had seen them coming and was turned to face them.

"Aunt Saralee——" Matt Bradford said gently. "The other night, when you saw me outside the Blue Dolphin, you told me there was trouble between Cee and Hugh. You asked me to intercede and I said I would. I didn't do it, but afterward, as anxious as you'd been, you didn't mention it again. Wasn't that because you knew the problem

no longer existed—Cee's marriage wasn't threatened from the outside any longer?"

She did not answer.

"Do you know why I'm here, Aunt Saralee?"

"They're going to arrest you, Matt."

"I haven't a chance," he said. "Not a chance as matters stand. They can prove she was killed in my house. They can prove I got rid of her body. They've found a motive, everything they need to make the strongest possible case. They can convict me."

All the old fire was gone from her eyes, all the brightness from her face. It was gray ashes. "Matt—— What do you want me to do?"

"You can prevent it," Doug's father said. "No one else can. You're the only one who can make them believe the truth."

She was silent again. She shook her head slowly, as if pitying him. . . . Then her small body stiffened and her eyes grew round. She was staring at the door behind Matt Bradford.

Doug had heard them coming in. They were standing just outside the room now, Porter shoulder to shoulder with Greer. Porter's face was blank under the shock of his sudden defeat. Greer was pointing a gun.

"I won't stand for any more funny business, mister," Greer said harshly. "No more rough stuff. Come out of there right now. With your hands up. . . . I said come on, I'm taking you in."

A wailing little cry broke from Aunt Saralee. She was a white flurry of motion. Before Doug realized it she was past him, amazingly quick on her bare feet. The two deputies, centering their attention on Doug's father, were caught by surprise. Matt Bradford was the man they wanted; this frightened old woman was of no consequence to them. They let her slip past. She was out of Doug's sight swiftly, running into the living room.

Matt Bradford stood still; Greer's gun was on him. Doug moved quickly to the bedroom door. Porter made a quick grab as if to stop him. Doug struck his hand down and brushed on.

Saralee Cooper had reached the outer door on the beach side of the house. As she turned the knob the wind swung the door inward against her; she almost fell. Before Doug had half crossed the room she was outside. The eave overhead was pouring. He saw the falling water drench her nightgown as she disappeared.

He stopped on the dark terrace in the rain, blinded and bewildered.

Had she turned away? Had she gone straight ahead toward the beach. This sudden flight seemed to be sheer hysteria. What was she thinking?—if she was thinking at all. Didn't she realize she had left Doug's father pinned in a position of guilt under a deputy's gun?

He called her name twice, loudly. He could not have heard if she had answered. The slashing of the rain and the booming of the angry surf filled his ears.

Lightning flashed far out over the Gulf. He saw her against the gleam, stumbling across the sticky sand toward the water. Instantly she was blacked out again.

As he ran toward her he told himself in sharp alarm that the strain of her wild exertion could be fatal—it could stop her heart as still as the impact of a bullet. Then the realization struck him with an icy shock that this was her intention. She was throwing herself into the most certain of escapes.

A wave washed against him calf deep. He stumbled, caught himself, turned aside. He could faintly see the curling foam, a dim luminescence of its own—that was all. He called again, knowing he would not be answered. Then light flared briefly behind the clouds and he glimpsed her again. She was at the edge of the rolling water, flinging herself along against the force of the wind.

He could outrace her. She was making little headway now; she was staggering and flailing her arms in a constant effort to keep her balance. As he ran closer she became more distinct, a white flutter in the darkness.

He was almost within reach of her now. That ghostly flicker was the repository of the truth, Matt Bradford's last hope of escaping condemnation for murder.

Doug saw her fall.

He dropped to his knees at her side. The water surged around her. She seemed to stir as he fumbled to find her pulse. Was it her heart-beat he felt or his own? He pressed one ear to her chest and heard only the growling of the storm. He tried again, her wrist loose and cold in his fingers, knowing it was futile. She had run without stopping until she had reached her goal. Saralee Cooper was dead. . . .

Doug remained on his knees, the rain pelting his back, until the weakness passed. Then he took her dripping body up into his arms, turned back, and carried her slowly along the black beach.

Chapter 25

It was past two o'clock in the morning when Matt Bradford turned his car into the parking lot behind the County Building in Palmport. Doug sat beside him. The storm had passed, and the night was cool and still.

Porter and Greer had followed them in one of the official sedans. The two deputies got out quickly and stood waiting, alert and watchful, until a third car swung to a stop beside them. Hugh Phillips was at the wheel. Cee and Caryl had come with him.

Caryl remained in the car, grief on her face, while Cee and Hugh alighted. Matt Bradford went with them toward the door of the sheriff's office, the two deputies at their heels. Doug held back a moment, gazing at Caryl. She did not look at him and he did not speak. She blamed him, Doug knew. He despaired of making her see how unreasonable it was. Perhaps in time she would see it for herself. Or perhaps she would never stop blaming him. . . . He turned away and followed the others.

They had gone into Ben McCardle's office. Cee, Hugh, and Matt Bradford had taken chairs. Porter and Greer were standing sober-faced behind them. The sheriff sat at his desk, his hands resting folded on his great paunch, his breathing a rhythmic sibilance. Doug sat facing him, beside the others.

It was rarely that McCardle's men disturbed his sleep. The inconclusive confusion in the Phillips home had left them no choice tonight. The sheriff himself had insisted on leaving his bed in order to hear them here.

"Saralee Cooper," McCardle said slowly. "Sweet, fine woman. Always had a soft spot in my heart for Aunt Saralee." He leaned forward and his chair creaked. "Mrs. Phillips—— Earl told me over the phone something about a letter."

Cee was white-faced with shock but admirably self-composed. She opened her handbag. "I found a sealed envelope with my name on it under Aunt Saralee's pillow. There was a note for me inside, a personal message——"

Ben McCardle waved the note aside. He did not wish to intrude into this final privacy.

"Along with another sealed envelope," Cee said, "addressed to you. She'd written, 'To be opened only by Sheriff Ben McCardle,' and of course I've respected her wish. I wouldn't let anyone else have it. I've brought it to you."

The sheriff reached for the letter and sat with it in his two big hands, wheezing over it. He looked up, first at Porter, then at Greer. There was authority in his faded blue eyes and they stayed on Greer as he spoke.

"Before I open this—— You men understand the rule here about publicity. No talking to any reporters on your own. Anything the papers print, they got to get it straight from me."

Doug saw a look of chagrin cross Greer's face and a twitch of Porter's mouth which might have been the beginning of a grim smile. If Greer had thought to turn this case into a victory of his own, his hopes were dashed. He could violate this admonition, but not without losing his job.

Ben McCardle fumbled among the papers on his desk until he found a letter opener. He used it carefully and sat back, his chair squeaking again. For a long time he read. The office was silent and they all watched the sheriff intently as he shifted from one page to the next, reading with sleep-dimmed eyes, without comment, interminably.

At last he finished and slowly rearranged the pages in their proper order. He took more time to think, tapping the letter opener on his desk. His wheezing was slow and labored. His face was sad.

"She writes—— Here in this first part, Mrs. Phillips—— It's all about your stepsister, the kind she was. She calls her Jenny, this woman who came here under the name of Jackie Burrows. There's no need to tell you what you already know about this Jenny, about how she abused and mistreated you. Aunt Saralee goes on——

"Jenny's promise, that she would make no trouble for us, was not to be trusted. I knew her too well and feared she meant to do Cee great harm. Cee's marriage was already under strain—forces beyond her control were breaking it up. Being a light sleeper, unlike Cee, I had heard Hugh slipping out of the house very late at night. There had to be another woman, and I strongly suspected it was Jenny, but there was nothing I could do—it would be useless to appeal to

Jenny, and Hugh wouldn't even discuss it with me—and I had no proof until quite unexpectedly I heard it from Jenny's own lips.' ”

Hugh's face was flushed; he was squirming in his chair. Cee, ignoring him, gazed steadily at Ben McCardle.

“There was a phone call for Hugh that night. He took it on the extension in Cee's bedroom, the room they had formerly shared. I heard Cee come downstairs and hurry out of the house. No doubt she had sensed the meaning of that call and the brazenness of it had upset her. I was so deeply concerned for Cee that I did not hesitate to listen in over the phone in the living room.

“It was Jenny's voice. What she said confirmed the worst of my fears. She had lied to me—she had vengefully set herself to destroy Cee's marriage and home—and she was relentlessly bending Hugh to her purpose. It terrified me. I swore to myself that I would stop her before it was too late.

“I was in my bedroom when Hugh came downstairs and left the house. I heard him driving off. Now I was alone there, and I tried desperately to think of something to do. I needed help. Matt Bradford, right next door, was an old, true friend—he could advise me. I went over—then, as I reached the side door, I realized he might not be alone. Wanting to make sure, first, that I could talk to him in private, I went around to the front of the house and looked in a window. Jenny was alone in the living room.

“I didn't know why she was there, or where Matt was, but no matter—I had found her, and at the sight of her a terrible hatred took hold of me.

“I cannot say I was thinking clearly. I should have waited until Jenny had gone to some other place—I realized that too late—but then she would be out of my reach, and time was short—she had insisted on leaving for New York with Hugh in the morning. I could think of only one thing, that Jenny must be destroyed before she destroyed Cee.

“It is difficult to remember clearly what I did, I was so beside myself. I must have gone back to my kitchen where I knew I could find a knife. I went into the Bradford home as quietly as possible, but Jenny must have heard me. I hid in the darkness and when she came within reach I struck her down.' ”

Cee was still. McCardle gazed past her at his two deputies. His

face was a weary rebuke. So much for their hot leads and scientific methods.

“I was panic-stricken, not only over what I had done, but because I had done it in the home of a friend. I would not have brought Jenny back to life if I could, but I knew I must try to undo the rest. I went out, and there in the carport was the black sedan that Matt sometimes used. He had left the keys in the ignition lock. I opened the trunk, dragged Jenny’s body out——”

Matt Bradford sat up, amazement in his eyes. Doug looked at him quickly, cautioning him. No one spoke.

After a moment McCardle continued. “It was an exhausting effort. I was afraid I might drop at any minute, but I kept myself going all through it. I found a place beside the road. Somehow I managed to get Jenny’s body out of the car and hidden. Then I rested, praying that no one would see me there—and no one did.”

A noise came from Greer. What was he thinking of—some bit of evidence which did not quite fit in? He started to speak but checked himself. McCardle’s eyes were on him, sterner than before. The sheriff stared him down.

“The rest is quickly told, and I tell it so that no innocent person will be implicated. I took Matt’s car back to his home. The house was still deserted; nothing had changed inside. I had time to clean up the blood. Then——”

Matt Bradford stirred again. Doug’s throat was tight. Until now he had not fully comprehended Aunt Saralee’s act of self-destruction. She had put herself beyond questions; she could not be challenged and broken down on minor points. The confession of a dead woman was irrefutable.

“Then I went across to my room and rested again, thinking my heart would burst. Finally, hours later, I was able to go out again. I knew Jenny must have left her car somewhere near by. I found it, drove it to her apartment and took away everything that might reveal her true identity. I left the car in front of the post office in Belle Loma and began walking. I marvel now that I did not drop in my tracks, but at last I reached home. The strain was enough to confine me to bed and the attack may still come. That is why I have written this letter. At this moment I believe no one else knows, but here is the full truth in case it should be needed. I alone am guilty.”

Sheriff McCardle refolded the pages gently and put them down.

"Almighty strange way to feel about one woman who killed another—but it's true she did it out of the goodness in her. . . . Bless her poor old heart."

Cee and Hugh had left the building together. A look from the sheriff had banished Porter and Greer into the adjacent room. Doug and Matt Bradford paused at the outer door.

Doug thought how deeply Jackie had left the marks of her evilness. It was as if she had wielded a knife of her own, sharper than the knife that had killed her—one that had gone on hacking at others even after her death. It had left a scar on Earl Porter. Doug's friendship with Porter had been lastingly injured. Doug knew he had lost Caryl. Hugh had been cut from the last possibility that he would ever legally represent Matt Bradford's company. The future of his marriage with Cee depended on her capacity for forgiveness. . . . But it was ended now, and with all that Jackie had unintentionally accomplished one good. Doug felt the warmth of it as his father's arm tightened across his shoulders.

"Might be a good idea for us to get away together for a while, son. You have your plans, your writing. I'd like to hear more about that. I've come to think it's a good idea."

"That's strange, Dad. I've been turning it over in the back of my mind and I've just about decided to stick with construction."

Matt Bradford smiled. Doug, looking back, saw Ben McCardle opening a closet in the corner of his office. It was hung with old coats and stuffed with odds and ends, the accumulation of all his many years as sheriff. He reached to a shelf where an old shoe box sat—no doubt a cache of personal items. He put Aunt Saralee's letter inside the box, gently shut the closet and turned a key in the lock.

Did he mean to let the case become forgotten in the unsolved file? . . . Doug could hope the last door was closed.

THE END OF THE TRACK

BY

ANDREW GARVE

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CHAPTER ONE

That Saturday in April was the nineteenth consecutive day without rain in the south of England, and the fire risk in the New Forest had reached a peak. Spring had come unusually late, and the easterly winds, persisting on and off for weeks, had held back the new vegetation that would bring comparative safety, and parched the old to tinder. The bracken that clogged the young conifer stands and the heather on the open moors would flare at the drop of a match. The bleached sedge grass that grew profusely everywhere was as explosive as guncotton.

Peter Mallory, the Forest Warden, was well aware of the hazard, but he wasn't actively thinking about it as he walked through Culverley Inclosure. He had no crystal ball to tell him that within a day or two he would have lost a quarter of a million young trees in a blaze that would live in forest memory. In any case, he had already taken every possible precaution. The most vulnerable areas had been protected by controlled burning and in all the inclosures the main fire lanes had been cleared of combustible matter. The watch towers were all manned, the duty squads were on continuous patrol, the water trucks and tenders were standing by at the depot, and a recent practice had shown that the fire fighting organization was working smoothly. There was nothing more he could do—and on this first real day of spring he had pleasanter things to think about.

He had been out that morning to meet his Deputy, Alan Forbes, at the site of some Douglas firs that had suffered from wind throw in the end-of-March gales, and now he was returning alone to his car. The damage had been less than he had feared and he had a relaxed, contented air as he strolled along the dappled path, enjoying the scent of the pines and the warmth of the sun. He moved quietly, in order not to scare away any wild life there might be, his eyes observant and appreciative. He was in his early forties, thick-set and strong but not very tall, with blunt features and a placid expression. One hand rested casually in the pocket of his baggy tweed jacket;

the other lightly grasped the crook of a walking stick. With his brown face, his thatch of coarse brown hair slightly sprinkled with gray, and his soft, unhurried tread, the Warden seemed as natural an inhabitant of the forest as any of the wild creatures in it.

The "ride" along which he was passing was one of scores that had been cut through the forest to give access to the timber and serve as firebreaks. Some, the most important ones, were graveled; some were broad avenues of rough grass with deep drainage channels on each flank; some were winding, moss-green paths, as secret as a maze. This one in Culverley was thirty feet wide and dotted with old stumps of oak and beech through which the track wound a corkscrew way. The ground was uneven and scored by the marks of horses' hoofs and by deep ruts where tractors and trucks had plunged and struggled in wet weather. Today, though, the ruts were caked hard. Everything in the forest was dry after the long drought—everything but the bogs, and the banks of the thin, trickling streams.

On either side of the track marched the sturdy ranks of the conifers—twenty-year Sitka spruces on the right, and on the left a fine stand of Corsican pines, almost ready for thinning. There were people, Mallory knew, who deplored the commercial planting of these alien trees in southern woodlands, and he understood their attitude. The plantations had something of the ruthlessness of an invading army, stamping out much of the native flora and fauna, and he regretted that. Scenically, too, their outlines were a little harsh. But as an ardent forester he could never agree that strongly growing timber could be ugly, and in any case the conifers were usually screened from the roads by belts of broad-leaved trees, to pacify the critics.

His progress along the ride was frequently interrupted, for there was much to inspect and it might be some time before he passed this way again. Beyond the Sitkas he stopped to examine a plantation in the thicket stage that badly needed cleaning. Tangles of honeysuckle and old man's beard were thick around the outer trees and there were coppice shoots from an earlier hardwood crop that ought to be removed. He would talk to Forbes about it, and see if it figured in the working plan. He went on, into the innermost recesses of the inclosure. A stand of young larch caught his eye and he paused to admire the delicate green haze of its fresh shoots, and to listen for a moment to the medley of forest sounds. There was bird song, and

the clumsy flap of wood pigeons; a rustling on the carpet of needles; the creak of a bough in the faint breeze; the distant barking of a dog; the impact of steel on wood, somewhere ahead; the drone of an airplane; the muted roar of traffic on A.35, a mile away. But the general effect was of stillness and peace.

Presently he crossed a stream by a wooden bridge, leaving the conifers behind, and spent a little time in a patch of deciduous scrub that had been ringed and underplanted. After that the track climbed to more open country where russet leaves and bits of rotting wood were thick upon the ground and the trees were mainly oak and beech, their bare boughs stark against the blue sky. A felled trunk lay invitingly in the sunlight and he sat down to bask for a few minutes, his red cedar stick between his knees. The ferrule, he noticed, was getting worn—he must have it replaced. He valued the stick. It had been presented to him twelve years before, when he had left the Colonial forest service—the touching, unexpected gift of the colored staff in his office in Georgetown—and there was a silver plate under the handle with a quaintly worded inscription—“To Mr. P. Mallory, with respectful affection of his fellow workers.” It still brought back nostalgic memories—of hard but rewarding days in the bush with smiling Negro gangs, of pioneering difficulties as Forestry Superintendent, of milk-warm breakers and velvet nights on the Caribbean islands, of his meeting with Linda and their brief idyllic courtship, and of their white bungalow under the mango tree. That had been the exciting, adventurous time of his life, in the vivid, violent climate of British Guiana. But the heat had proved too much for Linda, and he'd managed to get himself transferred to England, and though he still had these occasional reminiscent twinges he couldn't really say that he regretted having exchanged the steaming teak forests and strenuous expeditions of the Guiana days for the pleasures of seasons and the tranquil landscape of Hampshire and the quiet life. Tranquillity, he had long ago decided, suited his temperament very well.

The sound of laughing voices broke the train of his thoughts and soon a young couple came into sight, carrying a picnic basket from which a vacuum flask protruded. Mallory gave them a friendly smile as they passed, pleased to see the Forestry Commission's special map in the girl's hand. He liked people to use and enjoy the inclosures—to realize that the gates and fences were there for no other purpose

than to guard the plantations against straying animals, and that forestry meant access, not exclusion. Not that many people did penetrate very deeply at this time of year. The local residents rode a little, and exercised their dogs, and practiced their golf shots on the open heath, and on weekends there were picnickers with cars along all the fringes of the forest, but off the main tracks you could sometimes walk from dawn till dusk without meeting a soul.

He continued on his way. There were more conifers ahead—all Scots pines with waving blue-green plumes and red trunks shining gloriously in the sun. Several bicycles were propped against the trees, sure sign of a forest gang at work, and a moment later Mallory came across the men. There were four of them, in cloth caps and resin-stained waistcoats and gum boots, trimming pine trunks for telegraph poles. He acknowledged their greeting and chatted easily with them for a few minutes. There was contentment and a fine team spirit in the forest and a great deal of mutual respect. He mentioned the Douglases that the gale had knocked about and one of the men said he thought they ought to have been thinned earlier and they had a little discussion about that. Presently the gang resumed work while Mallory stood watching them, appreciating their skill because he had acquired it himself in the same tough school. He took intense pleasure in every forest process. The sowing of the seed in the nurseries, the tending of the young plantations, the "beating-up" and "brashing" and thinning, the harvesting of the main crop—like these wonderful Scots—all satisfied a deep creative urge in him. The job called for patience, of course, and a capacity for sustained enthusiasm, because the cycle of production extended over many decades and you couldn't hope to reap where you had sown. But it was that very fact, the opportunity to look beyond the clamoring moment, to plan for generations still unborn, that to Mallory made forestry such a supremely hopeful and satisfying way of life.

A few more steps brought him to the boundary of the inclosure—a low bank of earth, surmounted by a strong but not unsightly fence. He passed through the gate, noting with approval the stack of newly cut brush wood that would soon be made into fire brooms to refill the white-painted racks that were scattered generously throughout the Perambulation. Beyond the fence, the character of the forest changed. There were no more young plantations—the track wound

among massive pollard oaks and noble beeches and grassy glades cropped close by the commoners' animals—places that had scarcely changed since William the Conqueror had appointed the forest a Royal Domain nearly a thousand years ago. Soon the high forest gave way to scrub, with some thorn and yew and a few self-sown pines. A large black-and-white sow moved lethargically from the path, and a donkey chewed at a holly branch. The outline of a workman's cottage appeared through the thinning trees, with a hint of open heath beyond, and in a few moments Mallory reached the quiet road where his car was parked. He had had a delightful morning in the forest, and now he could look forward to an equally delightful afternoon at home. Life, he thought, could be extraordinarily good.

CHAPTER TWO

The Mallory house, a small freehold in a sea of common land, stood alone on a high point of open heath about a mile and a half from the village of Hurley. The position was exposed, but an ancient conical barrow, dominating it on the north side, provided some protection from the coldest winds, and a clump of well-grown pines and firs broke the force of the southwesterlies. The approach was by the Hurley-Lyndhurst road, a minor one that carried only light traffic, and then, for the last hundred yards, by a rising cart track that skirted the top of the barrow and gave a brief bird's-eye view of the house and garden before dipping to the drive. All around stretched a broad expanse of heather and gorse, bracken and bog—unfenced, uninhabited and featureless, except for the road. Visitors sometimes found the "waste" desolate and forbidding, but the Mallorys loved it for its changing colors and its wide skies and the sense of freedom that it gave. Living in such an out-of-the-way place had its disadvantages, of course; water, though plentiful and automatically pumped, came from a well, and electricity from a popping oil engine in a shed, and the nearest shop was more than a mile away. But the house itself had been sensibly modernized and was easy to run, and Linda had a small prewar car of her own to get about in when Mallory was using his for work, so she didn't feel too cut off,

and the place was perfect for the children, who had only to go out of the garden to have the whole empty heath for their playground.

The white, five-barred gate had been left open, and Mallory drove straight in and parked in front of the door. The house was in its usual Saturday-morning state of controlled chaos. On the gravel path there were some torn bits of paper, a bowl of water, a wooden boat, and two water pistols. A pair of gum boots had been flung down on the porch beside an overturned tricycle. The floor in the sitting room was almost covered by a complex system of railway lines and bricks, now abandoned, and the dining-room table was littered with exercise books and papers. Someone was bumping about upstairs, and from the back of the house came the steady piping of a very young voice. There was an appetizing smell of cooking in the air.

Mallory dropped his stick in the rack by the front door and went through into the kitchen, where Linda was putting the last touches to a lemon meringue pie. Teddy, aged four and a half, was playing with a truck on the floor and giving a running commentary on its maneuvers. He was a sturdy little boy, with round brown eyes like a robin's. He broke off when he saw his father and said, "A man's coming to see you."

"Is he?" Mallory's voice was very soft, contrasting oddly with his solid bulk. "What sort of man?" He bent over Linda and kissed the tip of her ear.

Teddy was no longer interested. Bringing up a car to reinforce the truck, he began an assault on the table leg, with appropriately fierce cries.

Linda said, "Don't make so much noise, Teddy, I can't hear myself think. . . . His name's Gill, darling. He says you don't know him, but he'd like to have a talk with you. He's a clergyman." She gave a deft whirl with her knife and stood back to admire the delicate spirals of white froth surmounting the lemon pie.

"Gill? No, I don't know anyone called Gill. . . . That's a nice apron you're wearing—looks like rather attractive wallpaper."

"Peter!" Linda gazed down at herself. "Well, yes, I suppose it does," she admitted. "It's a remnant I got at Murchison's last week and ran up myself."

"Quite the little acrobat!"

"You are an ass," she said.

Mallory grinned. He liked to tease Linda—to see the tiny flicker of uncertainty in her face, the exaggerated reproachfulness, the indulgent smile. He liked looking at her at any time, in spite of the fact that he'd been doing it for seventeen years. He liked her small, straight nose and her well-shaped mouth and her merry expression; her dark-brown, naturally curling hair, which she wore cut short like a child's; and her coloring, which was lovely—a clear olive skin and rosy cheeks and light golden-brown eyes, that reminded him of a beech wood in autumn. Linda herself thought nothing of her face; she grieved over having thick ankles and was convinced that they were the first and only thing people noticed about her. But Mallory found her ankles perfectly adequate.

An exclamation of childish annoyance switched his attention to the floor. "This string's all a nuisance," Teddy grumbled, fumbling ineffectually with a draggle of knots as he tried to tie the car behind the truck.

"Let's have a go," said Mallory. He got down on his haunches and systematically reduced the towrope to order. "What time's this fellow coming, Lindy?"

"He said about three, and I thought that would be all right. You won't mind if I leave you on your own, will you? I'd like to take the children to the beach for an hour or two. It's such a heavenly day."

"Heavenly," Mallory agreed.

Teddy said, "Where is heaven, Mummy?"

"They say it's up in the sky, darling."

"Where the airports are?"

"M'm . . . ? Yes, I expect so. . . . Hand me that basin, Peter, will you?"

"Pleasure!"

There was a shrill whistle from the hall and Richard, the nine-year-old, came in, hugging a large and docile tabby cat. He had his mother's vivid coloring and looked robustly healthy. "What's for dessert?" he asked.

"There'll be no dessert at all if you all come crowding into the kitchen," Linda said, putting the pie carefully into the oven. "Why can't you find something useful to do, some of you? Richard, go and clear up that rubbish outside the front door, for a start. And take Teddy."

Teddy began to gather up his toys from the floor, singing a little

song to himself. "Hob, shoe, hob. Hob, shoe, hob. Here a nail and there a nail and that's well shob."

"*Shod*," Richard said, "not shob."

"It's *shob*," Teddy said indignantly. "Isn't it shob, Mummy?"

"I expect so, darling."

Richard looked expressively at his father and shrugged his shoulders. "Some people . . . !" he said.

"You didn't tell me about the trees, Peter," Linda said, when the children had gone. "How were they?"

"Not at all bad, as a matter of fact. The place looks a bit knocked about but it shouldn't take long to clear up. Alan was very relieved."

"Did you manage to get over to the nursery?"

"No, there really wasn't time—I'll have to leave that for a day or two."

He lingered for a few moments, then went into the dining room. Sounds of verbal strife were coming through the door, and he wasn't surprised to find Richard there. Anne, fifteen years and nine months, was painting at the bookstrewn table. Richard was standing behind her.

"If you won't play at seeing who can hum longest," he was saying, "I shall pinch the mole at the back of your neck."

"Go away, you little pest," Anne said, but without heat. "Daddy, make him go away."

Mallory said, "Richard, don't be a pest. I thought you were clearing up."

"I've cleared up."

"Then go and see who can hum longest with Teddy."

"He can't play it—he always laughs."

"Well, play at something else—but outside, not indoors. Go on, scoot!"

Richard scooted.

Mallory smiled at Anne. She was their adopted daughter—a graceful, rather fragile little girl, with an engaging aura of youthful charm and innocence. She was a temperamental child, sometimes sparklingly gay and full of fun, sometimes pensive and solitary, but always a source of interest and pleasure to Mallory. It gave him great satisfaction just to see her around the place—the small neat figure with the soft fair hair and the delicate pink-and-white complexion that had such a lovely bloom on it.

She seemed rather quiet today, and he thought she looked a little pale. He glanced over her shoulder at her art homework, which turned out to be a water color of the docile tabby asleep. For a moment they both regarded it appraisingly.

"I'd just got him half drawn," she said, "and he deliberately got up and stretched and lay down the other way!"

"It's not bad, all the same. You really do paint quite well."

"Only average," she said realistically. "You should see what some of the girls do."

"Well, I think it's jolly good." He surveyed the littered table. "You seem to have had a busy morning."

"I have. I've been doing an exam."

"An exam? Here at home?"

"Yes, arithmetic."

"What's the idea?"

"Oh, to see if I'm good enough to take it for School Cert.," she said with a sigh.

"I thought you'd done that once."

"I had, but Miss Fisher wasn't sure. She said I was marginal, so I had to do it again. I've made an awful mess of it, I'm afraid."

"I shouldn't worry," Mallory said. He saw the fatigue in her face and added recklessly, "Women who are good at math are usually pretty frightful!"

She laughed. "Mummy isn't bad at math."

"She's not good enough to be objectionable. Anyway, how do you know? Has she been giving you a hand with the paper?"

"Daddy, really! She's had to sign at the bottom to say it's all my own work."

"Fair enough . . . How did the history go yesterday?"

"Not too badly. Would you like to see the questions?"

"Why, yes," he said, after only the slightest of pauses. "I don't suppose they'll mean much to me, though."

Anne got up with alacrity. The green skirt of her school uniform was short for her and showed a lot of slender leg. She would never be gawky, but she was certainly growing very fast.

Mallory returned to the kitchen and hovered. "Anne's looking a bit peaky, isn't she?" he said to Linda.

"She's all right, darling—it's just her age."

"Has she been taking her tonic?"

"Yes, you old fusspot."

"It's a bit much when they start making them do their exam papers at home."

"I know, but she does want to take arithmetic if she can."

"Well, I'll be glad when the wretched thing's over."

"So shall I. Only another eight weeks, thank heaven . . . Are you hungry?"

"Ravenous!"

"Just as well I've done some extra potatoes, then."

He smiled, recognizing the tactful change of subject. When Anne was under discussion, there was always thin ice about. Oversolicitousness on his part was one of the few things that could start a domestic squabble.

Anne was down in a moment with the paper in her hand. Mallory took it and ran his eye over the questions with an appearance of concentration. Comment seemed called for. He said with a grin, "I like this one: 'Why did the American colonists revolt in 1775? Were they justified?'"

"What's funny about it?" said Anne.

"Oh, I don't know—but I think the Americans might find it mildly amusing. Who set the paper?"

"Miss Fallon. Why?"

Linda shot her husband a warning glance, and he remembered that Anne had a bit of a crush on the history mistress. "Oh, nothing," he said, handing the paper back, "I've probably got an odd sense of humor. And I'm sure you did very well."

"Not well enough for Miss Fallon, I'm afraid. She marks very stiffly."

Mallory patted her head. "Personally," he said, "I think it would have a very healthy effect all round if you took a card into the exam room in June saying, 'It doesn't matter whether I pass or not,' and stuck it on your desk."

Anne looked at him in horror.

"Daddy's being silly," said Linda. "Of course you've got to pass, and so you will, quite easily."

"I'm sure you passed *your* exams," Anne said to him.

"I don't remember losing much sleep over them."

Linda said, "Lay the table, Anne, will you please?" She waited until they were alone in the kitchen and then gave Mallory a re-

proving look. "You shouldn't say things like that, Peter, even in fun."

"Well, she's worried stiff about her wretched work, and it was a beautiful morning, and she'd have been far better off getting some fresh air."

"I'll see she comes with us this afternoon, anyway."

"She keeps at it so long. Don't you think we ought to ration her?"

"Darling, I do, and she's quite amenable really. You'll only make her miserable if you start playing the heavy father—she'll worry much more if she feels she's not doing enough."

"Yes—I suppose that's true."

He strolled out into the sunshine, looking thoughtful. Probably he *was* troubling himself unnecessarily. It seemed to him a pity that schools put on the examination pressure just when there were so many other strains on a girl, but it wasn't as though Anne couldn't cope with her work. It was merely that she was overconscientious. Linda's good sense would take them through the next few weeks all right.

The sound of voices reached him from the Heath and he went through the gate at the end of the garden and found Richard and Teddy sitting on a rug in a patch of heather, playing fivestones. Teddy wasn't having much success and his enthusiasm seemed to be flagging. Presently he said, "We better go indoors, Richard—I think it's gonna wain."

Richard shouted with laughter. "Just because you're losing, you baby! Of course it isn't going to rain. It hasn't rained for weeks."

"I think it's gonna wain," Teddy persisted. "Don't you think it's gonna wain, Daddy?"

"I hope not. Mummy wants to take you all to the sea this afternoon."

"Oh, cheers!" Richard cried. "I hope she lets me paddle. That'll be the first paddle this year."

"I want to paddle, too," said Teddy. "Can I, Daddy?"

"I don't know about that. You'll be able to dig."

"I better take my spade, then." He gathered up the fivestones. "Betn't I?"

"You better," Mallory agreed gravely.

Teddy sidled past him, then broke into a run. "You're a great big bear!" he shouted as he fled.

At that moment the kitchen window swung wide open and Linda called "Lunch, boys!" The children scampered indoors and took their places. The food was served in the kitchen, and Anne carried the steaming plates into the dining room. Linda, who in the old days in Georgetown had been waited on hand and foot by colored servants, now managed alone in the house except for a woman who cycled over from Hurley twice a week to clean, and on the whole she preferred it that way. It helped that she wasn't fanatically house proud; to her, a home was for comfort and a family for fun, and the Mallory house had plenty of both.

There was a little lull once they were seated. To Linda, getting them all round the table with food before them was like getting a ship into harbor. At last she could relax. Teddy chattered ceaselessly while Anne cut his meat up for him, but the family was accustomed to the verbal background he provided and found it hardly more disturbing than the tick of a familiar clock. Richard ate stolidly for a while. Then he announced: "Haines killed seven squirrels this morning."

"Seven!" said Mallory in surprise.

"Yes, he was coming by on his bike and he showed me their tails. He and Johnson shot them."

"How awful!" said Anne. "Poor little things!"

Richard regarded her with schoolboy contempt. "You're a sissy."

"I'm not cruel, anyway. I think you're horrible, gloating over killing squirrels. They never did you any harm."

"They do the trees a lot of harm," said Mallory, "and they multiply terribly fast. If someone didn't keep them down they'd soon ruin the plantations."

"Well, I still think it's hateful."

"So are a lot of things that have to be done," said Linda. "You mustn't be such a sensitive plant, Anne."

"Daddy doesn't shoot them. He hasn't even got a gun."

"I've got a gun," said Teddy. "I'm gonna shoot your head off, Richard. I'm gonna shoot you all up an' put you in the dustbin."

Linda pushed his chair nearer the table. "Get on with your lunch, Teddy."

Anne said, "Well, Daddy *doesn't* shoot them, and I'm glad."

"We all let other people do our dirty work for us when we can,"

said Mallory gently. "I don't much like killing things, so I'm afraid I get Haines and Johnson to do it for me."

"Daddy's a sensitive plant, too," Linda said with a smile. "So it's just as well Haines and Johnson don't mind."

"But what if they did mind?" Anne persisted.

"Then I suppose I should have to do it myself," said Mallory.

"They're such pretty things."

"I don't think so," Linda said firmly. "Those gray squirrels make me think of rats."

"Their tails weren't pretty," Richard interjected. "They were all bloody."

Mallory said, "Pipe down, Richard."

"Well, they were."

"I said 'Pipe down.' If you're not careful you'll be spending the afternoon weeding the path instead of going to the sea."

Linda said, "Anne, take the plates out, will you, and bring the pie in. It's in the oven."

"You'd better help her with the plates, Richard," said Mallory, "and don't run with them."

There was a moment of blessed silence in the dining room, broken only by Teddy's busy scraping. Mallory caught Linda's eye, and grinned.

"Bored, darling?" he said.

CHAPTER THREE

Linda had hoped to get the children away before Mallory's visitor arrived, but at the last moment Teddy fell and cut his knee and by the time he'd been bandaged and they were all ready to pile into the car a figure in clerical gray and a black hat had appeared over the edge of the barrow and was walking up the drive. There was a little confusion while he introduced himself to Linda, consoled with Teddy over the knee, patted Richard, and smiled appreciatively at Anne. Then Mallory came over from the fir trees, where he had been hacking out an old stump with a billhook, and took charge of him; and the car drove away.

"I do hope I'm not making a nuisance of myself, Mr. Mallory," the clergyman apologized. "I see you're busy."

"Not at all," Mallory assured him, putting the billhook down on the porch. "I was just occupying myself until you came. How did you get here—on foot?"

"Yes, I walked from Hurley. Such a splendid stretch of country!"

"Very fine, isn't it? Well, come along inside."

"I should have written to you, perhaps, and made a proper appointment, but I was a little pressed for time and it seemed simpler to telephone."

"That's quite all right. Have a chair—you'll find this one's comfortable."

For a moment or two Mallory studied his visitor. The parson was a very small man, nearing his fifties, with thin hair smoothed back from a high, intelligent forehead and plump cheeks and a pallid, suety skin. His manner was benign, but he had a tight little mouth and his pale gray eyes under their thick white lids lacked warmth. On the whole, Mallory preferred the Vicar.

"Well, Mr. Gill," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"You'll be surprised when I tell you. I trust you won't regard my visit as an intrusion. The fact is, I'm the chaplain at the prison in Georgetown, British Guiana."

Mallory stared at him. "Good lord . . ." he said softly.

"I'm afraid that comes as a bit of a shock to you."

"It does, indeed. . . . What brings you over here?"

"A few personal matters—and a very strong desire to renew acquaintance with a temperate climate! I've been living in B.G. for more than twelve years, and you'll agree that's a long while. I must have taken over at the prison, I suppose, just about the time you left the colony."

"Then you knew Arthur Herrick." It was a statement rather than a question. There was constraint in Mallory's voice, and a look almost of apprehension in his eyes.

"Yes, I knew him. What a terrible affair that was! He was one of my charges, which is really why I've called to see you. I fear Herrick hadn't many redeeming features, but just before his death he did talk to me a good deal about his daughter. He seemed genuinely concerned about her future, and though his interest was rather belated I welcomed it as a sign of grace. He made me promise that if

ever I had the opportunity I would try to see how she was getting on. Well, Mr. Mallory, it's a long while ago now, but the promise has always been on my mind and this is my chance to do something about it. As I was in England, I thought perhaps you'd forgive me if I called on you briefly and made a friendly inquiry about Anne."

"I see," said Mallory, and for a moment he was silent. "Well, you've certainly taken me by surprise, padre. I imagined all that was over and done with long ago. . . . How did you discover where I lived?"

"Oh, it was very simple. I thought it unlikely that you'd have left the forestry service, so I inquired at the Forestry Commission in London and they told me you were now Warden down here. A fine, responsible job, if I may say so. After that, it was merely a question of looking you up in the telephone directory." The clergyman hesitated. "Of course, the last thing in the world I want to do is to revive painful memories, and if you'd prefer not to discuss Anne I shall quite understand. At least my duty is discharged."

Mallory made an effort not to seem churlish. "Naturally I don't mind talking about her. It was very decent of you to call."

"I'm glad you feel that way about it. Well, then, Mr. Mallory, how have things turned out?"

"Very well indeed, padre—without any qualification."

"That's splendid news. I must say the little girl looked very pretty and charming. That was Anne at the car, I take it?"

"Yes, that was Anne."

"You must feel very proud of her."

"We're very fond of her."

"Do I detect an understatement? I suspect that she's the apple of your eye."

Mallory smiled. "You could be right."

The clergyman sat back with a little sigh of pleasure. "You know, Mr. Mallory, it's heart-warming to see a kind and generous action so richly rewarded. It was very wonderful the way you and your wife came to the rescue at that sad time."

"Oh, I can't agree," said Mallory. "After all, Sara Herrick was my wife's closest friend, so it was only natural we should take care of Anne—particularly as there didn't seem to be any relatives who wanted her. And we hadn't any definite intention of adopting her when we brought her to England, you know. The truth is, we both

grew so fond of her that we couldn't bear the thought of losing her, and at the time my wife didn't think she could have any children of her own so it seemed the obvious thing to do. I would say it was a moderately selfish action."

"Then it's a pity there aren't more selfish people in the world. . . . So the two boys were unexpected additions to the family, were they?"

"The first one was."

"Ah, yes. And I suppose there have been the usual problems of adjustment?"

"Nothing serious, I'm glad to say. We all get on exceedingly well together."

"How very delightful! And what sort of a child is Anne? As gay and happy as she looks?"

"Well, just at the moment she's inclined to be rather solemn and introspective. You know what young people are like at her age—full of self-questionings and anxieties and doubts about their place in the universe."

"Of course—a most difficult time. So easily upset—it's a time when they need a little special care and love."

"And a lot of reassurance. But I haven't any doubt that Anne will have shaken down in a year or two."

"I'm sure of it. Does she attend a local school?"

"Yes, the local grammar school. It's quite a long way and she has to go in on her bicycle, but it was either that or a boarding school, and my wife and I didn't think that would be a very good idea in the circumstances."

"Quite so, quite so. And how is she doing at school?"

"Much better than she thinks she is. She has an examination to pass in June and just now she's rather agitated about it, but she's really very bright and I'm certain she'll get through without much difficulty."

"Has she any notion what she wants to do afterward?"

"She'd rather like to teach, I think—preferably small children."

"She could do much worse. It's a noble vocation—and from what you tell me about her I should think she might make a very good teacher."

"I dare say. She obviously enjoys it—as a matter of fact she al-

ready takes a class at Sunday school. I'd have thought she was a bit young for that—but perhaps you wouldn't agree?"

"I would say it was admirable."

"It doesn't amount to more than telling stories to tiny tots, of course. Anyhow, she wanted to do it—she fixed it all up for herself. You'd approve of her, padre—she's a great little churchgoer."

"I'm delighted to hear it—it's most heartening to hear of young people attending regular worship, particularly these days. It sounds as though she takes after her mother rather than her father."

"I don't know that adolescent churchgoing is a very sound indication of character," Mallory said dryly. "She's probably a mixture, like the rest of us."

"I suppose so. Do you ever see any obvious signs of her father in her?"

"A fleeting expression, sometimes; an odd mannerism. Nothing more."

"That's very fortunate. All the same, it's a brave experiment you're conducting, Mr. Mallory. It must surely be a source of some anxiety to you lest she *should* turn out to be in any way like her father?"

Mallory frowned. "A seedling tree doesn't grow crooked because the parent tree grew crooked," he said. "Most of Herrick's trouble was due to his drinking. Anne has been brought up in a happy, normal home, and I see no reason why she should ever be anything but a happy, normal person."

"I hope you may be right. I must confess that in your place I should feel a little worried. . . . I take it Anne knows nothing about that sordid tragedy?"

"Good God, no!" Mallory exclaimed in a shocked tone.

"She never asks about her parents?"

"Why should she? Children don't bother their heads about people they've never known, and Anne was only three when we brought her here. Of course, my wife has told her that she's an adopted daughter—that was long ago—and she did once tell her that her own mother, who was a very sweet woman, had died in an accident, and that her father died soon afterward. That fully satisfied her. I doubt if much more will ever need to be said about it."

The parson gave a little nod. "Let us hope not, Mr. Mallory—it would be a dreadful thing if she ever discovered the truth. Her fa-

ther, in my opinion, was fortunate not to be hanged. I suppose the jury decided it was manslaughter because he was drunk at the time and there seemed to be no motive, but the way Herrick talked after he was sentenced gave me the impression that that blow was struck with gusto. In the opinion of those best able to judge, he was a brutal, vicious sadist rather than a mere frenzied alcoholic, and the attack on a warder that brought about his death in prison was in keeping with his record. I would say that he *murdered* his wife."

For a moment, Mallory was speechless. The vague antipathy he had felt for the man sitting opposite him hardened suddenly into active repugnance.

"I must say, Mr. Gill, that I don't like your words or your manner—and I'm astounded at your attitude. Even if you're right about Herrick, which I doubt, I would have expected more Christian charity from a clergyman."

"But then you see," said Gill, "I'm not really a clergyman."

"Not a clergyman!"

"No, Mr. Mallory. I'm afraid I've misled you. These clothes I'm wearing—I'm not really entitled to them. I was never the padre in the prison at Georgetown. Actually, I'm a businessman, and I'm here on a matter of business."

"What business?"

"Blackmail," said Gill.

CHAPTER FOUR

For a second or two Mallory sat quite still, staring at him incredulously. There were things that couldn't happen to ordinary people—this, surely, was one of them? Yet the fellow looked as though he'd meant what he'd said. With a feeling of complete unreality, Mallory got to his feet and walked slowly to the telephone on the window ledge and lifted the receiver. "I don't know whether you're an escaped lunatic, Gill," he heard himself saying, "or a very simple-minded crook, but whichever it is the police will know how to deal with you."

Gill didn't move. He was watching the telephone—this was the moment of risk.

"Wait, Mr. Mallory, wait," he said calmly. "If you value your daughter's happiness, I beg you not to think that I'm simple. On the contrary, I'm rather subtle. Your position is infinitely more difficult than you suppose."

Mallory paused, his finger on the dial. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that blackmail is my profession. I'm an expert. I know all the gambits, all the reactions—and all the pitfalls. You surely don't imagine that I'd have placed myself in your hands like this and disclosed my intentions in person if I hadn't fully safeguarded myself first. You *could* hand me over to the police, yes, but you *won't*, because that would precipitate the very thing you want to prevent. You see, Mr. Mallory, I have an associate. I think perhaps I'd better introduce him to you right away, before you do anything rash."

He crossed over to the window. The whole episode was so improbable that Mallory still couldn't believe it was happening. Gill blandly took the receiver from him and pointed out across the heath to the ribbon of macadam that wound through the heather toward Hurley.

"You see that short stretch of road beside the gorse bushes," he said. "A little to the right of it, where the trees are, there's a T junction, as you undoubtedly know, and at the junction there's a public telephone box. I shall now dial the number of that box and the bell will ring inside it. My associate will hear the ringing and he will then appear."

Mallory watched him, fascinated. He saw the number dialed, and gazed across at the empty road. Almost at once, a figure rose up from the gorse. At a distance of nearly half a mile it had no distinguishable characteristics. It semaphored twice with both arms, and immediately plunged back into the bushes.

"That," said Gill, putting the receiver down with a complacent smile, "is my associate. Let's call him—Mr. Parker. You have no idea what his real name is, or what he looks like, or where to find him. He is not, perhaps, the most intelligent of men, but he's a very reliable assistant and he has his instructions. If anything unpleasant happens to me he will do, quietly and anonymously and without further notice, what I shall have to do unless you and I can reach

an understanding. You will see, therefore, that there is no easy way out for you. Now, Mr. Mallory, suppose we have a little talk."

Mallory turned slowly from the window. "What exactly do you want?" he said.

"I want two thousand pounds by Monday evening. That may seem rather a lot of money to you, but Mr. Parker will naturally expect a share. If the full amount is safely and punctually delivered to us, neither he nor I will take any steps to tell your daughter Anne that her father split her mother's skull with a blunt instrument and subsequently died in prison. If it isn't . . ." He threw out his plump white hands in an expressive gesture. The clerical garb was a blasphemy now, and added to the horror.

"It's the most diabolical thing I ever heard in my life," Mallory exploded.

"Oh, let's try to keep a sense of proportion," said Gill. "Surely it's not so very diabolical, even by your conventional standards. It isn't as though I *want* to tell the girl the truth. It would give me no particular pleasure—and in any case I'm quite sure I shan't have to. After my little—er—reconnaissance of your state of mind, earlier this afternoon, it is perfectly clear to me that you are a man who would go to extreme lengths to save his child from unhappiness—and two thousand pounds is not an extreme length. I took the trouble to look up your salary before coming down here—it must be one of the less pleasant features of being a civil servant, I always think, that one's income should be printed in a book for all to see—and I'm quite satisfied that you'll be able to find the money without undue difficulty. And that's as it should be—'from each according to his ability' is the principle on which I like to work."

"And if I can't find it, you seriously mean . . . ?"

Gill's little mouth tightened. "I can only advise you to make the necessary effort. As I say, I should hate to have to tell Anne that ghastly story and probably ruin a young life, but I have my professional standards and once it got around that a blackmailer didn't carry out his threats when he wasn't paid, the whole basis of the profession would be undermined. Either I or Mr. Parker would certainly feel obliged to tell her."

"It's fantastic," said Mallory.

"These things always come as a bit of a shock at first," said Gill, "particularly with people who have led rather sheltered lives. The

sudden impact of illegality on a peaceful, law-abiding family—the sudden realization that organized society cannot always guarantee protection—one doesn't think of such possibilities until they happen. But one soon gets adjusted—at least, that's what I've usually found in a very wide experience.”

“Have you no human feelings at all?”

“If you mean, am I sentimental about the people I deal with, the answer is no. Otherwise I should have picked some other job. I didn't just drift into this profession, you know—I chose it deliberately. You see, Mr. Mallory, life to me is a game, a racket if you like, in which the intelligent man does the best he can for himself without regard for anything else. I don't believe in good or evil—I believe that everything in life is morally neuter. That's why I'm not troubled by what you call human feelings. I'm a man without a conscience.”

“One day,” said Mallory, “you'll meet somebody with the same philosophy—and he'll kill you.”

Gill shrugged. “Kill or be killed—it's the way of things. But it isn't very likely as long as I have a Mr. Parker in the background, is it? How would it help anyone? Of course, there's a certain occupational risk—the moment of uncontrolled anger before common sense takes charge. I have to study my prospective clients with that in mind, and try to assess the danger. In your case it seemed slight. There was nothing in your record to suggest that a physical attack on me would come easily to you. You never seem to have done any fighting—all through the war you were in a reserved job. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that you'd never even seen anyone killed in anger. You're essentially a mild and peaceable man—and one doesn't suddenly violate one's whole nature.” Gill gave a contemptuous little smile. “But perhaps we can discuss these broader questions some other time—we've rather a lot to arrange just now.”

“We've nothing to arrange,” said Mallory curtly. “I shall take steps to see that my daughter is kept well out of your way, and you and your accomplice will both go to jail.”

“Now that's just whistling in the dark, Mr. Mallory. I assure you that whatever steps you may take it will be quite impossible for you to insulate your daughter against the information that we have. You can, of course, prevent us from making contact with her personally; you can intercept letters to her, and telephone calls. But you can't prevent us from communicating with her schoolfellows or

sending anonymous letters to selected people in the village, or leaving anonymous postcards in the local public houses. And country folk are such gossips! How long do you suppose it would be before she learned the truth? You are thinking, perhaps, that you might send her away altogether, but on reflection you will realize that that would involve you in something much worse than inconvenience. Besides, Mr. Parker and I are both very mobile. Quite frankly, we have made preparations to cover all possible contingencies. Our bomb is ready for use—and it will be exploded automatically the moment you step out of line.”

Mallory regarded him uncertainly. The threat had much more substance than he had realized, and mere defiance seemed no answer. Presently he said, “Supposing I paid you this money—which I have no intention of doing—how do I know that it wouldn’t be the first of a succession of demands? Isn’t that what always happens?”

“Not in my practice, Mr. Mallory. The blackmailers who do that sort of thing invariably end up in prison. They drive the client to desperation, and that’s always a mistake. Blackmail, to be successful, must be a calm and placid business, the triumph of cool sense over passion. No, my policy is to name a sum—a reasonable sum, not a crippling one—and then call it a day. I do very handsomely on that basis. I can guarantee that once the money is paid over, Mr. Parker and I will go out of your life, and you’ll never see us or hear from us again.”

“I’ve only your word for that.”

“Of course.”

Mallory began to pace up and down. “How did you find out about my daughter?” he demanded, after a moment.

“Oh, come, Mr. Mallory, you really can’t expect me to tell you that sort of thing. Why, you’ll be asking me next who I am and where I come from and what my background is. Permit me a little reticence. Let’s just say that we professional blackmailers are constantly on the lookout for promising situations, and this seemed to be one of them. . . . And now we really must get down to brass tacks.”

“If you think I’m going to hand over two thousand pounds to you, you must be out of your mind. Apart from anything else, I haven’t got it.”

"I'm sure you can raise it. That's why I mentioned Monday evening as a suitable time to meet—it will give you the whole of Monday to fix things up. Banks are most accommodating, provided there's security—and I'm sure you don't lack security. . . . By the way, the money should be in pound notes."

"How on earth could I walk into my bank and ask for two thousand pounds in pound notes?"

"It can be done, I assure you. You may find it a trifle embarrassing, but that's a small price to pay for safety. The notes must be unmarked, of course—marked notes might well explode the bomb! Oh, and don't imagine that it will help you to keep a record of the numbers—that, also, would be disastrous. Only one of us will dispose of his notes in the first place, and if there should be any trouble over them the other will immediately see to it that the information about your daughter is put around. . . ." He broke off with a deprecating smile. "But there, I needn't stress again what will happen."

"You won't get away with this," said Mallory. "I shall think of something, you may be sure."

"If you can, Mr. Mallory, good luck to you. You'll be a cleverer man than—with all respect—I think you are. There may be some loophole that I've overlooked, but I've gone over everything very carefully and I really don't think there is. And now for the meeting place."

"I have no intention of meeting you."

"You'll meet me—I haven't the least doubt of that." From an inner pocket Gill produced the familiar inch-to-the-mile map of the forest. "I've been going over the ground a little, with the help of this map that the Forestry Commission so obligingly provides for people like myself. I don't want to put you to unnecessary inconvenience, so I suggest Oakham Heath as a suitable spot. That's quite near here, isn't it? There's an old notice board lying on the ground that should make a satisfactory rendezvous. No doubt you've seen it."

"Of course I've seen it."

"Good. I shall expect you there at eight o'clock on Monday evening—alone. You'll have the money with you in a brown paper parcel—and no excuses will be taken." Gill stuffed the map back into his pocket. "And now I really must be going. *Au revoir*, Mr.

Mallory, and—think it over carefully. You'll find when you seriously get down to consider alternatives that you haven't any option. Eight o'clock on Monday, then!"

He went out into the hall and opened the front door and a moment later he was walking away down the drive. His step was so brisk, his manner so cheerful, that anyone seeing him would have thought he had just saved a soul.

CHAPTER FIVE

Now the sense of unreality returned. Left alone in the familiar, friendly house, where every association was a kindly one, Mallory had to make a continuous effort to believe in Gill. If an airplane had fallen out of the sky and shattered the place, there would at least have been convincing debris. Gill's descent, potentially just as catastrophic, had left no trace. How *could* one believe that a total stranger had brazenly insinuated himself into one's house and uttered a malignant threat and gone away smiling and confident about the outcome, when everything around looked just the same as ever? Or—since one had to believe—how could one take the theatrical incident seriously? The whole thing, Mallory told himself, was an impudent bluff, a try-on. Gill couldn't *really* intend to carry out his threat—or even if he intended it now, his nerve would fail in execution. . . . Yet he had planted fear, and the fear continued to grow. Suppose, just suppose, that he *did* tell Anne! The possibility that she might learn the truth from such a source was too frightful to contemplate.

And that wasn't the only thing. Mallory had another anxiety, now—less pressing, but still disturbing. Doubts long buried in his mind had suddenly been brought to the surface. Doubts about Herrick. Of course, Gill had probably made up all that stuff about Herrick being a zestful murderer, to reinforce his threat. As he hadn't been the padre, he could scarcely have known. Yet he'd spoken with an odd assurance, as though he really had talked to the man. And there *had* been that savage assault upon the warder. Ordinary anger and frustration might have accounted for that, perhaps—but

so might less simple impulses. The trouble, Mallory realized, was that neither he nor Linda had ever known Herrick, except through Sara's too-forgiving eyes. The man's uncertain temper and constant overdrinking had made normal social intercourse impossible. It was Sara whom they'd known—the gentle, conscientious, self-immolating Sara, escaping to Linda for comfort and companionship but stubbornly refusing to abandon the man she'd taken for better or worse. And Anne was like Sara in so many ways—naturally they'd always thought of her as Sara's child, not Herrick's. Yet genes were unpredictable things, and a defect of character could show itself quite late. If Herrick had been a butchering sadist . . . *If* he had . . . Probably no one would ever know for certain. Probably no one would ever know much more than had come out at the trial, and that was precious little. Mallory could still see Herrick's weak, handsome-debauched face, still hear his bewildered words to the court: "I was drunk—terribly drunk. We may have quarreled, but I don't remember—I don't remember anything. I never meant to do it—I was fond of her." And he'd got away with it. But had it been true? And if not, what sort of man had he really been, and what traits had he passed on?

There was a photograph of Anne on the bookshelf that Mallory had always liked, taken when she was only six, that showed her laughing and angelic and utterly trusting. He was drawn to it now and stood looking at it for a long time. Of course, she'd changed enormously since then; her face had grown more interesting, more sensitive, more inquiring; her expression less easy to interpret. She was actually rather a complex child—but there had never been the least hint of a latent viciousness. It was a morbid, baseless notion, and Mallory put it from his mind. It wasn't any natural development in Anne that they need worry about—only the sudden, crushing change in her that Gill could bring about.

What was he going to do about that? Looking back over the interview with Gill, he couldn't feel that he'd handled things very well so far. The situation had been difficult, but he ought surely to have done *something* more decisive—not just let the fellow go. It wasn't as though he hadn't coped adequately with crises before—he'd never have reached his present responsible position if he'd been liable to paralysis of action in emergency. Yet this crisis was different—a situation utterly outside his experience or imagining—and at the

back of his mind there was a grinding sense of inadequacy. It was true what Gill had said—he had led a sheltered life, in a way. His direct experience of crime had been limited to minor crookedness, and the protective framework of society had always been there in the background, to give support if necessary. He had certainly never before come face to face with evil raised to a principle of conduct, with evil as a conscious instrument of policy, with evil that seemed to by-pass the law. And now that he had, he was totally unprepared to deal with it. . . .

The family got back just before dusk. At the sound of the car, Mallory withdrew to the little downstairs room that he sometimes used as a study, but the children had never been accustomed to regard it as a sanctum and they soon found him.

Richard, high-spirited and tireless, said, "What do you think, Dad? We made a volcano on the beach! It was wizard! We built a big sand castle and made a crater in it and we filled it with bits of old paper and stuff and it burned just like Vesuvius or something."

"There were *ever* so many children on the beach," said Teddy, rolling his tongue round something large in his cheek. "An' I paddled with them all."

"They weren't children," said Richard with dignity, "they were Wolf Cubs."

"They had a ruler race," Teddy went on, ignoring him.

Anne, her face flushed by the air and sun, burst out laughing. "You mean a relay race. Oh, Teddy, you *are* funny."

"I'm not funny," said Teddy. "Have you still got your sweet, Richard?"

"No, I crunched it."

"You shouldn't have crunched it, you should have sucken it. I've still got mine. Have you got yours, Anne?"

Mallory let the tide of chatter sweep over him. As long as they kept on talking to each other it was all right.

Presently Linda came in. "Oh, this is where you are," she said. She gave a contented sigh. "What an afternoon! I do wish you'd been with us, Peter, it was so lovely. Just like real summer."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"How did you get on with your parson friend?"

"We had a long talk. I'll tell you later on."

"I hope you offered him some tea."

"No, I—as a matter of fact we were too busy. . . . Look, do you think you could get some of these kids off to bed?"

"Darling, give me a chance! I haven't even put the car away yet." She gave him a quick glance. "Is anything the matter?"

"No, of course not," he said, conscious that Anne was looking at him, too.

"You're a bit pale."

"I'm quite all right."

"Oh, well . . . Come on, children." She began to shoo them out. "Supper and bath for you boys—quickly."

"What's Daddy cross about?" asked Richard, stopping on his way through the sitting room to adjust one of his precious rails.

"He's not cross—but *I* shall be if you don't come along," said Linda.

Mallory got up and closed the door behind them. House noises usually didn't bother him, but now he felt he couldn't bear them. An immense fatigue had suddenly overtaken him and made all his limbs seem heavy. The thought of what he had to tell Linda sickened him, yet he longed to share the burden with her. He needed her sympathy and affection and, above all, her common sense. But the house routine had to be gone through first—supper, bath, bed, story for Teddy. And there'd still be Anne. She liked to sit up with them on Saturday evenings—to be treated as a grownup after the boys had gone to bed. She'd expect it, and she couldn't be hustled off. The very last thing Mallory wanted was to make her think that anything unusual had happened, that there was a secret to be kept from her and discussed in her absence. He'd have to wait.

He sat slumped in an armchair, ready to hide behind the *Times* if Anne should come back to talk to him. She was quick to notice things, and he didn't trust himself not to show that he was worried. Presently he heard Teddy crying upstairs, and Linda's voice, unusually sharp. It didn't take long, he thought ruefully, for irritation to spread through a household.

He opened the paper and glanced at the headlines. From the kitchen came the sharp crash of something breaking on tiles. He heard Linda calling downstairs to ask what had happened, and Anne saying it was only a cup, and after that there was comparative silence for a while. Then the television started up in the sitting room.

Mallory got up and went in. Anne was fiddling with the knobs. Worry robbed his manner of gentleness.

"Do we really want that on tonight?"

She looked at him in surprise, and turned the sound low. "Not if you're tired. I was going to see what the new serial was like, but it doesn't matter."

"I thought you were getting the supper."

"It's all in here—I've got it." She gave him a sudden, mischievous smile. "Didn't you hear me?"

He forced a smile in return. "Oh, well, look at the serial if you want to." He went to the bottom of the stairs and called up, "I'm going out to stretch my legs, Lindy."

"All right, darling—good idea."

He went out onto the Heath and walked slowly along a moonlit path. Walking was his recreation, and it usually soothed him, but tonight the anodyne wasn't strong enough. His problem was torturing him, and he was torturing it, but thinking about it didn't produce any solution. . . . As far as he could see, Gill *had* closed every loophole. He walked on, and round, keeping no check on the time, and when he got back to the house Linda and Anne had almost finished supper.

Linda said, "You've been a long while. Aren't you hungry?"

"Not particularly." He sank into a chair and took the coffee she gave him and tried to speak naturally to Anne. "What was the serial like?"

"Awful!" she said with a shudder. "One of those horrible thrillers again—bodies falling out of cupboards."

"You don't have to take them seriously," said Linda.

"Well, I prefer *Mansfield Park*, anyway." Anne returned to her book, curling herself up in her chair as though she were settled there for the evening.

There was a little silence. Presently Linda got out some socks, and began darning. Mallory picked up a magazine—a copy of *Country Life*. On the back, in the margin, someone had written "Bought x oxen for £240." Anne, of course, working out her sums all over the house. For a while he tried to read, but it was only his eyes that took in the words. Once he jerked out his arm, pointedly, and looked at his watch, but Anne was too deep in her book to notice.

Then, at a quarter to ten, when he could scarcely restrain his impatience any longer, she suddenly said, "I think I'll go to bed now."

"Yes, I think you ought," said Linda. "If you're going to early service in the morning you'll need a good night's sleep."

"May I have an apple?"

"If you can find one."

Anne got up, clutching her book, and kissed them both in turn. "Good night," she said.

"Sleep well!" Mallory called after her.

She fluttered her fingertips and closed the door behind her.

For a second or two they listened to her retreating footsteps. Then Linda said: "Well, out with it, Peter—what's happened?"

Mallory moved across to the settee and dropped down beside her, and told her.

She sat very still, clutching his hand, her face stiff and incredulous.

"It's the most fantastic thing I ever heard," she said.

"I know. I can still scarcely believe it myself."

"She looked round the room, slowly, as though it had suddenly become a strange place to her. "You mean he actually sat here and said those things . . . ! What did you *do*?"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't do anything much—I *couldn't*. . . ." Mallory told her about Parker, and about the careful plans that Gill had worked out to meet every contingency. "It sounds feeble, I know, but I was so utterly taken aback by it all that I didn't know what to do. . . . I suppose I was fascinated in a horrible kind of way. You can't imagine what it was like, watching a man dressed as a parson behaving like a—like a gangster. He even talked like a parson—he was so fluent and persuasive he almost made his proposition sound reasonable!"

"Darling, how awful!" Linda sat for a moment in horrified silence. Then she said uncertainly, "Peter, you don't think he really *would* try to tell Anne, do you?"

"I think he might. He doesn't seem to have any scruples at all."

"It's unbelievable—he must be an absolute monster . . . !" She broke off, her face flushed with indignation. Presently she said in a calmer tone, "How do you suppose he got onto it in the first place?"

"I can't imagine, but he's certainly very well informed. He knew when Sara was killed, and how, and he knew I was in forestry in B.G., and when we left there, and all about the adoption, and about the attack on the warder—he seemed to know just about everything."

"It sounds as though he must have been out there himself—I don't see how else he could have got to know so much. It was all reported there, but very little could have been written about it outside."

"I suppose someone else might have briefed him—Parker, for instance. . . . Anyway, the only thing that matters at the moment is what we're going to do about them."

"That's not much of a problem. We'll obviously have to tell the police."

"In spite of what Gill threatened?"

"We must, darling. Good heavens, we can't possibly cope with this ourselves."

"I can't see how the police will be able to cope with it either. I've been thinking about it for hours—and I really can't."

"But it's their job, Peter—they're sure to know what to do. After all, blackmail cases must come their way fairly often."

"Not this sort of case—it's probably unique. And I can't imagine any way they can tackle it—not any safe way."

"Well, they've got till Monday to work something out—nothing's likely to happen before then. They're bound to think of something. I'm certain we can leave it to them."

"I wish I had your confidence," said Mallory. "They're sound, painstaking chaps, of course, and that's fine when they're dealing with ordinary crooks. They may even be quite good with ordinary blackmailers—but Gill isn't ordinary. He's a devil, a brilliant devil. Look at the way he staged that interview with me and found out all about Anne before he made a move. He's got brains, nerve, experience—everything. He could easily be too clever for them."

"But, darling—what else *can* we do?"

Mallory slowly shook his head. "That's just it—I don't know."

"At least, Peter, they'll be able to advise us—and it can't possibly do any harm to tell them what's happened and see what they say."

"I'm not even sure about that. Once we tell the truth about Anne to anyone at all, there's no knowing where the story will finish up."

"Surely we can rely on the police not to talk?"

"Can we? Most of them may be pretty discreet, but not all. I've heard Sergeant Fuller gossiping like an old woman."

"Then don't tell Sergeant Fuller. Why not go to Winchester, where we're not known? That's the headquarters, isn't it?"

"I still think it might get around—these things so often do. And we can't take any chances. If one breath of the affair were to reach Anne, we'd be done."

"I do agree about that, darling, of course." Linda sat frowning for a moment. "Would you have to tell them about Anne, though—to start with, anyway? Couldn't you just say that a stranger named Gill had called and was blackmailing you, and leave it at that? It should be enough."

"I doubt it," said Mallory—but he looked interested.

"Well, they can't force you to go into details, and they won't be able to ignore what you say, either, because it's much too serious. Peter, I'm absolutely certain it's the best thing to do—and there isn't any time to lose."

There was a long pause. At last Mallory gave a sigh and said, "Well, I don't like it, Lindy, but I suppose you're right. There just isn't anything else to do." He looked at his watch. "I'd better fix up to see them first thing in the morning—they're not likely to be able to do anything much tonight. . . ." He got up and went to the telephone and dialed the operator. "Hello? Exchange? Get me county police headquarters, will you?"

CHAPTER SIX

Before setting out next day to keep his appointment at Winchester, Mallory climbed to the top of the barrow and had a good look round. It gave him a slightly self-conscious feeling, as though he were play-acting in some melodrama, but it seemed only sensible to make sure that no one was hanging about on the Heath or the road, waiting to follow him if he left the house. In spite of Gill's show of confidence the day before, the fellow must surely be a little concerned about his victim's movements?

There were several people in sight, and Mallory examined each of

them in turn through his glasses. The two occupants of a station wagon drawn up beside the Hurley road held his interest for a moment, but—though he couldn't see their faces clearly—he thought that one of them seemed too young and the other too tall to be Gill. There was also a bare-headed man riding alone across the Heath and another man picking his way on foot through a patch of bog, with a small white dog at his heels. Neither of them was Gill—either of them could have been Parker. But they were both moving away from the house, and presently the horseman disappeared over a low hill and the walker dwindled to a mere dot in the distance. Then the station wagon moved off, too, leaving the Heath empty. It was possible, of course, that a watcher might be lying concealed in the heather, but he wouldn't be getting much of a view and he certainly wouldn't be in a position to follow a car to Winchester. Reassured, Mallory returned to the house, called "Good-by" to Linda, and drove quickly out of the gate.

Where the stony track met the road he forked sharp right in the direction of Hurley, and at the telephone box he turned right again. He would be joining the A.31 highway a little further on, but to reach it he first had to make his way along a quiet country lane. He still found it hard to believe that no one had troubled to follow him and his glance kept darting to the driving mirror. But he had the road to himself, and after a while he relaxed and began to think about what he would say to the police. The meeting was bound to be embarrassing, but at least he would be talking to a man of status and authority—a Superintendent of the county C.I.D.—and that should make things easier. He was glad that he'd arranged everything the night before.

He descended a hill and slowed down to negotiate a short tunnel that took the road under a railway bridge. His mind was still on his coming interview and he was already halfway through before his brain registered what his eye had seen. With a suddenly pounding heart he braked to a standstill and reversed out until he could see the front of the bridge again. On the left-hand pillar of the arch, someone had chalked in large white letters:

ANNE MALLORY?

His first sensation was of panic. Anne had been out to early service, and he knew that she sometimes cycled this way round to church.

She could have seen the writing already, and the intrusive comment would have been more than enough to start a distressing train of thought. . . . Yet surely she would have said something about it, or at least shown some sign of disturbance in her manner? He tried to recall what she'd been like at breakfast, and his impression was that she'd been quite lighthearted. It looked as though no damage had been done so far.

He pulled the car in to the roadside and gathered a handful of dry grass from the shoulder and started to erase the words with feverish haste. Someone might come along at any moment, someone who knew him, and he certainly didn't want to have to explain what he was doing. The brick was rough, and the chalk difficult to remove, but he managed to rub out the question mark and blur the word "Mallory" into the thick line underneath it, so that the inscription no longer had any significance; and the "Anne" could have been anybody. Then he threw the chalky grass into the ditch and climbed back into the car, seething. This, presumably, was Gill's way of showing his power—the words could just as easily have read "Anne Mallory's father killed her mother," if the scrawler had been prepared to spend a little more time on them. And the choice of site was perfect. This road wasn't merely an alternative way to the church; it was the road along which Anne had to cycle to school every day, as Gill could have learned from any map. So she would have been pretty sure to notice the writing on Monday morning, and she would have told Mallory about it on Monday evening. The inscription had been intended as a final prod, to send him racing off to the rendezvous with the money.

His hand shook a little as he engaged the gear. He had felt all along that Gill's threat would be a simple one to carry out, but this practical demonstration had come as a tremendous shock. The whole blackmail plot had suddenly sharpened. The threat had become real, the danger imminent.

Mallory drove faster now, spurred on by a new sense of urgency, and in a few minutes he reached the main road. Once there he was able to keep the accelerator hard down and in less than half an hour he was running into Winchester.

The city was still wrapped in its Sunday-morning quiet and there were very few people about. Mallory stopped to ask a street-corner news vendor the way to the police station and having got his

directions he made a point of parking the car some distance away from it and approaching it on foot, first making sure that no loiterer had the place under observation. When he was quite satisfied he turned quickly into the building. He gave his name, and in a few moments he was being shown into the office of Superintendent John Ames.

The detective got up and shook hands and drew up a chair for his visitor. He was a striking-looking man—young for the rank he held, but giving an immediate impression of ability and strength. He had a broad, rugged face, with vigorous black hair springing away from a widow's peak, and black eyes with crows' feet of humor at the corners, and a down-drooping, satirical mouth. A formidable man, Mallory thought, with a lift of his spirits, a man of caliber, and he blessed his good fortune.

"Well, sir, what's the trouble?" Ames asked. He had a barely perceptible country burr.

Mallory said, "It's a very delicate matter, Superintendent. So delicate that though I've come to see you I'm afraid I shan't be able to tell you the whole story."

Ames reached for his pipe. "That's all right, Mr. Mallory—just tell me what you can."

"The fact is, I'm being blackmailed."

There was a pause while the two men looked at each other.

"I see," Ames said at last. "I imagined it must be something pretty serious to bring you in here on a Sunday morning, but—I'd never have thought of blackmail."

"I need help badly, Superintendent, but I want you to understand my position. I've got to be absolutely certain that something effective can be done before I go into much detail. It's not that I don't trust your discretion, but once you people take over, everything will be out of my hands. Unless I can feel sure that you're going to be successful I'd sooner you didn't start."

"I understand," said Ames. "It's a very natural attitude, and one we're quite familiar with in blackmail cases. But I don't think you need worry—something effective can usually be done."

"In this instance I rather doubt it. I'll give you a broad picture of the problem. A man who said his name was Gill called at my house yesterday and threatened to make certain information public unless I paid him money. If that were all, I imagine it would be com-

paratively simple to deal with, but this man has an accomplice." In a few words, Mallory described the incident of the telephone call, and Parker's brief acknowledgment from the roadside. "And there, Superintendent, is the difficulty. If I don't carry out the instructions given me by Gill, the accomplice will be in a position to disclose the information even if Gill isn't. It's a sort of double blackmail, and for the life of me I don't know what the answer is."

Ames was silent for a while. At last he said, "Yes—it *is* difficult. A most original idea! And you say you've no notion at all what this man Parker looks like?"

"Not the slightest. I couldn't even begin to describe him."

"H'm! What were these instructions that Gill gave you?"

"To meet him at a rendezvous in the forest tomorrow evening, with the money."

"A lot of money?"

"Two thousand pounds in pound notes."

Ames gave a low whistle. "He sets a high value on this information."

"He has reason to," said Mallory, uncomfortably aware of the superintendent's scrutiny. "I wish I could tell you what the information is, but I can't. . . . All I can say is that there's nothing in the least shameful about it."

"In that case, sir, why need it be hushed up?"

"I can't explain. I'm sorry—I do realize that this doesn't give you much of a chance. I was in two minds whether to come at all."

"I'm very glad you did, Mr. Mallory. As to the precise nature of the information, I don't know that that's of great importance at the moment—demanding money with menaces is a crime, whatever the menaces relate to. The question is, what do we do? The usual procedure, of course, would be to set a trap for the blackmailer. We'd have a couple of men concealed near the rendezvous and they'd arrest Gill after he'd taken the money from you. But as things are, that wouldn't do, because it would still leave Parker free."

"Exactly."

"Mind you," Ames added, "there's always a chance that if we arrested Gill the other man might take fright and clear off without saying anything. Quite a good chance, I should think—after all, he'd have nothing to gain by talking at that stage. This whole business about Parker could be a bluff."

"It could be, Superintendent—I realize that. On the other hand, the information he has is the sort of thing he could put about very easily and quickly, as I've the best of reasons for knowing, and he might do it out of spite. It's a chance I'm not prepared to take."

"Then the only thing is to arrest both men together."

Mallory looked at him in surprise. "Well, yes, if you can find them together. But Gill seemed to me too clever for that. It's quite possible they make all their arrangements by telephone and take great care *not* to meet."

"If I know anything about accomplices," said Ames drily, "they'll certainly have fixed a meeting for tomorrow night, or for very soon afterward."

"You mean that Parker will be in a hurry to get his share of the money?"

"Undoubtedly—and that's our chance. If you were willing to keep this appointment, I think we could undertake to keep on Gill's heels until he joined up with Parker. Then we could pick them both up together and your troubles would be over."

"I see," said Mallory, impressed. The plan certainly got over the main difficulty. He thought about it for a while and then said, "In that case, I'd actually have to hand over the money, wouldn't I? A dummy packet would hardly do—Gill would be pretty sure to check the contents at some stage, and if they weren't satisfactory he wouldn't join up with Parker."

Ames frowned. "That's true enough."

"I suppose I could see my bank manager tomorrow morning and try to raise the money. It won't be easy, though."

"H'm! I don't know that I like the idea of giving two thousand pounds into the custody of a blackmailer, even temporarily. It might be a good thing for you to call at your bank, of course, just in case anyone happened to be watching you—we must try to give the impression that you're playing ball. But I think we'll have to work out a safer way over the money."

"What safer way is there?"

"The Yard might be able to arrange something. I dare say they could get hold of some forged notes for a special occasion like this. I'll look into it."

Mallory nodded, his mind already on other things. "Of course, it wouldn't be enough simply to keep track of Gill," he said. "You'd

have to take the greatest care to see that he didn't suspect he was being followed, or he certainly wouldn't meet Parker. And he's bound to be very much on the alert."

"You can safely leave that to us, sir. We're not exactly novices at this sort of thing, you know."

"I appreciate that, Superintendent—but have you ever *tried* to trail anyone in a forest? It's almost impossible to move silently—I wouldn't be surprised if that's why Gill chose it as a meeting place. My own view is that he'd be bound to know there were people around, once your men started to follow him."

"We shall have to make a special effort to guard against that."

"How?"

Ames didn't answer at once. Instead, he got up and went over to a map on the wall. "Where is the actual rendezvous?"

Mallory hesitated. If he told the police that, it would be halfway to handing the case over to them. At the same time, he could hardly expect them to be helpful unless they knew the basic facts. After a moment he joined the superintendent by the wall.

"Oakham Heath—here," he said, and pointed to the place Gill had chosen. It was a rough oval of open ground, measuring half a mile or so from end to end and perhaps a quarter of a mile across, and lying on the Lyndhurst road about a mile from the Mallory home, in the opposite direction from Hurley. The Heath was entirely surrounded by woods, and the road, emerging from the trees on one side, cut across the lower part of it before plunging into the forest again on the other. "The meeting place is beside a notice board—about here."

Ames studied the map for a while. Then he said, "Yes—well, I agree that we shall need to take some special precautions. It looks to me as though short-wave radio may be the answer. We could place men in strategic positions with walkie-talkie sets—near the rendezvous, and around the Heath and along the road—and they could report Gill's movements without actually following him at all. Let's see, there'll be a moon, won't there?"

"It'll just about have come up."

"That should help us. Is there any cover on the Heath, do you know?"

"There are some pretty thick patches of gorse scattered around."

"Then I should say everything's very promising. We'll be able to

watch his departure and hand him on from one man to the next without any risk."

Mallory wasn't entirely satisfied. "The radio's a good idea if he keeps to the tracks and the roads—but suppose he just dives into the forest at some point?"

"He's not very likely to do that if he doesn't suspect anything. My own guess is that he'll strike up through Oakham New Inclosure to A.35 and pick up a car or a bus there."

"But suppose he does go into the forest?"

"In that case," said Ames, with a touch of impatience, "we'll have to follow, of course. But there's no earthly reason why we should give ourselves away—for one thing, he'll be making quite a noise himself. Really, Mr. Mallory, you must try to have a little faith in us."

"There's so very much at stake," said Mallory. "Are you sure you've got enough men for the job? It sounds a pretty big undertaking."

"We can get all we need," Ames assured him. "The only man I'm worried about is yourself. We can't do anything without your full co-operation."

Mallory walked slowly back to his chair and sat there for a while in deep thought. Presently he said, "I confess I'm not too happy about your plan, Superintendent. It's ingenious—but is it foolproof? Can you guarantee that it'll work?"

"I can't *guarantee* anything," said Ames.

"That's what I was afraid of."

"We'll do our best—that's all I can promise."

"If it doesn't work, I'm sunk—you realize that?"

"You could be, I agree, but I think it will work. In any case, surely some risk has to be accepted?"

"It's easy to say that when you don't know what's involved. It's absolutely vital to me that this information doesn't get out—it is, without exaggeration, almost a matter of life and death. I *can't* take risks."

Ames regarded Mallory's agitated face with sympathy. "I can quite understand how you feel, Mr. Mallory," he said. "Blackmail's a filthy business. But if you'll allow me to say so, that's why you haven't the right to look at this thing solely from a personal point of view. If these chaps aren't apprehended now, they'll go on with

their dirty work, and other people will suffer besides yourself. They're a menace to society, and it's your duty to help bring them to account—even at some risk to yourself."

Mallory shook his head. "You'd naturally take that view, Superintendent, but at the moment I'm afraid I'm not disposed to consider myself expendable in the interests of society."

"Nobody's suggesting that, sir. We'll do everything we can to get you out of your trouble, you can be sure of that. Success matters a lot to us. Don't forget that if people once got the idea the police couldn't protect them against blackmailers they'd stop coming to us—and we certainly don't want that. It's as much in our interest as it is in yours to see that this information doesn't get out."

"Not quite—and that's what worries me. We put things in a different order. Your main concern, quite rightly, is to catch the blackmailers and see that they're punished. Mine isn't—mine is to ensure, one way or another, that in this particular case they keep silent."

"What other way is there?"

"In the last resort, I could pay them. It sounds fantastic, I know, but I'd far sooner do that than have this thing come out."

"I doubt very much if it would help you, Mr. Mallory. If you pay, it'll be the old story—they'll keep on at you until they've drained you dry, and you'll still have to come to us in the end."

"I realize that's a possibility, of course," said Mallory. "But then the outlook seems to be pretty uncertain whatever I do. . . ." He looked ten years older as he sat turning the problem over in his mind. "There are other difficulties that we haven't considered yet. Even if this plan of yours worked, it seems to me that a great many people would know the whole truth before the case was over."

"Not necessarily. I imagine somebody would have to know, but if you were uneasy about the possibility of a breach of confidence, the full story could probably be kept for the highest quarters."

"Suppose Gill or Parker talked after their arrest?"

"They'd have no opportunity, sir, and in any case they wouldn't do it—they'd only be making things worse for themselves. It might put years on their sentence."

"What about the trial?"

"I'm sure you've nothing to worry about there, either. These matters are rather outside my province, of course, but you must know yourself that in blackmail cases absolutely everything is done

to safeguard the person being blackmailed. It has to be. Ordinary rules don't apply. If necessary, the prisoners could be moved out of the district and the trial could be held in London. You'd appear as 'Mr. X' and nothing would be published about your identity. The court would have complete authority to protect you. I dare say some of the proceedings could even take place behind closed doors if there was a good enough reason. . . . Now, sir, what I suggest is that we go and see the Chief right away, and discuss it with him, and after that he and I can get down to the details. Your part in the affair will be very simple and we won't trouble you more than we have to. What do you say?"

Mallory still hesitated. Ames's forceful personality had swept away some of his doubts, but the right decision mattered so much to him that he was reluctant even now to give the word. When at last he did so, his tone was grudging.

"I appear to have no alternative," he said. "It looks as though I'll have to put myself in your hands."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The rising moon was just beginning to lighten the sky when Mallory, keyed up and expectant after thirty-six hours of planning and preparation, set out on the following evening with a bulky brown paper package under his arm to keep the appointment that Gill had made.

For the moment, his fears had died down and hope was strong. The more he had seen of Ames, the more he had been impressed by him. The superintendent was not only thorough, but imaginative and resourceful as well. It had been Ames's idea, for instance, that his men should come to Oakham Heath in the afternoon disguised as an ordinary forest gang. If Gill or Parker should be hanging around there, he had argued, the open approach with tools and trucks in daylight would be much less likely to attract their attention and arouse their interest than a number of surreptitious arrivals after dark, while the signs of activity at the spot would tend to keep them at a safe distance. Mallory had agreed, and had picked a job

for the gang that would appear to justify their presence and yet would require no specialized forest skill—the replacement of some sections of boundary fence around Oakham New Inclosure. He had also found an excuse to rearrange the normal forest work schedule so that no other gangs would be near Oakham New that day.

The details of the plan had been very simple. A dozen men, half of them cover for the other half, would arrive on bicycles from various directions immediately after the dinner break, suitably dressed in old stained clothes and gum boots. They would make their way in small working groups to the points that had been fixed in advance by Ames. The half dozen who were hand-picked to stay on for the night's operation would conceal their bicycles in the undergrowth. A truck, with a load of new posts camouflaging the radio apparatus underneath, would then make a circuit of the various groups, dropping at each point a quota of timber and a quota of walkie-talkie sets, which would be quickly hidden. The whole gang would then put in a convincing afternoon's work on the fence. At knocking-off time the cover men would leave on their bicycles and the others would melt quietly into the plantations and lie low until dusk, when they would move into position with their sets.

By now, Mallory thought, they should all be in their allotted places. He would be passing one of them as he turned to cross the Heath—an outlyer, from whom a police car could take over if by any chance Gill should decide to use the Hurley-Lyndhurst road for his getaway. Then there would be two others close to the rendezvous, another on the fringe of the inclosure, and two spaced out along the ride that cut through it to A.35. Not far from the end of the ride, an ordinary-looking fast tourer would be parked off the road and in it a C.I.D. sergeant would be sitting with a young plain-clothes policewoman, ready to hurl himself into an amorous embrace if Gill should appear, and to start off in pursuit if a car should pick the blackmailer up. On the assumption that everything had gone according to plan, the ground was well covered.

Mallory himself had carried out his instructions to the letter. Early that morning he had called on his bank manager in Lyndhurst and, as an excuse for the visit, discussed the possibility of a modest overdraft. He had paid a second visit to the bank after lunch with a brief case, clasping it tightly under his arm on his way back to the office as though it contained something of value, though in fact he had

merely drawn five pounds from his account. Later, he had taken delivery of the packet of bogus notes that had been rushed down from London, and had made up the brown paper parcel in the garage at home while the children were having tea. It had been an unreal, cloak-and-dagger sort of day, but as Ames had said, almost apologetically, when they'd been discussing the arrangements, that was the sort of atmosphere in which blackmailers lived. And now here he was, with the preparations over, and the plan at the point of test.

He stepped out quickly along the tree-lined road and soon emerged into the open oval of the Heath. There was a path that struck off across the grass in the direction of the inclosure and a few minutes' walk through the gorse and bracken brought him to the rendezvous. The broken notice board that Gill had mentioned, a relic of wartime days when the Heath had been a firing range and passers-by had had to be warned not to pick up live ammunition, lay face downward on the ground. A hundred yards ahead, he could just make out the dark edge of the woods. He sat down on a tuft of heather and looked at his watch by the light of a small flashlight. The time was seven minutes to eight.

The silence was so intense that it was difficult to believe two policemen were lying in the gorse only a few yards from him, and that others were stationed not far away. In a sense, it was reassuring—there was certainly nothing here to make anyone suspect a trap. Yet as Mallory sat listening he realized again what a liability that silence could have been once Gill had departed with the money, and he felt thankful that Ames had thought of the walkie-talkie sets. With luck, the blackmailer's progress to a main road would be plotted without moving a man. There'd be difficulties enough afterward, though—keeping on his trail in the dark, not losing sight of any vehicle he might use, following him perhaps to some entirely different part of the country, discovering the identity of Parker, choosing the moment for the decisive pounce. The hours of waiting for news weren't going to be easy. Whatever happened, a wretched night lay ahead.

He pressed the flashlight button again. Three minutes to eight! He tried to control the violent thumping of his heart, to steady himself for the encounter. So much depended on him at this stage! He mustn't show any sign of nervousness or excitement, he told himself

—those were the wrong emotions. He was supposed to be paying out the savings of a lifetime to a blackmailer—he must appear angry, resentful, bitter. He must seek fresh assurances that there would be no more demands. He must put on an act—and he had no gift for that sort of thing. But at least the danger period would be short—once Gill had the money he'd be sure to hurry away, and Mallory's part in the business would be over.

Suddenly, away toward the inclosure, something stirred. Mallory clutched the paper parcel and peered in the direction of the noise. He could see almost nothing against the dark background of the trees, but the sounds of movement were unmistakable. Of slow, infinitely cautious movement, as though someone were creeping through the grass. *He was coming!* Mallory waited tensely.

Then, as the seconds passed, a new sound reached his ears—a heavy breathing, close at hand. A tall shape loomed up out of the darkness, and he realized with chagrin that it wasn't Gill he'd been listening to at all—it was only a forest pony. He gave a grunt of disgust and the pony, startled, shied away. Mallory ran the back of his hand over his damp forehead. A false alarm was almost worse than the real thing.

When next he looked at his watch the time was ten past eight and he was beginning to feel a little anxious. Why should the man be late? It didn't make sense to be late for two thousand pounds. . . . Could he, perhaps, be watching from the forest fringe, waiting for the light to improve, waiting until he could see his victim clearly and satisfy himself that there was no one else about? At the thought, Mallory got to his feet and started to pace up and down beside the notice board, making himself as visible as possible. The rim of the moon was just coming up above the treetops and the shadows were moving away. Soon the whole Heath was bathed in light.

Twenty past eight! God, suppose the fellow didn't turn up after all! The possibility that these careful preparations might go for nothing, that uncertainty might come again, was almost more than Mallory could bear to contemplate. A leaden misery began to press down on him.

Then, in a moment, he was alert once more. Something was moving in the bushes close by. He heard a faint whistle, and as he advanced quickly toward the sound the face of Superintendent Ames looked out through a gap in the gorse.

"Sit down here!" Ames said quietly. "Keep looking toward the trees. . . . Something seems to have gone wrong."

"I'm afraid so."

"Are you sure you didn't make a mistake in the time?"

"Certain."

"Or the place?"

"Positive. This is the place all right."

"Well, it doesn't look as though he's coming."

"I simply don't understand it," said Mallory.

"We'll give him a bit longer."

Silence fell again. In the moonlight, the Heath looked beautiful—but very empty. One or two cars passed along the road at intervals, but there were no other signs of life. Presently, through the still air, came the sound of the church clock at Hurley, striking a quarter to nine.

"It's no use," said Ames. "If he'd been coming he'd have come by now. We'll have to call it off." He began to fiddle with his radio set. "Look, you'd better walk back to the road. Go slowly, and give him a chance to follow you—he may have some scheme of his own in mind. If nothing happens, I'll be with you in ten minutes."

With a dreadful feeling of anticlimax, Mallory moved off along the path. The superintendent was right, of course—there was no point in hanging about all night—yet he was reluctant to abandon hope. He reached the road and stood there conspicuously in the moonlight, waiting, and presently Ames joined him.

The policeman looked grim—with a short-handed force he couldn't afford this sort of fiasco, and there'd be a lot of explaining to do.

"Well, we seem to have been wasting our time," he said.

"What do you think can have happened?"

"If you're sure you made no mistake about the rendezvous, I should think he must have smelled a rat."

"Why should he?"

"That's hard to say. One of them may have seen you call at the station yesterday."

"I very much doubt it. I was frightfully careful."

"If you'd passed Parker in the street you wouldn't have known, would you? But he might have known you. Then they'd have put two and two together."

"Why should they think I'd go to that particular police station?"

"County Headquarters—it's a fair bet, isn't it?"

Mallory groaned. "If Gill knows I went to you, he'll tell everything. God, what a fool I've been!"

"I'm sorry, sir. We did all we could—we can't follow a man who doesn't show up. We've got his description, of course—if you're agreeable we might try to get on his trail tomorrow. It shouldn't be difficult. But if he's determined to spread his information right away, I'm afraid there's nothing to stop him."

Headlights suddenly lit up the road and both men stepped back. Mallory said, "What shall I do with this packet?"

"Better give it to me—we don't want all those phony notes lying about. . . . Here's my car, can I give you a lift?"

"No, thanks, Superintendent—I'll walk home."

Ames nodded. He took a step toward the car and paused with his hand on the door. "I really am sorry about this, Mr. Mallory. You might give me a ring if there are any developments. Good night, sir."

"Good night," said Mallory dully.

Linda was halfway up the stairs when she heard him come in. She stopped and leaned over the banister, her face harassed and anxious. "Darling, how was it? All right?"

A plaintive voice called down, "Mummy—I want you."

"He didn't turn up," said Mallory.

"Oh, Peter!" She stood hesitating, poised between the insistent maternal duty and the claims of the deeper crisis. "Teddy's got earache, he keeps crying. I must go—I'll be down in a minute."

Mallory flung his coat on a chair and went into the sitting room. Anne was there, eating an orange.

"You're up late," he said sharply.

"I am a bit—I had to finish my Latin. Everything's been upside down because of Teddy—I've been telling him stories in bed."

"Oh—I see."

"Poor little boy, he was so pathetic. I told him the funniest ones I could think of to cheer him up, and he kept trying to smile and all the time the tears were trickling down his cheeks. . . . It's a shame!"

"Never mind, I expect he'll be better tomorrow."

"I hope so," she said.

Mallory sank down on the settee. Anne gathered up her belongings and made for the door. She was halfway across the room when the telephone rang, and she stopped to answer it.

"Who?" she said. "Oh. . . Mr. Gill! Yes, I remember. . ."

Mallory was out of his seat as though he'd been shot from a gun. "I'll take it," he said, and grabbed the receiver. "You get off to bed."

"All right," she said with a hurt look, "you don't have to snatch."

"I'm sorry. . . ." He waited until the door was shut and then said, "Mallory here."

"So I gather," came Gill's suave voice. "Pity! I thought for a moment that Anne and I were going to have a pleasant chat. What a well-mannered little girl!" There was a short pause. "You're very silent. Didn't you enjoy your evening?"

Mallory felt the blood pounding in his head. Hatred had come to him late in life, but it had come.

"If you've got anything to say, Gill, say it quickly and get it over."

"I've a lot to say. Don't imagine that I was surprised by what happened tonight, Mr. Mallory. I foresaw it, you know. In spite of what I said on Saturday, I never supposed for a moment that a law-abiding citizen like you would hand over two thousand pounds without getting in touch with the police. We all have to learn by our own mistakes, don't we? Well, you've made yours. What do you think of your clubfooted friends now?"

"How did you find out?"

"Oh, there wasn't anything difficult about it. They ought to have taken up their positions the previous night, of course—then perhaps I wouldn't have seen them. Imagine leaving the start of operations until this afternoon! Have they never heard of the early bird? I watched them from my safe retreat, my cozy foxhole, and believe me it was quite a comedy. They gave themselves away time after time. Some of the remarks I overheard were *most* injudicious—and as for all that creeping about after dusk . . . ! Honestly, I feel quite insulted!"

"What—what are you going to do?"

"What do you suppose I'm going to do? What did I *say* I'd do?"

"You can't—you mustn't!" There was desperation in Mallory's

voice. "Look, Gill—give me another chance. I'll bring you the money tomorrow."

"Why not tonight?"

"I haven't got it. . . . I went to the bank, as you probably know, but it was just a pretense. I can get it, though, tomorrow. And I swear I won't bring the police in again."

Gill chuckled. "That I *can* believe! All right, Mr. Mallory, I'll give you another chance. As I say, you had to learn your lesson, and I'd made provision for it. I'll meet you tomorrow—alone!"

"I understand."

"I hope you do. I really don't want to have to chalk on pavements—it's so uncomfortable. . . . Oh, there's just one other thing—I'd prefer a slightly less exposed meeting place."

"Very well. Where?"

"There's a circular saw standing beside the track in Oakham New Inclosure. Do you know it?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow at eight o'clock. And no tricks with the notes, remember! There'll be no more chances. Good night, Mr. Mallory!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

As Gill put the receiver down, the look of slightly amused complacency that his face had worn during the telephone conversation quickly faded. Not that the expression was solely a trick of the job, a professional prop to help his morale; it was a genuine reflection of his acquired conceit and the sense of power that he always had when dealing with important victims. But tonight he didn't feel particularly complacent—he felt extremely tired after his long, cramped watch in the woods, and a little disappointed. It was true, as he'd said, that he'd fully expected the police to turn up on this first occasion, but he'd have been quite prepared to collect the cash straight away if they hadn't, and for once it would have been pleasant to find that he'd been wrong. People, he reflected ruefully, thought blackmail was easy money—they didn't realize the work that went into it. And

he'd still have to go on doing most of the work himself, while Parker waited in paid idleness for a thousand pounds to fall into his lap. That wasn't Parker's fault, of course, but it was irritating all the same. In fact, Parker was extremely trying altogether, with his hoarse, jarring voice and his crude manners and his slow mind. Gill couldn't remember ever having picked a less satisfactory associate, and he blamed himself for having taken the easy and obvious, rather than the well-considered, step. It would have been wiser to wait, and look around for a bit. However, it was too late to think about that now.

With a quick glance to right and left he emerged from the telephone booth and walked stiffly down the road to the small saloon car that was drawn up on the shoulder fifty yards below the box. Parker was waiting there, hunched over the wheel. The moment Gill had taken his seat the clutch slammed home and the car shot away down the hill.

"We needn't go far," said Gill. "There's a wood at the bottom where we can talk—turn her in there."

"What did he say?"

"I'll tell you when we stop."

Parker gave a grunt, and concentrated on the road. Presently a block of trees showed up in the headlights and he found a rough track through the wood and turned along it.

"That'll do," said Gill. "We don't want to break a spring."

Parker pulled up with a jerk and switched off the engine and lights. Then he glanced nervously back at the moonlit road. "I don't like being so near that box," he said. "If the call was tapped they could find us here."

"Nonsense!" said Gill. "In any case, it wasn't."

"You're always so damned sure. One of these days you'll be too sure." Parker lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. He was a huge man, about twice Gill's size, and in the narrow car his rump spread half across the other seat. He had grizzled black hair, cut to stubble, and a close-cropped, grizzled mustache, and heavy, sullen features. "Well, what did he say?"

"He'll turn up tomorrow with the money."

"He will?"

"I assure you."

"Did he say he would?"

"He did more than that—he begged for the opportunity. If I'd been there, he'd have been down on his knees."

"He could still change his mind, couldn't he?"

"In the condition he's in, he scarcely has a mind. All he can think about is the girl. He's flat out and finished—I know the symptoms."

Parker spat out of the window. "He must be a prize sap."

"As a matter of fact, he's a highly intelligent man. He knows when he's beaten, that's all."

"I don't get it. It can't matter all that much whether the kid's told or not. I suppose she's been brought up soft, but she'd soon get used to the idea."

"He thinks it matters—perhaps because I drew a rather fanciful picture of Herrick's state of mind."

"That's what I said—he's a sap. He'd believe anything. Where does he keep his guts, I'd like to know. It still beats me how he didn't take a poke at you that first day."

"He was too busy listening to what I was saying—which is more than you do, or you'd know why he couldn't. Besides, he's the sort of man who has to work himself up to violence. Some people have grown out of the habit, you know. But you wouldn't understand that."

"For two pins," said Parker slowly, "I'd take a poke at you myself."

Gill gave a sour smile. "If I thought you were as stupid as you sound, I'd be worried for both of us. I prefer to think you can't be."

"Aw, put a sock in it! I'm sick of your smart talk."

"At least I talk to some purpose. After all, tomorrow *is* pay day."

"I'll believe that when he hands over the dough."

"Which he'll do at eight o'clock. In twenty-four hours from now you'll have a thousand pounds in your pocket. I guarantee it."

There was a short, greedy silence. Then Parker said, "What if he brings the police along again?"

"He won't—I tell you he's scared stiff. He'll handle it by himself from now on."

"Suppose you're wrong?"

"I was right about today, wasn't I? I told you exactly what would happen, and it did. You must agree I've managed our enterprise very competently so far."

"Maybe, but I still don't like it. I don't like any part of it."

"You'll like the money well enough!"

"Once the police get onto a thing like this they don't let go so easy. Hell, I ought to know."

"You ought to have known in B.G. that beating up a witness would get you discharged from the police force and into Georgetown jail—but you didn't, did you?"

"Cor, hark at Mr. Clever! I suppose you never did time there yourself? I suppose it wasn't you that Arthur Herrick and me used to run around the exercise yard with?"

"At least I learned my lesson," said Gill. "From the way you talk, I'm not sure that you did."

"Is that so? Well, now I'll tell you something—I almost wish I'd never met you on that ship. Thousand pounds or no thousand pounds, I've got a feeling I'll be sorry."

"Pure superstition! It was a splendid piece of luck, especially for you. If we hadn't run into each other again I'd never have heard the end of the Herrick story, and you'd have missed the chance of a lifetime. Or did you want to go on swabbing ships' decks for the rest of your days?"

"At least it was safe. This bloody racket gives me the jitters."

"I can see that. We'll have to keep you well in the background until the money's safe or you'll be wrecking the whole enterprise."

"Eh? What's the big idea now?"

"Tomorrow's the crucial day—I can't risk having you blundering about in the woods while the meeting's taking place. I'll keep this appointment with Mallory alone, and you and I will divide up the proceeds afterward."

Parker shook his head. "Not on your life! You must think I'm a sucker! I'll be there, too, thank you very much."

"So you don't trust me?"

"You're damned right, I don't."

"You're not much of a judge of things, are you?" said Gill contemptuously. "Don't you realize that this is my livelihood and that I can't afford to play tricks? I make enough enemies as it is—how long do you think I'd last if I welshed on my associates? I'll see you get your half, don't worry."

"All the same, I'll be there."

Gill sighed. "You're certainly not the easiest person in the world to collaborate with. Look, let me explain the situation again in words

of one syllable. There's no great risk if *I'm* seen about the woods, because Mallory daren't make a move against me as long as you're an unknown person in the background. That's what you're being paid a thousand pounds for—to keep out of the way. If *you* came to the rendezvous and he happened to get on your track and catch a glimpse of you, we'd both be done for. He knows that. He'll be watching out tomorrow night, and if he gets the idea that you're close by in the forest he'll be after you like a shot. I tell you, it's absolutely vital that you keep right away from me as long as there's any third party about."

"I didn't keep right away from you in that teashop in Southampton," said Parker. "What's so different now?"

"That was before we decided to go into this business together," said Gill patiently. "In the light of what's happened since I think it's a pity we did meet so openly, but at least no one was on our trail, then. Now they are. It's an entirely different situation, and I'll be quite frank with you—if you insist on coming to the rendezvous tomorrow, I'm calling the whole thing off. It's too risky."

Parker drew on his cigarette. "What's your idea, then?" he said sulkily. "When would we meet for the share-out?"

"We shan't need to meet—I've got everything worked out. You'll have the car parked outside the hotel at ten o'clock tomorrow night and you'll leave one of the windows open. I'll get a bus into Ringwood after I've met Mallory and I'll drop your share of the money in through the window as I walk by. You can be watching from a safe distance and you can move in as soon as I've left, so there'll be no danger of anyone stealing it. And I promise you it'll be there to the last note."

For a moment or two Parker sat in silence. Suspicion filled the car. At last he said, with a clumsy effort at casualness, "Where are you going to meet Mallory, anyway?"

Gill gave him a sardonic glance. "The same place that we fixed for tonight," he said. "By the notice board."

There was another short pause. Then Parker said, "Okay, I suppose I'll have to leave it to you."

"Good! Then that's about all there is to discuss. By this time tomorrow you'll be a thousand pounds richer, and I'm bound to say you'll have earned it very easily. All I ask is, don't go splashing it around as though you'd just held up a mail van. Spend it a little at

a time, and remember, London's the best place to do it. And lay off the drink, if you can."

"I'm not a bloody fool," said Parker.

"That's very moot. Still, if I hadn't thought you'd enough horse sense to go a bit carefully, I'd never have cut you in on it."

"What are *you* going to do?"

"Take another sea voyage, I expect—there are always good pickings from a ship. It's quite extraordinary how many of the best people pass the time in each other's cabins . . . !"

For a moment or two, Gill allowed his thoughts to stray into pleasant channels. Traveling about the world in liners was his weakness, and the proceeds of his bigger *coups* ashore were nearly always spent at sea. He loved the lush furnishings of a good stateroom, the thick pile of the carpets, the soft lights, the swift service of menials. He loved the leisured life of a gentleman of means, the wearing of the right clothes, the ordering of the right drinks, the music and the dancing, the shipboard hobnobbing with people of wealth and position and title—above all, the knowledge that some at least of them could be made to eat out of his hand if, in his own good time, the effort seemed worth while. And then, of course, there were the women—sometimes quite attractive women—who were prepared to pay in kind for his silence on small matters, particularly if the voyage were soon to be over. For a man as physically insignificant as Gill, it was delightful to get such offers—and even more delightful to turn them down! Power! There was nothing like power . . . !

The voice of Parker broke harshly into his thoughts. "There's one more thing—I need some money for tomorrow."

"Surely not? I gave you twenty pounds on Friday."

"I had to hire the car out of that, didn't I? I tell you I'm broke."

"What about the pay you drew when you signed off after the voyage?"

"Be your age," said Parker. "How long do you think that lasted in port?"

"I see. . . . Very well, here's ten more." Gill produced the notes. "A free gift! I won't even knock it off your thousand!"

Parker took the money without a word, and started up the engine.

CHAPTER NINE

Linda said blankly, "But two thousand pounds! It's insane!"

She was standing with her back to the window, bewildered and somehow remote. It was eleven o'clock, and she had only just succeeded in getting Teddy off to sleep.

"If it's a question of paying up or spoiling Anne's life," Mallory said, "I can't see that we've any choice."

"Have we *got* two thousand pounds?"

"We can probably raise it. I doubt if I can borrow any more on the house, but I can lodge the big insurance policy with the bank and that should just about cover it. Of course, there'll be the interest to pay. . . ."

Linda broke in anxiously, "But that's the policy we were keeping for Richard and Teddy. You know we'll never be able to send them to a decent school and to the University without it."

"They'll have to win scholarships, that's all."

"They'll never be allowed to take up scholarships, Peter—not with your income."

Mallory took a deep breath. "Do we really have to go into all that now? I suppose they can take their chance like everybody else?"

She said indignantly, "You can't just brush aside their whole future like that as though it's of no importance. . . ."

"I didn't say it was of no importance and you know I don't think it. This happens to be a crisis, that's all, and we've got to treat it as a crisis and put first things first."

"But . . . !" Linda broke off with a gesture of hopelessness. "I simply don't know what to say, it's so utterly preposterous. . . . Do you seriously mean that you'll go and meet this loathsome creature and meekly hand over every penny we've got?"

"Yes, if there's no alternative—and there doesn't seem to be. . . . Look, Lindy, suppose Anne were dreadfully ill and the only way we could save her was by spending two thousand pounds—we wouldn't hesitate, would we? Surely this is the same sort of thing?"

"I don't think it's the same thing at all. Illness is something you can't help, and this isn't—at least, it oughtn't to be. I think you ought

to tell Ames what's happened. Just because the police have made a mess of things once, it doesn't mean they will again."

At the mention of the police, Mallory's face hardened. "It's no good, Linda. It was a blunder to bring them in in the first place, and I ought never to have allowed myself to be talked into it. The situation's obviously too much for them. All they could possibly do now would be to try the same sort of thing over again—with even less chance of success than before. We simply can't take the risk. Gill's all set to do what he threatens, and there's no way of preventing him. I didn't tell you, but there was some writing on the railway bridge when I went into Winchester yesterday morning."

"Peter! You don't mean . . . ?"

"No, it wasn't anything serious, as it happens—but it could have been." He told her of the inscription that he'd rubbed out. "If we get the police in again I'm certain Gill will lose patience and give the whole show away. Next time it'll be the real thing—and it'll probably be outside the school gates!"

He regarded her steadily, willing her to face up to the situation as he had done.

"Well, I still think there must be *some* way," she said at last. "Honestly, Peter, I'd sooner pack up and leave the district altogether than pay all that money for nothing."

"It wouldn't help, Lindy. You'd have to whisk the children off tomorrow, in a ghastly rush, and you couldn't possibly do it without telling Anne why. She's not a child any longer, and she's on the point of taking her exam—she'd make a frightful scene. There couldn't be a worse time. We'd *have* to explain—and what possible explanation could we give for such crazy behavior? In any case, she'd certainly want to write to her school friends, and probably see them, and by that time the story would be all over the place here, even if it hadn't reached her through the papers, and they'd be bound to say something to her. . . . Don't you see, it's just not practicable. Gill was right—we *can't* insulate her. Not without appearing absolute brutes."

There was a little silence—the agonized debate seemed to have reached complete deadlock. Then Linda suddenly said, "I suppose we couldn't tell her the truth ourselves? Then it wouldn't matter what Gill did."

"Lindy! You don't mean that?"

"I was only wondering. . . . After all, if you've got the right to give away our life savings at least I ought to be allowed to consider all possible alternatives."

"You haven't the right to consider that one."

"I don't see why not—it seems to be a choice of evils whatever we do. I know you always put Anne first but she isn't the only one whose future we've got to think of."

Mallory became very still—he could almost hear the ice cracking beneath them. Words torn from them now, in the anguish of their dilemma, might never be entirely forgotten. With an effort, he fought down his rising temper.

"If I put her first," he said, "it's because she needs us most. You know that, Lindy. The boys are all right—they're healthy young animals without a care in the world, and fundamentally they'll be all right whatever happens. Anne's different—she could fret herself into a nervous breakdown in no time at all."

"It might not affect her that way. How can we tell?"

"We've plenty to go on. Look at the way she always behaves at the slightest hint of violence."

"I'm not sure she hasn't caught that from you—it may not go very deep. She might turn out to be a lot tougher than you think, when it came to the point. Children are completely unpredictable."

"It's a gamble we can't take."

"Well, she's quite likely to find out in the end, however much we try to protect her. I'm sure if I were an adopted child I should want to know all about my real parents sooner or later."

"If it's only in the end she finds out, it probably won't matter. Once she's grown up and has a secure background of her own I dare say she'll be able to take it all in her stride. It's what could happen now that I'm frightened of—when she's so impressionable and unsure of herself. She'd worry her head off. She'd fail her exam and worry about that—she'd worry because her teachers and her friends all knew about her—and if she's as intelligent as I think she is she'd start worrying about whether she'd inherited Herrick's traits or not. That's the thing, you know—that's what terrifies me. Suppose she got the idea that she had some taint?"

"Why should she? There was never any suggestion that Herrick was a pathological case until Gill brought it up. I'm sure Sara never thought he was. All we know is that he was a man with an un-

controllable temper, particularly when he was drunk—and that's all we'd need to tell Anne."

"It's not all that Gill would tell her. He'd spread it around that Herrick was a congenital sadist. He'd see she was told everything that he told me, and more—everything he could dredge up out of his beastly mind. And once she knew the truth, she'd probably be receptive to all the rest as well. If *she* wasn't, other people would be, and they'd talk—and she'd be absolutely devastated. She'd creep away on her own and brood, and brood, out of our reach, and a blight would settle on us all—and we'd deserve it. . . ." His voice broke. "Lindy—for God's sake!—you didn't really mean it?"

She looked steadily at him, her face set, her eyes sullen. Then, slowly, her lips began to quiver and in a moment she was crying.

At once he was at her side, taking her in his arms. Now that she had started to cry, accumulated misery and self-reproach swept all control away. Her whole body shook, her breath came in long, shuddering gasps. The sound tore at his heart. "Don't, darling," he said, "*please* don't. I can't bear it."

"Oh, Peter," she sobbed, "I don't know what to do. I'm so *tired*—and it's all so unspeakably awful."

He held her close, murmuring words of comfort, soothing her.

"We've been so happy. It doesn't seem possible everything could have got like this."

"I know, I know. We will be again, you'll see. It'll all come right in the end. . . ."

"Do you think so? I don't see how. . . ." She was beginning to grow calmer, but the tears still flowed. He found a handkerchief, and gave it to her.

"Look, Lindy, we're both tired—let's not talk about it any more tonight."

"But we've got to decide something," she said tremulously. "You know we can never talk when Teddy's around. . . ." She released herself and dabbed at her eyes. "Oh, dear, I'm not much of a help, am I, and it must be so much worse for you. . . ."

"We're in it together, sweetheart, and it's just the same for both of us. And we'll be in it together whatever happens—even Gill can't take that away from us."

Linda gave a little sigh, and pushed her hair back, and dropped down onto the settee. Her eyes were red, and she still dabbed at

them from time to time, but she was clearly anxious to resume the debate. This time, though, it was in a different key.

"If only," she said, "we could be sure we wouldn't hear from Gill again after we'd paid him! It wouldn't seem quite so bad, then. I wonder if he *will* go away?"

"That's anyone's guess, I'm afraid. Ames doesn't think he will. I'm inclined to think he may—but how can one possibly tell with a man like that? He'd obviously say anything that suited him."

"Yes—and even if he intends to go away, he may easily change his mind. If we're going to pay him all that money I do think there ought to be some guarantee. . . ."

"How can there be?"

"I suppose there can't, really, but . . . Peter, he may be ringing us up again in a couple of days' time! . . . If only we could make him go to Timbuctoo or somewhere to collect the money, so that we knew it would be ages before we could possibly see him again!"

Mallory frowned. "It's technically possible, I suppose. There are things called banker's orders—as long as you keep inside the sterling area you can arrange to pay anybody anything anywhere. But he'd never agree."

"Darling, couldn't we try it?" Linda became eager. "Couldn't you bargain with him a bit? Offer him, say—oh, I don't know—a thousand pounds, if you like—provided he's willing to collect it in some remote place. Like—well, like Georgetown. And while he was away there might be a chance for the police to do something. At least it would give us a breathing space."

"It wouldn't work, Lindy. He'd be sure to know that we'd some plan like that up our sleeves. And why should he bargain, anyway? He holds all the cards."

"Does he, though?"

"I think so. He's gambling on the fact that we won't sacrifice Anne—and he's right."

"But he can't be certain how right he is. I know he's talked to you, and thinks he's sized you up, but he's only guessing and he could realize that he might be wrong."

"He'd never have taken the personal risk he has if he'd had any doubts."

"Well, I still think it's worth while putting up some alternative suggestion. Even if it doesn't work, we can't lose."

"We can if he gets vicious and decides to tell his story right away."

"Is that likely? I think the worst that could happen would be that he'd turn your suggestion down flat and tell you to bring the money the next night. After all, it is the money he wants, isn't it? Not just to tell about Anne."

"That's so, of course. But he can pick up money in other places. We've only one daughter. That's his strength—and our weakness."

"I'm sure he can't pick up a thousand pounds so easily every day. Honestly, Peter, I do think you're underestimating your bargaining position. It's true he's got all the cards when it comes to flatly refusing to pay anything at all, but not if you seem prepared to meet him halfway. He must surely be expecting to bargain a little."

Mallory shook his head. "I admit it's the best idea yet, darling, but I'm afraid your plan won't work. I don't think for a moment he'd go as far as Georgetown to collect—I'd be very surprised if he'd even go to Glasgow. The last thing he'd want would be to get involved with a lot of documents and signatures. . . . I suppose if I could bluff hard enough I *might* get him to take less than the full amount, though I doubt it." He gave a long, exhausted sigh. "Let's sleep on it, Lindy."

"Sleep on it!" she said. "What a hope!"

CHAPTER TEN

Parker left his hotel next morning, the momentous Tuesday, firmly intending to enjoy himself. With ten pounds in his pocket, and nothing to do until evening but spend it in a seaport he knew well, he seemed to have all the ingredients for a successful binge. He approached Southampton at a leisurely pace, stopping from time to time to fortify himself with double whiskies, and by noon he was driving the hired car into the city with slightly exaggerated care. He parked outside an excellent eating house that he'd patronized once before and had some more drinks and a large, succulent steak with trimmings. After lunch he dropped into a cinema and slept

soundly for an hour in a very comfortable seat. He came out at four and strolled around for a bit in a neighborhood where night life was governed by ships' movements rather than by clocks and presently he picked up a blonde and went home with her. By five-thirty he was beginning to feel thirsty again. It was a fairly routine day for him when he happened to be in funds and on the loose, and he usually found it most agreeable.

Today, though, he didn't seem to be getting his customary kick out of the routine. He had too much on his mind, and not all of it was pleasant. The thought that he might soon possess a thousand pounds in one lump sum was very gratifying, of course, but he still couldn't quite convince himself that Mallory would pay up. And then there was Gill. . . .

Parker had always disliked Gill—even in prison, where it didn't do to be choosy and any white man's companionship had been acceptable. A clever little runt, that's what Gill was—a clever, cocky little runt. And he'd got worse since the Georgetown days. That way he had of talking! Just as though he was explaining something to a kid. And pushing people around, too—telling them what to do, and always taking it for granted they'd do it. Well, he'd got a surprise coming to him this time. Someone else had worked out a plan, too, so Mr. Bloody Gill had better watch his step.

Resentment smouldered all day in Parker's breast. Then, as evening approached, the prospect of action drove all other thoughts from his head. He had a last double for the road, and by half past six he was on his way back to the forest. Shortly after seven he ran the car into a disused gravel pit that he'd noticed on the outskirts of Hurley during one of his outings, and in the failing light he began to walk—a heavy, shapeless figure with a rolling gait. He walked past the telephone box and along the Lyndhurst road until he was barely fifty yards from the end of the track that led to the Mallory's home. There he stopped and settled down to wait behind a gorse bush.

He didn't have to wait long. Almost at once, voices reached him from the direction of the house and he guessed that Mallory was taking leave of his wife. He gave a satisfied smirk in the darkness at his own excellent timing. Presently footfalls sounded on the track. They drew nearer, changed direction at the fork, and continued along the road. The tap of Mallory's stick on the macadam grew fainter. The quarry was away.

Parker stayed where he was until a safe distance had opened between them and then set off in unhurried pursuit. He didn't mind getting a bit behind—he'd been over the ground before, when Gill had first mentioned the notice board, and he knew just where Mallory was making for and the best way to get there. The main thing was not to give himself away. He'd brought a pair of rubber-soled shoes in Southampton, specially for the occasion, and even on the hard road they were almost noiseless. They pinched him a bit, but he could put up with that as long as he didn't have to go far.

Very soon he came out on the Oakham Heath and turned along the path toward the inclosure. The footsteps ahead were muted now, but he could still hear them. He began to move more warily, for the notice board was only a short distance away. He knew exactly what he was going to do. By using the scattered gorse bushes as cover he would be able to get quite close to the meeting place without any risk of being spotted. Directly the money had been handed over and Mallory had cleared off, he would show himself to Gill and collect his cut.

He covered fifty yards in easy stages and then stood still, listening. At first he could hear nothing. Mallory must have reached the notice board and stopped there, he decided. He began to creep forward again. Suddenly, from the edge of the wood, came the unmistakable click of a gate being closed. That must be Gill. Not much longer to wait now! Slowly and silently he advanced over the grass, peering ahead for a glimpse of his quarry. The moon wasn't up yet, but the sky was getting lighter. A few more cautious steps, and he could make out the notice board. He approached it with care—but he couldn't see anyone waiting.

He stopped to listen again, but now everything was very quiet. He couldn't understand it. Slowly, it dawned on him that it couldn't have been Gill at the gate or he'd have shown up by now. It must have been Mallory. Mallory must have gone on into the inclosure!

His fists clenched in a spasm of anger as he suddenly realized what that meant. Gill was trying to cheat him after all—the little swine must have fixed a different meeting place. Parker had never really believed his suspicions would turn out to be justified—his plan had been an insurance, that was all—an insurance against the hundred-to-one chance. And the chance had come up. If he hadn't had the sense to go to Mallory's house and follow him, right from the

start, he'd have been had for a sucker and Gill would have been able to clear off with the whole two thousand.

Well, it was going to be just too bad for Gill! Quickly he set off for the wood—what mattered now was keeping close on Mallory's heels so that he didn't miss the new meeting place. With gloating satisfaction he thought how scared little Gill would be when he showed up after the money had been handed over. Gill would be smiling on the other side of his face tonight. There wasn't going to be any fifty-fifty division now—not if Parker knew it! No one was going to do him dirt and get away with it.

A few strides brought him to the trees. He followed the path to the inclosure and went through the gate, shutting it softly behind him. Then he plunged into the forest, keeping to the center of the ride where there was less danger of stepping on a piece of brittle wood. The moon was coming up now, but trees pressed in on both sides and the path itself was dark. The darkness suited him well. His confidence was growing—by now he'd caught up sufficiently to be able to hear Mallory again. The fellow was stepping out briskly, unsuspectingly, making no effort to be quiet.

For half a mile the plantations continued almost without a break. Then, on the right-hand side of the path, a grassy clearing came into view, lit by the direct rays of the moon. The path was bright, too, for fifty yards ahead—so bright that Parker didn't like the look of it. Once more he stopped and listened. No footsteps now! He gazed around uneasily, wondering if he was near the meeting place. Across the clearing, on the fringe of the trees, there were three neatly stacked piles of pit props that might have done for a rendezvous, but there was no sign of Mallory. Parker hesitated. If he went on into the moonlight he'd be bound to show himself to anyone who was watching—but if he stayed where he was he might lose his man altogether—and the money too. He couldn't face that, and after a moment he began to move forward again. He got through the patch of light in safety and, relieved, continued at a good pace round the next bend, making up lost ground. Then, suddenly, he jerked to a stop. A hundred yards ahead there was another small break in the trees and Mallory was standing there, in full moonlight, close to some object at the side of the path that Parker couldn't identify. His whole attitude made it clear that he'd reached the end of his journey.

Parker moved to the edge of the ride and began to consider what he should do next. He'd have liked to be nearer the meeting place—he felt sure that Gill would clear off in a hurry once he'd got the money and it would be easy to lose him. Yet he didn't see how he could get nearer except by working his way round through the trees and that would make a hell of a row and draw Mallory's attention to himself. Maybe he'd better stay where he was. . . . Anyway, he'd wait for a bit and see what happened.

It wasn't a pleasant wait. The sight of Mallory, standing there motionless with his head slightly on one side, obviously listening, soon began to get on his nerves. Also, his new shoes were pinching badly and he'd have been glad to take the weight off his feet. He wished Gill would hurry up so they could get the business over.

At the thought of Gill, he suddenly realized that it wouldn't do to stay where he was after all. Gill might come to the meeting along this path, and if he did he was pretty sure to spot a man standing only a few feet to the side of him, and the last thing Parker wanted was a showdown before the money was safe. And that wasn't all—Mallory would probably come back this way himself after he'd handed over the money. Parker began to feel very exposed. Whether he liked it or not, he'd have to move back a little—get off the ride and into the shadows at the side of the clearing. He turned, and took a step, and a stick snapped under his foot. In the silence, it was like a gun going off.

He threw an anxious glance in Mallory's direction. The man was looking along the path—obviously he'd heard the noise. After a moment he began to stroll very slowly, very quietly, toward Parker. The quarry had become the hunter. Parker retreated and again there was a crackling underfoot, and Mallory came on faster.

Then Parker panicked. He turned and lumbered back to the clearing as fast as he could go, careless now of noise, and crossed the grass and dived in among the conifers where it was pitch dark. He lay there, flat against the ground, breathing hard.

Mallory was already halfway across the clearing, but judging by his hesitation as he approached the trees he hadn't seen the final drive. After a moment he came to a halt beside one of the piles of timber and stood there, gazing around. His face in the moonlight looked grim and determined—it wasn't at all the weak face that

Parker had expected to see. Presently he laid his stick down on top of the stack and produced a torch from his coat pocket and came over to the edge of the trees, directing the beam between the slim trunks.

Parker felt the sweat begin to creep under his armpits. He'd got himself in a proper jam. It was too late to think of moving again—he'd be spotted at once. He'd probably be spotted anyway. There was only one thing for it now—to be ready to act fast when the moment came. He'd have to knock the man out—there was no other way. He'd have to keep his own head down and knock him out so quickly that there'd be no chance of identification afterward. Beat him into unconsciousness before he knew what had hit him! Then take the money, and clear off, and to hell with Gill . . . !

The torch beam dipped and swung and came nearer. Any moment now! Parker raised himself on his hands and dug his toes into the ground and waited like a runner for the starting signal. He was all set for the lunge when the light suddenly began to move away again, back along the edge of the clearing toward the ride. The crouching man relaxed—but not for long. Presently the torch went out altogether, and there was a long period of silence, more nerve-racking by far than the visible approach. Now Parker had no idea where Mallory was, and he scarcely dared to breathe. He had a horrible feeling that he might be pounced on at any moment. A bramble had caught in his trousers and was tearing his knee but he couldn't risk changing his position. This was exactly what he'd been trying to avoid—an encounter in the dark with a man who was on his home ground and knew all the tricks.

He was just beginning to feel that he couldn't keep still for another second when there was a diversion from the ride—the sound of cautious steps along the path. The torch beam suddenly flicked on again—perilously close. It made a last quick sweep, missing him by inches. Then it swung away for good, and Parker watched Mallory leave the clearing and stride off rapidly toward the rendezvous.

He got to his feet and ripped the bramble from his knee and stood waiting uncertainly at the edge of the wood. It was damned awkward being so far away, as he'd known it would be—from where he was he couldn't see anything of the meeting place, or hear much either apart from an occasional raised voice. But he'd been badly scared

and he wasn't going to take any chances of a fresh collision. He'd stay here now until Mallory cleared off, and then get after Gill as fast as he could.

The wait seemed endless, and after a while he began to feel seriously worried. He couldn't hear voices any more. Maybe Mallory—had gone off some other way—and Gill too! Maybe the meeting was over! That put a different complexion on things. He was about to move out into the clearing and try to find out what was happening when he caught the sound of approaching footsteps. He drew back quickly as Mallory emerged from the ride into the open. He saw him stop, look round, hesitate—and then continue slowly on his way with his head bent and his eyes on the ground. The man's demeanor sent Parker's spirits soaring—he'd never seen anyone look more depressed. The money was obviously in the bag, and now all he'd got to do was collect it.

He allowed a few seconds for Mallory to get clear and then crossed the open space and turned into the ride. He couldn't see Gill but he could hear him, not far ahead, and his steps sounded hurried—the steps of a man making a hasty getaway. Parker quickened his pace—he could just make out Gill's figure, now, on the path. He broke into a run. At the sound, Gill stopped abruptly and looked back. Then he suddenly scuttled off the ride into a thicket of trees.

Parker pounded up to the spot. No sound came from the thicket. Bluff seemed his best bet.

"All right, I know where you are," he called out hoarsely. "Come on out, before I fetch you out."

Almost at once there was a disturbance in the undergrowth and Gill emerged, shaking with anger. "It's you, is it, you blithering fool! You scared me stiff—I thought it was someone else after me."

"Yeah?"

"What's the idea? Didn't I tell you to keep away?"

Parker suddenly grabbed him by the lapels of his coat and shook him violently. "I'm taking no more orders from you, you dirty, double-crossing little rat! The same meeting place as before, eh? Come on, where's the money?"

Half choking, Gill gasped, "If you'll take your hands off me, you imbecile, I'll tell you."

Parker released him. "Well?"

"You've got everything wrong, as usual. I told you I was meeting

him at the notice board simply because I didn't want you messing everything up. . . . I thought you might decide to be there after all and I wasn't taking any chances. It was in your interest as much as mine, and if you think . . ."

"Where's the money?"

"He didn't bring it—he had some crazy idea he could pay us through a foreign bank. . . ." Gill's face looked pasty in the moonlight and for once his self-assured tone didn't ring quite true. "I admit it's a development I didn't expect, but I soon brought him to his senses. We shan't have any more trouble with him—he'll bring the money tomorrow. There'll be no more snags."

"You're lying," said Parker. "Every word's a lie—do you think I was born yesterday? He gave you the money, all right, and you've hidden it—you've hidden it in the trees. You knew it was me behind you, and that's why you shot off the path. Thought you could come back and get it after I'd gone, eh? Well, I'm not going. We're neither of us going till I've got that dough, see?"

"You're off your head," Gill snapped. "I've told you the truth and if you're too stupid to believe it. . . ." He broke off as Parker advanced on him with clenched hands and hatred in his eyes. "Now, don't do anything silly. . . ." He glanced wildly around. Suddenly he turned and ducked off the path. There was a low bank on the right-hand side, sloping to a narrow stream that trickled under a culvert, and he didn't notice it and missed his footing and fell. In an instant Parker was on top of him, reaching for his throat.

"Where is it?" he snarled. "By God, if you don't tell me I'll squeeze the life out of you."

Gill was on his back, his head down the slope, helpless as a child. Parker knelt beside him, pressing his thumbs into the little man's neck.

Gill gurgled, "I . . . can't . . . tell you . . . no money."

The thumbs pressed harder. "Talk, you rat!" Now Parker scarcely knew what he was doing in the exquisite pleasure of doing it. "Talk, you bloody little runt!"

Gill's legs thrashed feebly against the ground and a choking rattle issued from his throat. Then, quite suddenly, he was still. Parker didn't let go at once—he eased his grip and slowly drew back, gazing down in horror at his handiwork, not really believing.

But there was no doubt about it—Gill was dead.

For a moment or two Parker continued to kneel beside the body. His quarrel with Gill had been so noisy that he was half afraid Mallory might have heard the racket and turned back. He listened tensely. A faint wind was beginning to stir the treetops, but otherwise the forest was quiet. He got up, brushing the sweat from his eyes.

He felt more scared than he'd ever felt in his life. He'd mauled and battered his way through some pretty rough fights in his time and had done hideous damage, but he'd never actually killed a man, even accidentally. Now he had—and they'd call it murder! Not even worth-while murder, either—if the little swine *had* hidden the dough he'd surely have spoken up in the end to save his skin. A hanging job, damn all! Parker stood and cursed under his breath.

He knew only too well what could happen now—he'd spent long enough in the police force to have a pretty good idea of the routine. Once they'd found the body it wouldn't take them long to discover whose it was—not with Gill's belongings still in his room at the hotel, and the owner missing. They'd identify the dead man, all right. Then they'd start making inquiries about who'd been seen with him lately and they'd try every dodge they knew to find out. They'd fix up Gill's face so they could take a picture of him and they'd stick it in the newspapers and they'd ask people who'd seen anyone in company with the dead man to come forward.

And that, Parker realized, was where his own troubles would start. He didn't have to do much thinking to know there were people who'd remember seeing him with Gill. That pretty waitress in the Southampton teashop, for instance—she'd remember, because he'd tried to make a date with her, and bloody Gill had stopped him. And she wasn't the only one. Back on the ship, the morning he'd run into Gill and they'd chattered openly like old buddies, there'd been a couple of hands painting the railings near by, men who knew him well. They might easily remember Gill if they saw his picture in a paper, and it wasn't likely they'd have gone to sea again yet so they'd probably be reading plenty of papers. One way or another, it was well on the cards the police would get the description they wanted. Then the hunt would be on—and if things got as far as that Parker didn't give much for his prospects. He'd never been a very bright cop himself, but he didn't underrate the skill and persistence

of the men who'd be tracking him down. So what was he going to do . . . ?

He thought of trying to get another ship right away—but a ship would be a prison once he was in her and if the police got on his trail they could be waiting for him at the other end and he wouldn't have a hope. Better to get up to London and lose himself there for a bit. He'd need money, though—a lot of money if he didn't want to be answering questions all the time—and after his binge in Southampton he was almost broke again. Maby Gill had a good fat wad on him. . . .

He got down to look, but a sudden noise along the path jerked him to his feet again. . . . Probably only a bough creaking in the wind, he decided after a moment—but it seemed safer to move the body into the trees before he searched it. He bent and seized it by the ankles and drew it up the bank. Then he slung it over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and carried it into the plantation and set it down with its back against a pine tree and its head lolling over. At once he began to go through the pockets. Gill had brought a flashlight with him, which helped a lot. There was a leather wallet in the jacket and he opened it with trembling fingers and counted the notes. One, two, three—hell!—only four pounds . . . He thrust his hand into the trousers pockets. Twelve bob in silver—chicken feed! What about valuables? Yes—a wrist watch—a pretty good one, and no initials or anything. He unstrapped it. A plain gold ring on the right hand. He seized the limp white fingers and dragged it off. Gold cuff links, too—the little runt had certainly done himself well. It wasn't a bad haul—but pawning it would be risky, and anyway it wouldn't fetch more than a few pounds. Not much for a man on the run—and he wouldn't dare even to start running until he'd paid his hotel bill and settled for the balance of the car hire, or the police would be after him for bilking. . . . He was up against it, and no mistake! He slid the wallet back and felt something else hard in the pocket and pulled it out. Gill's passport! He'd forgotten about the passport. Well, that was a break, anyway—if Gill had kept it with his luggage instead of carrying it with him it would have made everything a lot easier for the police. For one thing they'd have had a proper picture of him. As it was, they'd never be able to make the dead face as recognizable as that. In fact, they'd have quite a job to

make it recognizable at all. . . . As Parker glanced down at Gill's distorted features, he suddenly had an idea. Why not make the face *quite* unrecognizable? Then he wouldn't need to worry about pictures in the papers at all. He shone the torch around, looking for something heavy that he could use as a bludgeon. He tested several bits of wood, weighing them in his hand, but they all felt light and rotten. The heel of his shoe might be better—rubber or not, it would do the trick. He hadn't any qualms, but he still hesitated—he didn't want to get blood on the shoe if he could help it. . . . Then it suddenly came into his mind that bashing the face wouldn't be any good after all. Gill had a police record, so they'd be able to identify him by his fingerprints and there'd be photographs with the record. There was actually only one way of making sure that no picture ever appeared and that was to hide the body in some place where it wouldn't be found. If he could do that, it was even possible the police wouldn't realize there'd been a murder. Gill would be just another missing man, a man who'd walked out of his hotel without leaving an address. Loss of memory, maybe, or an accident . . . The police wouldn't work on that as they'd work on a murder.

He sat back on his heels and tried to think how he could dispose of the body. One thing was clear—he couldn't bury it, not without proper tools. The ground was much too hard and dry. He thought of carrying it to one of the ponds he'd seen around the forest but he wasn't sure now where they were and even with a map it would take him a long while to find one in the dark. It looked as though he'd have to stuff it down in the undergrowth somewhere and hope for the best.

He started to look around for a suitable spot. The plantation on the opposite side of the path seemed the best bet—the one that Gill had dived into. It was full of young trees—Christmas trees, they looked like—almost hidden by bracken and brambles. Just the place, he thought, if he could force his way into it. He returned quickly to the body and draped it over his shoulder again and backed with it into the thicket and dumped it. He took away the passport and wallet, just to be on the safe side—he could get rid of those later. Then he threw bracken over it till nothing was visible.

Well, that was that! A last look round, now, to make sure he hadn't dropped anything or left any obvious traces, and then he

could clear off. He took the torch and examined the place where he'd searched the body, and the path, and the bank of the stream. There were two faint dents in the ground where the toes of his shoes had pressed as he'd knelt beside the body on the bank but they didn't amount to much and he soon scratched them out with a piece of wood. Everywhere else that he'd walked was too hard to make footmarks.

He glanced once more at the thicket where the body was hidden. He didn't think anyone was likely to find it there—not for a bit, anyway. He hadn't left much of a trail in the bracken and an animal could have made that—a dog, perhaps. . . . A dog! At the thought, a new anxiety gripped him. He'd seen keepers walking around with dogs, and a dog might nose out the body and draw attention to it. Probably would! Maybe he ought to have carried it further in—a long way in. Maybe he still should. He swore softly—it would be a hell of a sweat in that rough stuff, and he wanted to get away. He'd had enough—he needed a stiff drink. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, scowling across at the thicket.

Then, suddenly, he had a much better idea.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mallory had refrained from going straight home after his meeting with Gill. He knew there would be the usual difficulty about saying anything to Linda while Anne was still around, and he was in no mood for another silent, repressed session. Linda would be anxiously waiting for news, of course, but it wasn't as though he had anything good to report. The interview had been as fruitless as he had feared, and even more humiliating. He had made a determined effort to get his own way, going faithfully through the act he'd prepared. Virtually he'd said to Gill, "Accept my terms, or tell and be damned!"—and Gill had called his bluff and his bold front had collapsed. In the end he'd had to beg again, for one more chance. There had been a moment when it had seemed that he might not get it, that Gill in his malice might prefer to tell rather than to wait, and he'd been terrified. It had been an utterly degrading interview—he still felt

sickened at the thought that he'd had to *plead* with a man like Gill. And after all that, he would have to pay just the same. If only, he thought, he'd succeed in overtaking the running man—the man who must surely have been Parker! That would have changed everything. The fact that he'd come so near to doing it made the failure seem unbearably bitter.

It was still only half past eight when he emerged from Oakham New Inclosure. He took no conscious decision where to walk, following any path that offered and yet coming out at last, by some homing instinct, at the foot of the barrow near his house. There he climbed the hill and sat down in a hollow, out of the rising wind, and gave himself up for a while to anger and resentment. It was wrong, no doubt, to build his personal and unique experience into a general indictment, but tonight he felt a deep grudge against a society that required respect for its standards and observance of its laws and yet could fail so utterly to safeguard its citizens when the pattern of crime took a slightly unusual form. . . .

His arid reflections were cut short in the end by the sound of Hurley church clock striking half past nine. Anne should be out of the way by now. He got up, and began to make his way slowly to the house.

Halfway down the hill he stopped suddenly, sniffing the air. Surely he could smell fire? He sniffed again, and was certain of it. That wasn't the acrid smell of an old scorched site; it was the resinous tang of freshly blazing conifers! He gazed anxiously upwind. At that moment a tongue of flame leaped high above the distant woods. He was too far away to pinpoint it, but the direction—he noted with little surprise—was Oakham Heath.

Fire had been Mallory's lifelong enemy, but now he felt almost grateful for the diversion, for the chance of swift and useful action after days of frustration. He raced down to the house and plunged straight into the sitting room.

"There's a fire in the forest—looks like a big one," he called, as Linda sprang up in alarm. He grabbed the telephone and rang Calloway, the Fire Duty Officer.

Until that moment, Calloway had heard nothing. The fire tower watchers would have knocked off at nightfall, when the hazard usually became negligible.

"Oakham New?" he repeated, in a quick, alert voice.

"I'm pretty sure. It's quite a sight already—it could be the Norways."

"Oh, lord!" Calloway said. "Right, I'll get cracking."

"I'll see you there."

"Okay, sir."

Mallory dropped the receiver and dashed upstairs to put on old flannels and a windbreaker. By the time he was down again, Linda had the car waiting for him in the drive. Anne had joined her in a dressing gown and was gazing, large-eyed and apprehensive, at the spectacle. The fire was spreading fast, and already there was a fierce red glow over the trees. The sirens added their own note of urgency.

"Well—see you sometime, Lindy," he said, as he struggled into his rubber boots. "Better not wait up—it looks like an all-night job."

She nodded, not thinking of the fire. "Did you—have any luck?"

He shook his head.

"Oh . . . ! Well, be careful, darling, won't you?"

"I will. Don't worry."

He waved, and drove off quickly toward Oakham Heath. As he went, he considered the various routes by which he could reach the fire. With a blaze like that, and a strong breeze, it would be best to approach it downwind first of all. That meant getting round onto A.35 and entering Oakham New from the far side.

It took him ten minutes to reach the arterial road. As he parked beside the inclosure entrance, a tall lean man was just getting out of his car—Forbes, the Deputy Warden. A water truck and tender had arrived and were turning in at the gate and the fire squad was being steadily reinforced by forest workers and keepers.

"Good work," called Mallory encouragingly. "See the gate's kept clear, Hollis. Come on, Alan, let's have a look at it."

He strode off with Forbes along the ride. On their left were the twenty-five-year-old Scots pines that had provided the thinnings for the pit props. On their right was a large stand of Norway spruce—the Christmas trees; twelve years old and not yet tall enough to have formed a canopy that would kill the undergrowth. Both plantations were burning furiously at widely separated points.

"Someone's been up to mischief," Forbes muttered, and Mallory nodded.

A couple of hundred yards along the ride, the heat stopped them.

The young spruces were an inferno. With their tangle of dry bracken they were being consumed at a fantastic rate. Flames were leaping thirty feet above the trees, and a great cloud of billowing smoke shone red in the glare, an awe-inspiring sight. The hissing and crackling and roar of the fire made talking an effort.

It took Mallory only a few seconds to size up the situation and start to plan the counterattack. The Norways, he could see, would have to be written off—probably the whole two hundred and thirty acres of them. The fire seemed to be raging all along their windward edge and no one could hope to get near such a furnace. But to leeward of them there was a wide firebreak, and beyond that a hundred acres of well-grown Corsicans that might be isolated. As for the Scots on the left, there was a chance that the fire there could be gradually headed off.

By now the first of the tenders had been hauled along the ride and there was no lack of helpers. Mallory issued quick, incisive instructions. "Wheeler, you take charge of the Scots—get the water in there. Sharp now! Smith, will you take a dozen men round the east side of the Norways and start felling at the break. I want the Corsicans saved. Perhaps you'd go with them, Alan—I think that's the key spot at the moment. Martin, you stay here and direct the newcomers—half to each party. Grange, get to the phone and tell HQ we need every man we can get for felling."

Everyone dispersed without fuss. Mallory returned quickly to the gate and arranged with Hollis to send water round to the Corsicans via Oakham Heath as soon as there was transport to spare. For the time being, the Scots needed the water most. The first of the regular brigade engines had arrived now and he had a word with the officer in charge as the hoses were run out. There was terrific activity everywhere, but order had begun to emerge.

Presently Mallory left the gate and followed the Corsican party round the edge of the Norways, skirting the already wide expanse of smoldering debris that constantly leaped to fresh life in the gusts of wind. Broadside on, the fire looked huge, and he had to shield his face from the glare as he passed. By the time he reached the break, the men were already hard at it. Forbes had split them up into groups along the edge of the plantation and they were systematically slashing down the bracken and the tender, twelve-foot trees. It would be touch-and-go whether the flames jumped the gap or not, but if

they could get a broad enough belt down all along the break there was a chance. They were working in the direct track of the fire but it was still a good way off—Mallory thought they should have at least an hour before the place became untenable. The smoke was the worst problem, but there was nothing to be done about that. Speed was vital, and masks would defeat their own end.

Satisfied that everything was going well, he worked his way back to the ride and plunged into the pines to see how the other party was faring. The fire was tremendously fierce there, also, burning on two levels. On the ground it was slow, for the Scots had a good canopy and the undergrowth was thin. In the tops, though, the flames were leaping fantastically from tree to tree as the heat scorched the needles ahead to tinder. Still, some progress was being made. No vehicle could get in among the trees but a second hose had been joined to the first and water was being played on the tops, sideways along the leading edge of the fire. Slowly the party advanced, and every foot of ground they won meant scores of trees saved to the left of them. The careful training of the men, the many fire drills that Mallory had insisted on, were proving themselves now.

Once again he returned to the gate. Two more engines had arrived and the place was throbbing with ordered activity under Hollis's cool direction. Police were controlling the late traffic on the main road and keeping the cars moving. A truckload of young National Servicemen had just driven up from the near-by camp and Mallory sent them round to the Corsicans in the charge of a forester.

Calloway, who had just arrived from HQ, said, "How's it going, sir?"

"Fair!" Mallory wiped his glistening forehead. "It's going to be a long job, Jim—we'll need some canteens down here before the night's out."

"I'll fix it," said Calloway. "I've got the police radio car sending messages for me."

After that, Mallory lost all count of time. The Corsicans were still his greatest anxiety, and now that the general plan was operating smoothly he went back to the firebreak and took an axe himself. It was stifling work, with the smoke getting thicker every minute and the air full of hot ash, but this final effort could make all the difference and he knew the sight of the Warden on the job would stimulate the others. The heat of the blaze was perceptible, now,

and Mallory saw with concern how ribbons of burning debris were blowing across in the wind. Several fresh fires had already started in the heart of the Norways, cutting down the margin of time. He assigned a squad of men to watch the fringe of the Corsicans, ready to pounce on any outbreak there.

Presently, above the fury of the fire, he heard the roar of an engine near by. A cheer went up as a truck appeared out of the smoke from the direction of the Heath—and another. Hoses were run out once more, and the men were stationed among the Corsicans, well back from the break, with Forbes in charge.

Suddenly there was a burst of flame from the Norways, much closer than any yet, and a cloud of dense smoke enveloped Mallory. As he staggered out of it, coughing and choking, there was a yell from behind him and someone called out, "Help!" and then again, "*Help!* Carter's out!" He dropped his axe and fought his way back through the smoke, a couple of shadowy figures at his side, and as the gray cloud momentarily thinned he saw someone on the ground and another man trying desperately to haul him out by the shoulders. He took a quick, incautious step forward, and his face jabbed hard into the lopped branch of a tree. For a moment the pain and shock stopped him dead. Then, with water streaming from his eyes and the taste of blood on his lips, he bent to the unconscious man and joined with the others in hauling him out.

The incident was a warning and, as Carter began to come round, Mallory called the whole gang off. They were scarcely recognizable now as individuals, their faces running with black sweat, their clothes tattered and filthy. They stood back in attitudes of exhaustion, or flung themselves on the ground between the pine trees, watching the greedy fire advancing upon them. Now was the testing time. The flames approached, burst through the wall of spruce, ate up the last of the high bracken, devoured the stuff on the ground, crept toward the fire break. Then, little by little, the din began to subside. The water men were at their nozzles, spraying the grass on the break, spraying the tops of the Corsicans, spraying the flames. Twice the fire jumped the barrier, but each time men converged swiftly upon the new danger spot and dealt with it.

At last Mallory gave a little sigh and turned to Forbes. "I think we've done it, Alan. Will you get some of these chaps back to the

road while the others keep watch—the canteens should be there by now.”

He looked across to his right and saw that the Scots were still blazing fiercely. Once more he made the circuit of the burned-out Norways to see how the other gang was faring. With weary satisfaction he saw that his strategy had been the right one. Little by little, the water was heading off the fire, and in an hour or two its leading edge would be driven to a stretch of waste that had been burned off only the week before. There, with luck, it would die.

By now, the fighters had been organized into canteen shifts and everyone was getting a rest spell. Mallory stopped at the road for a sandwich and a mug of tea and made arrangements with Calloway for a reserve of fresh men to take over watching duties when the fire was beaten.

Day had broken before it seemed safe to relax. At that hour the last of the darting flames was quenched among the Scots and the exhausted men began to leave—the young Army chaps, slumped in their truck, the firemen with their engines, the forest workers and keepers and police. The reliefs had begun to take up their positions around the area of the fire, ready to go into instant action if it should show any fresh signs of life. They, and their replacements, would be keeping guard for many hours, perhaps even for days, since fire had a way of getting into the peaty ground and starting up again treacherously when all seemed well.

As the sun rose, a grim spectacle was revealed. In addition to the total destruction of the Norways, Mallory could see now that in spite of all their efforts a great part of the Scots had gone too. This was no moment to count the cost, but in value it would be many thousands of pounds and in young trees hardly fewer than a quarter of a million. In all his experience he had never known a forest fire in England to equal it. On every side there was nothing to be seen but scarred and blackened stumps, burned grass, burned earth, and the charred and twisted remnants of gorse and heather roots. Tiny wisps of smoke still floated upward in the dying wind from half a dozen points. The scene of devastation would have been depressing enough at any time, but as a background to Mallory's personal problem it seemed to have a ghastly symbolism. Trees that he'd tended and watched over for a decade had gone in a flash. The

happiness of the child he'd watched over could go just as quickly. And he had an idea that the same two men were responsible on both counts—though why they should have committed arson was beyond him. It seemed a pointless crime.

Sick at heart, he walked alone along what had been the central ride, crossing the trickling stream and coming to the spot where he had joined Gill. A crescent rubber tire guarding the teeth of the circular saw was partly melted but the saw itself seemed to have suffered little damage. He moved on, and came to the clearing where he had listened in the dark for Parker. The place was scarcely recognizable now, for it had become part of a much larger clearing. The trees around it had been burned to the ground and fire had swept over the grass. Two of the piles of pit props had gone, and the third was a mere remnant.

He was about to turn back when something caught his eye that he couldn't account for. He crossed the dead grass and slowly approached the still-smouldering pile.

A couple of yards away from it he stopped in his tracks, his face rigid with horror. The charred black object he had seen was the half-cremated body of a man. The legs and arms were burned-off stumps and most of the torso had gone. But the scorched and hairless head was almost intact, hanging down over the logs that were still unconsumed, and though the features were blackened and the swollen tongue protruded he recognized the face of Gill.

He stepped back, his head averted, fighting down a wave of nausea. After the strain of the night, the sight was almost more than he could stand. Yet he knew that what had been done here concerned him intimately, and he wanted to see more while he still had the place to himself. Presently the dizziness began to pass and he forced himself to look again and found that he could bear it. He approached the heap once more and stood staring at it, trying to see what had happened and what had been meant to happen.

Gill had been murdered—that was plain—and a determined effort had been made to destroy the body.

The three stacks of pit props had been heaped together into one huge pyre—that accounted for the disappearance of the other two without trace.

The heat must have been intense, but it wasn't difficult to see why the head had remained intact. The murderer had made a mis-

take—he'd placed the body with the head pointing upwind, and the strong breeze had blown the flames away from it.

The surrounding forest had presumably been fired to keep everyone away from the pyre until it had done its work. The arson was explained.

And the murderer? Parker . . . !

Yes, everything was clear. Or almost everything.

For a little while longer Mallory continued to stand there, pre-occupied now with the consequences. Then he saw two keepers approaching along the edge of the burned area, and shouted to them, and in a moment or two they had joined him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The family were at breakfast in the kitchen when Mallory stumbled in just before eight o'clock, sagging with weariness and completely black with soot. It was a most dramatic entrance. Even Linda, who had been prepared for something of the sort, gave an involuntary gasp when she saw him. Anne said, "Oh, Daddy, you are in a mess!" her voice hushed with dismay. Richard let out a whistle of delight. Teddy gazed solemnly at the apparition, a little scared but frightfully interested.

Mallory lowered himself carefully onto the edge of an old wooden chair and gave a long sigh. "Well, it's out. My word, what a night!"

Richard said excitedly, "I saw it, Dad. I heard the sirens and I woke up and watched it from my window. It was smashing."

"You should have woked me," Teddy said severely.

"I bet you'd have cried."

"Get on with your breakfast, Richard," Linda said. "You'll be late for school." She poured a cup of tea for Mallory and put it on the table beside him. Then she noticed the blood on his cheek. "Peter, your face! It's all swollen!"

"I know—I walked into a tree. Carter passed out in the smoke and we had to get him out in a hurry and I didn't look where I was going. It's nothing."

Richard's eyes sparkled. His father hadn't merely put out the fire—he'd rescued a man as well. School was going to be fun today!

"I hope Carter's all right," Linda said.

"Oh, yes—right as rain—and everyone else too, thank heaven. All things considered, we were pretty lucky."

"It was a blaze, wasn't it—your poor trees!"

He nodded, sipping his tea.

"Do you know what started it?"

"Yes," he said grimly.

"Oh." She was silent. Arson in the forest was hardly a new thing, though she couldn't remember that it had ever had such catastrophic results before.

"I suppose you were up most of the night yourself?" Mallory said.

"Yes, I was, as a matter of fact." Linda was suddenly conscious of her unbrushed hair, her neglected face. "I expect I look a sight. . . . Darling, are you hungry? I'll get you something straight away if you like."

"Not now, thanks. I had some sandwiches."

"Just bath and bed?"

"That's about it." He smiled at her.

"Poor old boy—you must be whacked!"

"I'm all right. . . . I've got some news for you, Lindy."

She gave him a quick glance—all news lately had been bad news. But today it seemed to her that under the grime and tiredness there was relief.

"I'll just run Richard to the bus," she said quietly, "and then you can tell me."

Anne, busy filling her satchel, suddenly exclaimed in annoyance. "Oh, dear, I've just remembered I've got a flat tire. I suppose you don't know where there's any valve rubber, Mummy?"

"I'm afraid I don't. Why on earth didn't you think of it last night?"

"Oh, well, I'll just have to keep pumping up, that's all." She flashed a beaming smile at Mallory, picked up her books, said "Good night, Daddy, sleep well!" blew him a kiss and departed.

"Well, that's one out of the way," said Linda. "Come on, you boys. I won't be long, Peter."

He continued to sit there, his eyelids heavy, his head drooping with fatigue, but his mind at rest as it hadn't been for days. Presently the sound of the returning car roused him from his torpor.

He heard Linda talking persuasively to Teddy, evidently trying to make him play in the garden. Then she came hurrying in.

"Well, what is it, Peter?"

He hesitated, seeking words that wouldn't sound callous. "A shocking thing has happened, Lindy. Well, shocking in a way. . . . Gill's dead. He's been murdered."

"Peter!" She stared at him incredulously.

"I found the body myself—or what was left of it—after the fire had burned out." Briefly, he told her of his discovery at the pyre.

She sank down on a chair. "Darling! How absolutely ghastly!"

"It was pretty horrible."

"No wonder you look worn out!" For a moment or two she sat in a shocked silence. Then she said, "Did Parker do it?"

"He must have. There wasn't time to tell you last night, but he was hiding in the woods close to where I met Gill. At least, someone was, and I don't know who else it could have been."

"But they were in it together—why should he want to murder Gill?"

Mallory shrugged. "Thieves falling out, I suppose. It's not really surprising when you come to think of it—it must happen all the time to people mixed up in that sort of business. Gill obviously took one chance too many."

Linda nodded. "Have you told the police?"

"The local police know about the body—I sent one of the keepers to phone the station and Sergeant Fuller turned up with a constable and took charge. . . . I didn't tell them I knew who the man was—I thought I'd better wait and get in touch with Ames as he knows so much about it already."

"Will that be all right?"

"I don't see why not—an hour or two can't make much difference and it didn't seem sense to start broadcasting information now that we're almost out of the wood. The thing is, Lindy—with a bit of luck we shan't have to worry about Anne any more. That's what I wanted to tell you. It's all finished now."

"Darling! Do you really think so?"

"I'm sure of it. Parker's bound to see he can't do anything on his own—and after what's happened he'll be too scared to try, anyway. I should think his one idea will be to get as far away from here as possible, and keep quiet."

"It sounds too good to be true," Linda said in a faint voice. She had been under strain for so long that she felt quite weak now that the tension was suddenly relaxed.

"It's true enough. Of course, if the police manage to catch Parker, things may be a bit tricky for us for a while, but Ames did assure me that nothing would be allowed to come out if there were an arrest for blackmail, and I can't see that the principle is any different now. . . . Honestly, sweetheart, I believe our worries are about over."

Linda's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, it would be so wonderful. . . . I know you said that everything would be all right in the end, but I didn't see how it could, and last night was the worst of all. I thought we were going to have that dreadful creature around us forever and ever. . . ." She was suddenly trembling. "Peter, I've been so *frightened*."

He got up and put his arms around her, and laid his smudged, bristly cheek against her forehead. "Well, it's all right now, Lindy darling, it really is."

There was a clatter of feet at the door, and Teddy appeared.

"Mummy," he said reproachfully, "I jus' remembered, you said I could paint after breakfast."

Linda released herself and wiped her eyes. "So you shall, darling," she said. She gave a little laugh that was touched with hysteria. "You shall paint the whole town red."

Mallory slept solidly for three hours and woke refreshed. His unaccustomed work with the axe had left him slightly stiff around the shoulders but apart from his bruised face and an incipient black eye he had taken little harm from his night's activities.

While Linda prepared lunch, he did some telephoning. First he rang police headquarters in Winchester and left a message that he had some important information for Superintendent Ames who, it appeared, was already out on the forest murder. Then he put in a call to the Forestry Commission in London and gave the Director a preliminary account of the fire and the damage. Finally he rang his secretary, Miss Clinton, who had been carrying on virtually single-handed in the office, and asked her to arrange a conference of his chief lieutenants for the late afternoon.

Lunch was a cheerful meal. Teddy prattled away unrebuked; Linda sat with an indulgent smile, letting his talk flow over her;

Mallory, no longer weighted down by personal anxieties, was able to let his thoughts range over the more congenial problems of work. No call had come from the police by the time he was ready to leave for Lyndhurst, but as he went out into the drive a car swung through the gates and Superintendent Ames got out.

The policeman came forward with a friendly nod. "Hello, sir! I didn't know whether you'd be about yet, but I got your message and I thought I'd take a chance." His eyes rested for a moment on Mallory's bruises. "You look as though you had quite a night."

"We did," said Mallory. He hadn't entirely forgiven the Superintendent for his failure on Oakham Heath, and his manner was cool. "Come inside, will you?"

"I was trying to get hold of you all day yesterday," said Ames, as he followed Mallory into the sitting-room, "but no one seemed to know where you were."

"I was on a round of inspections," Mallory told him. He didn't add that he'd deliberately kept away from telephones so that he wouldn't have to mention his own plans to the police. "Anyhow, Superintendent, what I wanted to tell you was that I recognized the man whose body I found in the forest this morning. It was Gill."

"Ah!" said Ames. He didn't seem at all surprised.

"I'd have let you know earlier," Mallory went on, "but I was just about all in when I got home. I hope this won't have held you up."

"Not at all," Ames assured him. "As a matter of fact it did occur to me that it might be either Gill or Parker, directly I heard that a body had been found. We don't get a lot of murders round here, and we don't get a lot of blackmailers, either, so it seemed a bit of a coincidence. When I saw the remains and remembered your description I felt pretty sure it must be Gill. A nasty business!"

"Horrible! Not that I feel like shedding any tears over him. If ever a man deserved his fate, he did."

"I agree with you," said Ames. "Murder's murder, of course, but between ourselves I don't think I've ever been so pleased to see a corpse! It must be a great relief to you."

"It is, indeed. I'm still just a little concerned about what may come out, but we'll discuss that later. . . . Do you know yet how he was killed?"

"We think he was strangled."

"By Parker, of course."

"That seems more than likely."

"I haven't a doubt about it, Superintendent. You see, I was in Oakham New Inclosure myself yesterday evening, shortly before the fire broke out, and there was a man lurking about there who could only have been Parker."

Ames gazed at him in astonishment. "*You* were there? How was that?"

"I'd arranged to meet Gill there. He rang me up the previous night, after I got home from the Heath, and we made an appointment."

The friendliness faded from Ames's face. When he spoke again, his tone was extremely official.

"I thought, sir, you were going to let me know if there were any fresh developments."

"I decided not to. To be frank, Superintendent, I wasn't impressed by the way that affair was handled the other day and I wasn't prepared to risk a second failure. You assured me that you would take the greatest possible care, and I relied on you, but you didn't prevent Gill spying on you. It seems he was there all the time, right under your noses. He overheard your men talking and he watched them take up their positions."

"That's impossible," Ames said sharply. "If he'd been around we should have seen him. My men scoured the whole area during the course of the afternoon, and there wasn't a sign of anyone."

"Then they couldn't have been sufficiently thorough."

A dark flush spread over Ames's face. "I was there myself—I know just how thorough they were."

"At least you'll agree that Gill failed to show up."

"That doesn't mean that he spotted us—as I said at the time, there were other ways he could have got wind of our intentions. The fact that he claimed to have seen us is neither here nor there—he probably told you that to sow distrust in your mind and stop you coming to us again. . . . What else did he say?"

"He said he'd expected you to intervene. He said you ought to have started operations the night before and not left it till the afternoon. He said he was lying in a safe retreat and saw your men creeping about at dusk. In my view he was much too well-informed about everything not to have been there—obviously you underestimated the possibilities of the undergrowth as a hiding place. Still, it's

old history now. The fact remains that after that fiasco I felt I'd prefer to handle things in my own way."

"So you met him?"

"I did."

"And paid him?"

"No—I hoped to bargain with him."

"Indeed! Were you successful?"

"No."

"I should think you might have expected that."

"I was more than half prepared for it."

"So did you take the money with you?"

"No—I hadn't made any arrangements with the bank. I should have been paying him tonight."

"If he hadn't been murdered."

"Exactly."

There was a little silence while Ames made some rapid mental adjustments.

"Well, sir," he said at last, "this is a very unexpected development. I'm afraid there are a few more things I'll have to know."

"Go ahead, if you think I can help you."

"This encounter with Parker last night—where exactly did it take place?"

"It was scarcely an encounter," said Mallory. "I was standing at the rendezvous—a circular saw beside the path, about a hundred yards beyond the clearing where I found the body this morning—when I heard a noise behind me. I moved toward it, and a man suddenly pounded away down the path. I chased him, but I lost him among the trees."

"How much were you able to see of him?"

"Virtually nothing. He was too far away and it all happened too quickly."

"But you feel quite sure it was Parker?"

"Who else could it have been?"

Ames grunted. "It's a great pity you can't give me any description of him."

"He was a big, clumsy man," said Mallory, "judging by the row he made. But that's really all I can tell you."

"Not much to go on, is it? You say you saw him in the distance last Saturday, you say Gill talked about him, you say you chased him

in the forest—and yet we know nothing at all about him. He's—just a name."

"That was the whole idea, of course."

"A sort of will o' the wisp."

"Hardly that, Superintendent."

"Well, we'll have to see. We're not likely to get much help from marks on the ground, unless we're very lucky, but we'll probably find out before long where Gill was staying and there may be some clue among his effects. . . . In the meantime, sir, I think it would be a help if you'd tell me now what you were being blackmailed about."

"What difference can that make?"

"If we had some idea what kind of incident was involved, and where it occurred, it might give us a lead as to who Gill really was—and if we knew who Gill was we might get a line on his associates, too."

Mallory nodded slowly. "Yes, I see. All the same, it's something I can't tell you. I'm sorry, but there it is. I'm afraid you'll have to accept that."

"A man's been killed, sir. I can't believe you want to withhold relevant information."

"You told me what my duty was once before, Superintendent, and the result was disastrous. I'd prefer to use my own judgment."

"Very well," said Ames, tight-lipped. "Let's get back to this meeting of yours. What time did it take place?"

"At eight o'clock."

"And how long were you with Gill?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"Did you see which way he went after you left him?"

"Toward the arterial road—the way he'd come."

"And which way did you go?"

"I walked back along the path and out onto Oakham Heath."

"Did you hear any more of—Parker?"

"No."

"You didn't attempt to search for him again?"

"No, it seemed quite useless."

"You didn't, I suppose, have any occasion to go near those stacks of pit props?"

Mallory stared. "Why, no, I . . ." He broke off. He had been about to say that he'd stopped by the stacks when he'd been search-

ing for Parker earlier, but suddenly he didn't much like the trend of the questions and it seemed better not to volunteer information. "No," he said, "I didn't go near the stacks. I went straight on along the path."

"And straight home?"

"Not immediately. I went for a bit of a walk. I was very upset and I knew my wife would be too busy with the children to discuss anything until later. And I wanted to think things over."

"May I ask, sir, where you walked?"

"Oh, across the Heath and round through the woods—and then I sat down on the hill there for a while. I was on the point of coming into the house when I caught sight of the fire."

"What time was that?"

"About half past nine."

There was an awkward pause. Then Ames said, "Did you by any chance happen to meet anyone during this hour or so when you were walking around? Anyone who might have recognized you?"

"No," said Mallory. "Why?"

"Only that it's always helpful to have independent corroboration of these things," said Ames, in a too-casual voice. "It saves so much bother." He got up. "I'm afraid I'll have to trouble you to come along to the local station and let us have a detailed account of all this—if you've no objection, that is?"

Mallory glanced at his watch. "My only objection is that I'm going to be extremely busy this afternoon. Will it take long?"

"I *hope* it won't take long, sir."

Mallory regarded him thoughtfully for a moment. Then he said, "Very well, Superintendent—though I have an idea we're both going to be wasting our time. . . . I'll just tell my wife I'm off, and I'll be with you."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

t.

Linda spent a happy afternoon—the first for days. As soon as Mallory had gone she changed into a gay frock, to match the weather, and took Teddy into Bournemouth to get him some dungarees and

a new pair of shoes. Afterward she bought him an ice cream and they sat on deck chairs in the sun and watched a sailboat maneuvering close inshore. Merely to be free from worry seemed an exquisite pleasure and she basked contentedly while he kept up his usual flow of comment and question at her side.

They got back in time to meet Richard at the bus and organize a picnic tea in the garden. Then Linda settled down to the evening routine, with one ear alert for the sound of Mallory's return. He was later than usual, but at first it didn't bother her. Then, as dusk began to fall, she began to feel vaguely anxious again. On the rare occasions when he was going to be kept as long as this he always let her know in advance.

It was nearly eight when at last she heard the car turn into the drive. She switched on the outside light and went to meet him.

"Peter, you are late! Where on earth have you been?"

He put an arm reassuringly round her shoulders and walked indoors with her. "I'm afraid it's been one of those days, darling. I'd have rung you, but I didn't really expect to be so long. . . ."

"What have you been doing?"

"Oh, one thing and another. . . . First of all, Ames asked me to drop in at the station so they could have all the details of this morning's affair and then there was the conference at the office and a lot of stuff to be got off to London, and by that time the police had thought up some more questions so I went back for another session. . . . Hullo, are the kids in bed?"

"Richard's just had his bath—Anne's gone to Girl Guides. . . . What could the police have found to talk about all that time? You must have been with them for hours."

"It was a bit long-drawn-out. As I'm the only person who knows anything at all about the business, I suppose they wanted to make sure they had every scrap of information they could get from me. . . . I say, I could do with a drink. How's the cellar?"

"There should be a little whisky," Linda said. "I'll get it for you." She went over to the cupboard.

"Won't you have one?"

"I don't think so, not just now."

"But it's practically a celebration. Liberation Day!"

She gave him a startled glance. "You haven't been celebrating already, have you?"

He took the generous glass she handed to him and drained it and sat down. "No such luck!"

"You're in a strange mood. . . . Who was there? Just Ames?"

"Ames and a sergeant the first time. This evening his Chief came along, too, with an inspector. Quite a high-powered gathering!"

"Well, what happened? Come on, tell!"

"Oh, it was just routine stuff, Lindy. About Parker and Gill and so on."

"What, for hours and hours? You hardly know anything about Parker and Gill."

"A lot of stuff had to be written down and typed and read over to me before I signed it. It takes time."

"Not all that time, surely. Peter, are you trying to keep something from me? Because if you are you're being very stupid. Now come on—what's wrong?"

He hesitated a moment. Then he shrugged and said, "Oh, well, I suppose you'll have to know in the end. . . . The fact is, Lindy, the police seem to have some idiotic idea that *I* may have had something to do with Gill's death."

She stared at him. "You mean—they think you *killed* him?"

"They seem to think it's a possibility."

"They must be out of their minds."

"I know, it's too ridiculous. But there it is—that's why the session took so long."

"But—I simply don't understand. What about Parker?"

Mallory gave a long sigh. "Do you think I could have another drink?"

"Of course." She got up and poured out a small one and gave it to him.

"The thing is, they don't believe in Parker," he said. "Not entirely, anyway. They didn't actually say outright *what* they were thinking and everything was very formal and polite, but that's what the drift of their questions suggested. That, and the dubious look on Ames's face. I'm afraid I upset him when he was here by criticizing the arrangements he made on Monday, and then of course I refused again to tell him what the blackmail was about, when he thought it might help him to know. . . ."

"Darling, do keep to the point. What do you mean, they don't believe in Parker?"

"Exactly what I say—they think I made him up. Their idea seems to be that when Gill first threatened me last Saturday afternoon I decided to get rid of him, on the principle that dead men tell no tales, and that I made an appointment with him then for last night with the intention of killing him and that in the meantime I invented an accomplice—Parker—so that he could be blamed when the body was found. You see, they've only got my word for it that Parker ever existed—there isn't a scrap of independent evidence."

"Oh, Peter, you must be imagining things. Of course there's evidence. Look at the way you went to the police and took all that trouble to help arrange a trap so that both men could be arrested together. That wouldn't have made any sense except for Parker."

"We know that, Lindy, but the police don't. I'm pretty sure what they think now is that I was simply trying to plant the idea of Parker very firmly in their minds, and that I knew all along that the trap would be a failure because I'd never actually *made* an appointment with Gill for that night."

"But that's absurd—what about Gill ringing up afterward and talking about it?"

"They see that differently, too. At first Ames was inclined to think that Gill was pretending to have been in Oakham New when he hadn't been. Now, unless I'm very much mistaken, he rather doubts whether I ever had that conversation with Gill on the phone—he suspects that I made it up, to provide an excuse for a later meeting with Gill on my own. Honestly, I've never known such skepticism."

"At least they could check that there *was* a telephone call, couldn't they?"

"I don't think so, not a box call—and even if they could it wouldn't prove it was Gill."

"Anne knows it was—she spoke to him."

"Yes—well, we certainly don't want to bring her into it."

Linda continued to gaze at him, her forehead wrinkled in perplexity. "But, Peter, how *could* they think such idiotic things about you? You haven't got that kind of tortuous mind at all."

Mallory gave a wintry smile. "They haven't the advantage of knowing me as well as you do, darling. And from their point of view I suppose I am the obvious suspect, though it never occurred to me until Ames began asking questions. After all, I did have the opportunity to murder Gill if I'd wanted to, and I didn't take any money

along to the meeting, which looks rather fishy, and then I couldn't give a satisfactory account of my movements for the time when the murderer would have been arranging the stacks and starting the fire. . . ." Wryly, he told her about his walk round to the barrow. "As for motive—well, I had more than enough—I still don't know how I did manage to keep my hands off Gill. And the police know how desperate I was—I even told Ames the other day that it was practically a matter of life and death for me that the blackmail story shouldn't come out, and I'm sure he remembered the phrase. So you see, they have got a bit of a case."

"It sounds frightful, the way you put it. . . . All the same, they really aren't being very intelligent. It's obvious that no one who'd planned to do a murder would say a thing like that beforehand."

"Oh, they probably think that it was all part of the elaborate build-up for Parker. I'd got to convince them, you see, that there really was a second blackmailer around, and the best way I could do that would be to seem very worried about the possible failure of their trap."

"How do they account for the fact that you told them yourself about going to meet Gill? After all, you didn't have to, and if you *had* killed him it would have been a mad thing to do."

"Not if I'd been relying on Parker to take the blame—it would have seemed the act of an innocent man!"

"Heavens, how complicated . . . ! But surely they must realize that the whole thing *looks* like the work of Parker and not a bit like your work. Burning the body, for instance—it's obvious why Parker should want to do that, if he and Gill had been going around together, but why should you? You'd have known the police would be bound to link up the body and the blackmailing sooner or later, so what would have been the point? And setting fire to the forest—a man like Parker would have done that without giving it a thought, but you wouldn't."

"I might have made myself do it. The thing is, Lindy, if I'd been trying to give the impression that it was all the work of an unscrupulous accomplice of Gill's, named Parker, I'd have had to do things just the way Parker would have done them. That's how the police will argue, anyway."

Linda looked baffled. For once, she couldn't understand him at all. He sounded tired, but not particularly anxious.

"You're talking about it as though it were some sort of academic

problem that didn't particularly concern you," she said. "Aren't you worried?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I'm certainly nothing like as worried as I was yesterday when Gill was alive. That business over Anne was pure hell—I hope we shall never have to go through anything like that again. This is quite different. I know I may seem to be in a rather awkward position, superficially, but the fact remains that I didn't murder Gill so it's difficult to take their crackpot theory seriously. Anyway, they'll probably find Parker."

"Will they look for him if they don't believe in him?"

"Oh, I think so—they must, as long as they haven't got a watertight case against me. They're very conscientious about these things, and they'll take all the routine steps. Even if they don't pick up some clue on the site they'll probably find something helpful in Gill's belongings. That's what Ames was hoping earlier today, before he started to get suspicious."

"But suppose they *don't* find him?" Linda persisted, "Suppose he never appears again! Then they'll be sure it was you, because there won't be anyone else. . . . Honestly, Peter, I think you ought to do everything you possibly can to help them."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, you said Ames wanted you to tell him about the blackmail. I think you should. Suppose you told him that Gill said he was the padre in Georgetown—that would give him something to work on."

"It would give him altogether too much to work on," Mallory said grimly. "If they start making inquiries at that end they may easily find out about Anne."

"Well, perhaps—but it's no good being quixotic. You may be in frightful danger for all we know. It's not going to do Anne much good if you're arrested for murder!"

"Oh, come, Lindy, I'm sure there's no chance of that. It would be different if the police had anything concrete to go on, but they haven't a thing, really—all their evidence is completely circumstantial and quite inconclusive. And they realize that, or by now they'd have done something more than ask questions. The case simply isn't strong enough for an arrest—and it certainly won't get any stronger. If we keep our nerve and wait, the whole thing should just blow over."

"I think you might see a lawyer, anyhow. I'd feel much happier."

"I don't want to see anyone, darling. I don't want to talk about the thing any more than I have to."

"But you can't just say nothing. For one thing, there'll be the inquest on Gill—you're bound to have to give evidence, and they'll probably make you say that Gill was trying to blackmail you, and that won't sound very nice in court, anyway, if it's Anne you're thinking of."

"I'm hoping it won't come to that. The inquest may not be held for some time, and by then the police may have quite a different view of the case and everything may be easier. I vote we don't cross our bridges before we have to."

Linda turned abruptly away. "I'd better get some supper," she said.

Mallory nodded and lay back on the settee. The day had been a wretched one, what with the nagging persistence of the police and the indignity of being not quite his own master, but the whisky, rare for him, was beginning to have its effect. He was more certain than ever, now, that there was nothing to be alarmed about. It was only in films, he told himself, that innocent people found themselves in danger from the law—not in Forest Wardens' homes, with domesticated wives making omelets in the kitchen!

Presently he heard a step on the gravel at the drive gate. That would be Anne. He registered the fact with a faint sense of relief. Since Gill's appearance at the house, Mallory had never been entirely easy in his mind when Anne was out on her own, and though the threat had passed, the vague feelings of disquiet still lingered. He got up and went to the front door and stood waiting in the porch, listening for the sound of her bicycle being put away. But now he couldn't hear anything. He must have been mistaken he decided—it couldn't have been Anne after all.

He was about to return to the sitting-room when he heard the noise again. Not a crunch, this time, but a careful step on the track near the gate. A slow, prowling step! Mallory's thoughts flew instantly to Parker. It didn't make sense, of course, after what had happened—yet who but Parker could have stealthy business around his house at night? And who could gauge the venom of a blackmailer and murderer? Perhaps the threat hadn't passed! And Anne might be coming up the track at any moment.

With a sudden, sick feeling he turned to grab his heavy stick

from the rack. It wasn't there. For a second he gazed around the lighted porch, trying to remember what he'd done with it. He always put it in the rack automatically when he came in from a walk. . . . Then the cautious tread sounded again and he seized another stick, a slimmer one, and crossed on tiptoe to the grass edge beside the drive and crept along it to the gate. The steps were retreating. He peered out along the track. Now they'd stopped altogether. There were clouds over the moon, but against the sky he could just make out a dim, silhouetted figure, standing a dozen yards away, looking across the Heath.

It was a bulky figure with a flat-topped cap. Just beyond it a car was parked. A police car, keeping watch.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

For a second or two Mallory stared at the shiny black hood as though he couldn't believe his eyes. It had been bad enough to be subjected to hours of police probing, but to be followed to his home and watched, as though he were a known criminal who might try to escape justice—that was monstrous! His impulse was to march straight up to the officer and ask him what the hell he thought he was doing.

Then the wave of indignation began to ebb—and with it, Mallory's conviction that he'd nothing much to worry about. He could see, now, that he'd been foolishly optimistic. Ames, and Ames's superiors, would never have taken a step like this if they hadn't felt pretty sure they were watching the right man. Obviously they *did* think he was a criminal and they *were* afraid he might give them the slip. So Linda had been right—he was in danger. In far greater danger, actually, than even she had realized. For the first time he saw himself not as the Peter Mallory whom he knew to be virtually incapable of murder but, with detachment, as a suspect whom the known facts might convict. Whom the latest fact would almost certainly convict if it came to light!

For now he'd remembered about the stick. He'd taken it with him the night before, of course, when he'd gone to meet Gill. He'd laid it down when he was chasing Parker, when he was getting out the

torch. He'd put it on top of the pit props, and in the excitement of the hunt and all the anxiety afterward he'd forgotten to pick it up. . . . He turned in agitation and began to pace up and down the drive, thinking about the stick and what it could mean to him.

He hadn't much doubt that it had been destroyed in the fire. There'd been no sign of it near the pyre when he'd got there and it wasn't at all likely that Parker would have taken it away with him. In all probability he'd failed to notice it in the dark and had piled more pit props on top of it, and burned it. But it wouldn't all have burned—the silver nameplate was indestructible. It was a very small plate, and by now it must be buried deep in the pile of ash—but if the police searched at all thoroughly they might find it.

For a fleeting moment Mallory wondered whether they'd found it already—whether that was the reason for the close guard they'd placed over him. But if so, he argued, surely Ames would have asked him at once for an explanation? On the whole, it seemed more likely that the discovery was still to come.

If only, he thought, he'd been more forthright with Ames about his approach to the stack before his meeting with Gill! Of course, he hadn't actually denied that he'd been near it—he'd merely said that he hadn't been near it *after* seeing Gill. But the police would undoubtedly think that he'd withheld the truth—as in a sense he had—and they'd be sure to attribute his lack of frankness to guilt, rather than to a vague uneasiness induced by questioning.

What could he do about it now? If he went to the police and said that he had been at the timber pile after all and had left a stick there, they'd naturally conclude that he'd been driven to tell them merely because he'd discovered that the stick was missing and had realized that they might find out about it themselves. So that wouldn't help him. But if he didn't tell them, and they came across the silver plate, they'd be sure to consider the fact that he hadn't mentioned his loss to anyone as additional evidence of a guilty mind. Whatever he did he'd be compromised in their eyes, and if they were as near arresting him as the presence of the car outside suggested, this would be just the bit of material evidence they needed to clinch the matter. It wasn't even as though his reason for leaving the stick in the first place would sound very convincing. The simple fact was that he hadn't picked it up immediately because he'd wanted to go after Parker quietly and it might have been in his way; but the police

might well think that anyone chasing a man in the dark would be more likely to hang on to his stick. On top of all the other evidence, the odds seemed overwhelming that they wouldn't believe any of his explanations. . . .

At that point Linda called him from the house. Supper was on the table, but it grew cold as he told her the news. He refrained from saying anything about the stick, but he had to tell her about the police car, and she was appalled. He did what he could to reassure her, pointing out that watching a suspect was a routine precaution while inquiries were going on; but there was no mistaking the fear in her eyes, and when she said again, more emphatically, that he ought to take Ames completely into his confidence, leaving nothing out, he was silent. If things continued to go as badly as they were doing, he too could see that the moment might come when he'd have no choice but to talk without reserve.

Presently Anne came in, and they had to behave as though nothing unusual had happened. She asked at once what the police car was doing outside the house. Mallory said in an offhand tone that the police were probably keeping an eye on the Heath because of the murder the night before. Anne had heard that there'd been a murder but she didn't seem to know much about it or want to be told any details. She was feeling rather pleased because she'd qualified that evening for some special Guide's badge, and while she ate her supper she described what she'd had to do to earn it, so that neither Linda nor Mallory was obliged to talk much. Soon afterward she went up to bed; and then Linda said she thought she'd go and take a hot bath, and Mallory was left alone to wrestle with the unresolved dilemma of the stick.

He was no nearer a solution when he woke next morning. The only ray of hope he could see was that the inscription on the silver plate might have become indecipherable in the heat of the fire—though he certainly couldn't count on that. Or, of course, he might in his apprehension be exaggerating the danger that the plate might be discovered. At least, he decided, before he allowed himself to be stampeded into telling Ames the things he so desperately wanted to keep quiet, it might be a good idea to walk across Oakham Heath and find out what was happening. After breakfast he rang Miss Clinton and told her that if anyone wanted him urgently he'd be in-

specting the nurseries in Hampton Inclosure, which lay on the other side of A.35, just beyond Oakham New. Then, shortly after ten, he set off.

The police car had been moved back a few yards and was now parked on the edge of the track at the point where it breasted the hill, giving a clear view of the house and garden and all the Heath around. At present the car was empty, but up on the barrow two men were sitting in the heather. One was in uniform—the other was wearing a raincoat and a snap-brim hat. As Mallory walked by, they both turned to look at him. For a brief moment he wondered whether he was being wise to go back to the scene of the murder and whether they would think his behavior suspicious. Then he took a grip on himself. As an innocent suspect, he would naturally want to know what was going on. He strode out vigorously.

The weather had become cooler and less settled and Oakham Heath looked drab under the scudding clouds. He passed the notice board, still lying face downward beside the path, and entered the inclosure, and soon the burned land opened out in front of him. Almost at once he came across the Superintendent, standing by the path in earnest conversation with a colleague. As he approached, Ames broke off and gave him a curt nod. Mallory had half expected him to show some sign of embarrassment considering what had been happening at the house, but he showed no emotion of any kind. He had become the complete machine, and Mallory realized that any mention of the police car, any protest about being watched, would get nothing but a coldly official reaction. It seemed better to ignore it.

“Well, Superintendent,” he said, “any developments?”

“We’ve found out where the dead man was staying,” said Ames.

“Oh—where?”

“A pub called the ‘Rose and Thorn,’ at Ringwood.”

“Has it helped at all?”

“Not a lot.”

“Didn’t you find his things there?”

“Yes, but there was nothing to indicate who he really was. We’re still working on it.”

“I suppose he registered?”

“He did. ‘H. Gill. London.’ ”

“Oh! And no line on Parker?”

“No line on Parker,” said Ames impassively.

"Couldn't the people at the inn tell you anything useful?"

"It depends what you mean by useful, sir. They said they'd never seen Gill in company with anyone else and that as far as they knew he hadn't taken any telephone calls while he'd been staying there."

"Oh! Still, he could have done all the ringing up himself, couldn't he?"

"He could," said Ames.

Mallory gazed around the devastated land. There were far more men at work than he'd expected to see—at least a dozen of them, all in old clothes and gum boots. "You haven't found anything here yet, I suppose?"

"Not a thing."

Mallory nodded an acknowledgment, and passed on. As he entered what had once been the clearing he saw that men were deployed right across it, moving forward together like beaters and apparently scrutinizing every inch of the charred ground, while a police photographer stood stolidly by with his camera. Four more men were working at the pyre itself—going through the ash with fine sieves, as far as he could see. He'd rather expected something of the sort, but his heart sank all the same. There was a lot of ash and it would take some time to get through, but they'd be bound to find the silver plate in the end—if not today, tomorrow at latest. He wondered again whether it would have been wiser after all to tell Ames about the stick, and seriously considered going back and getting it over. But the thought of the Superintendent's unsympathetic manner deterred him, and anyway this was hardly the moment—it would seem too much like a reaction to the sight of the searchers at work.

He passed the circular saw, where two more men were bent together over the ground, and crossed the stream that ran under the culvert. When he reached the unburned trees he turned and looked back. The two policemen had got to their feet and were moving on to a fresh place. Behind them, another man was crossing the clearing, walking slowly, keeping his distance. A man with a snap-brim hat.

Mallory spent an unproductive hour at the nurseries. He found it impossible to concentrate on things like planting areas and soils and disease-resistant strains when his whole mind was preoccupied with the police search and speculation about Parker and doubts about what

he himself ought to do, and he left at twelve after a perfunctory inspection. The man in the hat, still keeping his distance, followed him back as far as the police car, where he joined the uniformed officer who was patiently sitting at the wheel.

Lunch that day was as grim a meal as the previous day's had been cheerful. What little fresh news Mallory was able to give Linda only served to plunge her deeper into depression. At the table he could scarcely bring himself to look at her because of the misery in her eyes. Teddy, sensing the atmosphere, was unusually difficult, and it was a relief for everyone when at last Linda took him away into the kitchen.

Left alone, Mallory considered without any further self-deception the dire straits into which he had fallen. He hadn't much doubt now what was going to happen—the course of events seemed clearly mapped. The police would find the silver plate, and they wouldn't find Parker, and they'd come and arrest him. He would be charged with murder and taken off to prison and the life of the Mallorys would fall to pieces.

That being so, should he now seek out Ames and tell him the background of the blackmail plot, as Linda had wanted, and about Gill saying he was the padre at Georgetown? Should he now throw all reticence away, even though it meant that the whole story of Anne might come out . . . ? He still didn't think so. Knowing the background, he argued, wouldn't necessarily mean that the police would be helped in their inquiries about Gill, whose actual connection with Georgetown was pure surmise. Even less would it mean that they'd be given a definite lead about Parker—and it was only the finding of Parker that could make much difference now. They'd have a slightly better chance of finding him, perhaps, with the extra information, but that was all.

It wasn't enough, Mallory told himself, to make the probable cost acceptable. He would wait a bit longer, and see what happened. . . . The decision to postpone the decision gave him comfort.

Meanwhile there was the afternoon to face. He'd have to put in an appearance at the office, he supposed, and tackle the mountain of work that had accumulated during these days of neglect. He went into the hall to get his raincoat and was about to call a "Good-by" to Linda when the telephone rang.

He returned to the sitting room and picked up the receiver.

"Mallory here."

A voice, hoarse and low, said, "I guess you know me. It's Parker."

"Parker . . . !" Mallory's heart was suddenly racing. "You said Parker!"

"That's it. Now listen, Mallory—don't leave the phone and don't try and speak to anyone, see? If you do, I'll ring off right away—and you know what'll happen then, don't you?"

Beads of sweat gathered on Mallory's forehead. Surely there was something he could do? The police were so near—if only he could stall, and somehow warn Linda, so that she could get to them . . . !

Parker's voice broke harshly into the silence. "Okay, if you won't talk I'm ringing off—you've had your chance. I'll be safer chalking on walls. . . ."

"Wait!" Mallory cried. "What do you want?"

"Two hundred pounds, that's all. I'm making it easy for you. Two hundred pounds, and I'll keep my mouth shut."

"I see. . . ." said Mallory, and paused.

"Well, yes or no?" Parker rasped. "I haven't got all day."

"I suppose I'll have to pay you."

"That's right—you got no choice."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Go straight along to the bank now and get the money. Stick it in an envelope and take it to that notice board. Be there at four o'clock sharp—understand? Shove it under the notice board and clear off. That's all."

"Very well," said Mallory.

"If you don't show up, I'll have that story about your girl all round the place before I beat it."

"I understand."

"And don't think you can pull any tricks. I'll collect it when I'm ready, see? Maybe tomorrow—maybe next week—when I'm sure there's no cops around. If I smell a cop I'll tell everything. That clear?"

"Perfectly clear."

"Okay—then get to work. You play fair and I'll soon be out of the country and that's the last you'll hear of me. You cheat, and that girl of yours'll wish she'd never been born. So long, Mallory."

The telephone clicked.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As Mallory put the receiver down, a phrase that Gill had used of Parker came sharply to his mind. "Not, perhaps, the most intelligent of men." It seemed a fair description. In spite of his momentary scare the night before, he had never thought it really likely that Parker would be stupid enough to risk contact with him again. Now that it happened against all expectation, the outlook was transformed. The immediate opportunity, such as it was, had slipped by—but there would be another chance to catch him. It was an incredible stroke of luck.

He felt almost no concern over the renewal of the blackmail threat. After Gill's spine-chilling artistry, Parker's crude bluster had failed to alarm him. It was most unlikely, he thought, that a murderer would draw attention to himself by spreading scurrilous stories in the neighborhood of his crime. The threat was a bluff, and the weakness of the man's position was plain. He would never have dared to stay on in the district merely to continue the blackmail; he must have some other reason for staying, and it sounded very much as though lack of money was at the bottom of it. He must be needing money urgently to get away. That was why he'd been driven to make this dangerous phone call—and his eagerness to accept a cut rate proved his extremity. The only worry was how best to exploit that extremity.

As the first shock of excitement passed, Mallory began to go over in his mind the arrangements that Parker had outlined. From the blackmailer's point of view they now seemed to have advantages at least as obvious as their dangers—so perhaps the fellow wasn't so stupid after all! It certainly wasn't going to be an easy matter to apprehend him. . . .

Mallory's thoughts switched to Ames, suspicious and hostile—and then to the police car outside. He opened the window a little and leaned out cautiously until he could see the car. It was still in the same place and the same men were still waiting in it. As he stood there, regarding it, his face gradually lost its thoughtful look and took on new lines of decision. Gill and Parker and Ames between them

had toughened him a lot in the past few days—he could contemplate action now that a week ago he'd have considered well outside the range of his powers. . . . Presently he went to the door and called, "Linda!"

It was imperative that he should have time alone with her now, but when she appeared Teddy was trailing along in her wake.

"I want to talk to Mummy for a little while," he said, trying hard to rid his voice of urgency. "Go and play in the other room, Teddy, there's a good boy."

Teddy's face became wooden. "I don't want to play in the other room," he muttered.

"Never mind what you want. Do as you're told."

Slowly Teddy's lower lip rolled over and his cheeks reddened—sure signs that a scene was imminent. Mallory regarded him with rare exasperation. Linda, sensing a new crisis, took over.

"Now come on, Teddy, don't make a fuss—I shan't be long. Look, you can have something very special to play with if you're good. What would you like?"

"I'd like Richard's engine," he said.

"Oh, dear! Well, if you'll be awfully careful with it . . ."

He gazed at her, large-eyed. "*Can* I play wiv Richard's engine?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yes, just this once."

"*And* wiv his signal?"

"Yes—run along."

"They won't be any good wivout his lines an' his tender."

"Well, all right. You really will have to be careful, though. Go on, now, you know where to find them—they're in the cupboard. And I don't want to hear a sound from you."

Teddy shot out of the room, fearful of losing even a second of the unheard-of license.

The moment he'd gone, Mallory said, "Linda—that call was from Parker."

She looked at him as though she couldn't believe her ears. "*Parker!*" she said.

"Staggering, isn't it?" Quickly, he told her the gist of the telephone conversation.

"But how dare he? Is he mad?"

"I should say he's just desperate."

"What was he like? What sort of man?"

"It's hard to say. He had a rough, hoarse sort of voice. He sounded very jumpy."

"I should think so . . . ! Well, there's one thing about it, the police will have to believe in him now." Her face was suddenly alive with excitement. "Darling, surely it means . . ." She broke off, checked by his blank expression. "What are you going to do?"

"That's just it. I feel as though this is where we came in."

"Oh, but Peter, it isn't at all. Why, it's exactly the chance we've been waiting for. Parker hasn't anyone behind him the way Gill had, so we've nothing to worry about. Once he's caught, the whole thing will be over for us."

"Once he's caught, yes."

"Surely there won't be any difficulty about that? He's not likely to go near the notice board until after dark, and by then the police could be waiting for him. I don't see how they can go wrong."

"They went wrong last time. Gill spied on them successfully—why shouldn't Parker?"

"But everything was different then, with all those complicated arrangements and policemen all over the place. It would be much simpler this time."

Mallory shook his head. "It wouldn't, Lindy. If anything, it could be trickier than before. No meeting's been fixed, remember, so there's no telling when Parker will show up. However pressed he is for money I don't suppose a day or two can make much difference to him as long as he knows he can lay his hands on it in the end. He doesn't necessarily have to collect tonight—or tomorrow night. That's his safeguard. He can wait until he's sure the coast is clear."

"The police could wait, too."

"They could, but would they? Even if they'd agree to co-operate again, which we can't be certain of, they wouldn't really believe in what they were doing—their hearts wouldn't be in the job. They're on the point of arresting me and they're more doubtful than ever about Parker's existence and they'd be thinking all the time that I was trying to lead them up the garden again. And if he didn't come the first night, they'd probably give up or get careless. I don't think we can rely on them after what's happened. They'd bungle it, as they bungled it before, and Parker would slip through their fingers and our last chance would be gone."

"But, Peter, what other way is there? I admit there's a risk, but if we don't take it he'll escape anyway so what have we to lose . . . ? Darling, I don't understand. . . . What are you driving at?"

"There's an alternative," said Mallory. "I could go myself and wait for him and bring him in."

She looked at him aghast. "You don't mean—*alone*?"

"It's the only sure way of getting results. After all, I'm the one person who'll be prepared to wait indefinitely, and I know the ground, and I've the best of reasons for being cautious and not giving myself away too soon."

"But you can't possibly tackle him all by yourself."

"I can try."

"Peter, you're mad. . . . You admit he's desperate, and he's killed one man already. . . ."

"A very small man," said Mallory.

"That's not the point—he's probably some horrid gangster type who's used to fighting and killing, and you're not, darling, you'll be just a child in his hands. I know you're terrifically strong but it's experience that counts and you're just not cut out for this sort of thing. You're much too civilized."

"I'm not as civilized as I was," said Mallory grimly.

"I still think it's the job of the police to make arrests."

"If the police aren't on our side it's no good depending on them—and they're not. Until we can produce Parker in the flesh, we're on our own—we're as much on our own as people in a frontier country where there's no law. It seems a fantastic state of affairs, but it's true. The way things are, the whole issue lies between Parker and me, and if I do nothing now and he gets away the responsibility for all the ghastly things that'll happen to us will be on me. Don't you see, Linda—I've *got* to go. We've all had more than enough of this business—it's got to be finished, once and for all, and I've been given a chance to finish it and I must take it. If I thought I couldn't handle Parker I wouldn't suggest going, because it wouldn't get us anywhere, but I think I can. And I don't believe anyone else can. I'm sure it's the best way—for you and me, for Anne, for us all."

"You've obviously made up your mind," Linda said bitterly.

"I want you to agree."

"Oh, don't be stupid—women never agree to the idiotic things men

do. They just have to accept them." Then a look of relief crossed her face. "Anyway, you're forgetting the police outside. They're bound to follow you."

"I believe I can give them the slip."

"How?"

"I've thought of a plan. The only real danger is the open space between the garden and the nearest patch of gorse—I'll need cover while I get across that. What I suggest is that you take Teddy in the car and drive off up the track as though you were going into Lyndhurst or Hurley or somewhere. When you get exactly opposite the police car, you'll pull up and say something to the men inside. You can tell them they can come in and have a cup of tea if they want to—they won't, of course, but it'll seem a good reason for stopping. As long as you're there, you'll be blocking their view. I'll be waiting by the back door, and as soon as I hear you stop I'll make a dash for it. All right?"

"I suppose so—if you must do this mad thing!"

"Then the sooner we get it over, the better. I'd like to take some food with me—just a few sandwiches, and a flask of something."

"All right."

While she was away, Mallory quickly got his things together—raincoat, cloth cap, gum boots, and a torch. Then he looked around for something that would serve as a weapon in case of need. He couldn't see anything suitable in the house, and he didn't want to bring anything in from the shed in case Linda realized what he was doing and became more upset than ever. He looked in the porch, and his eye fell on the billhook that he'd been using in the garden when Gill had called. He picked it up and balanced it for a moment in his hand. If Parker did turn out to be really tough, it would be a pretty powerful argument—just the thing to persuade anyone to go quietly! He slipped it deep into the pocket of his raincoat. By the time Linda returned, he was dressed and ready.

He tried to make the parting as casual as possible. "There's no telling how long I'll be away," he said, stuffing the sandwiches and flask into the other pocket of his coat. "You'll have to trust me to look after myself and not worry too much if I seem a long time."

"I'll worry every second," she said.

"The police are bound to realize that I've gone, pretty soon, and

they'll question you. Tell them I've gone to Southampton to see someone. Whatever happens, I don't want them to think I'm in the forest."

She nodded.

He took her in his arms and held her close for a moment. "It'll be all right, Lindy. You'll see."

"I hope so. You will be careful, won't you?"

"I promise."

"If anything happened to you I couldn't bear it. . . ." She clung to him, pressing her face against his. Then, abruptly, she turned away. "Are you ready?"

"All set."

"I'll get Teddy, then."

She went into the dining room. Teddy was squatting on the floor in a chaos of railway lines and table legs, holding Richard's engine and looking rather guilty.

"I dropped it," he said, his lip quivering, "an' the wheel came off."

"Never mind, darling, we'll mend it later. Come along, we're going for a ride in the car."

She put on his coat and took his hand and led him out into the drive.

Mallory was in the kitchen by the open door, listening for the first scrape of wheels on gravel. As the car moved off he stepped into the garden and strode briskly along the rhododendron-sheltered path until he reached the gate that opened onto the Heath. Ahead lay a bare expanse of grass and heather—fifty yards of it, and all plainly visible from the hill. Beyond was the inviting gorse. He waited. He heard the car turn out of the drive and accelerate in low gear up the hill. He heard it stop. He counted five, and then sprinted across the open space, holding his raincoat in a tight bundle, and flung himself down behind the bushes. He listened again. Voices reached him from the barrow—quiet voices, talking in level tones. He hadn't been spotted. Keeping his head down, he worked his way quickly along the edge of the gorse. A stiff wind was blowing from the southwest and very soon he could hear no more sounds from the road. He'd almost made it! There was one more open patch, a short one, and he negotiated it safely on his stomach. After that he was out of the police angle of sight and there were no more hazards. He dropped into a

gully, crossed a stretch of bog that was almost dry, and a moment later reached the shelter of thick trees.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He slung his raincoat over his arm so that the billhook and flask wouldn't slap against his legs, and set off through the wood at a steady pace. Every inch of the ground was familiar and he knew precisely the route he must take. After a while he came to an inclosure gate and went through and turned to the right along a ride. He emerged by another gate and continued along winding paths for a quarter of an hour, always bearing to the right, until at last the trees began to thin and he saw grass and heather ahead. He had walked in a rough semicircle with the police car as the hub, and the open space was Oakham Heath. The hands of his watch showed twenty to four.

With time to spare, he reconnoitered the woods for some distance on either side of him. At present, while he was still carrying out Parker's instructions, it wouldn't matter if he were seen or not, but this was his last chance to move freely and he needed a secure base for his operations. He searched the area methodically, but as far as he could judge he was quite alone. Satisfied, he passed the last few minutes in the lee of a holly tree, gazing out across the road and listening to the rising wind. It was going to be a wild and noisy night by the sound of it, though there was still no sign of rain. Then, just before four, he stepped out boldly from the wood, crossed the road, and walked quickly along the grassy path to the notice board.

He looked carefully around again, but there was no one in sight. From an inner pocket he drew the little package of blank paper he'd prepared, and lifted the board and placed the package underneath it. Then he straightened up, took a final glance round, and at once set off back in the direction from which he'd come. When he reached the road he turned left along it, as though he intended to walk home. He had a few moments of uneasiness, because of the outside chance that someone who knew him might drive by, but the risk

soon passed. At the point where the jaws of the forest closed in on the road he suddenly swung off along a track through the wood. One minute he'd been going briskly and openly about his business; the next, he had vanished into the part of the forest that he'd reconnoitered. For the moment he was safe. From now on, though, it was impossible to be too cautious. He must see without being seen—everything depended on that. Slowly he worked his way back along the edge of the wood until he came once more to the holly tree. Just beyond it he found a sheltered hollow that gave him an unobstructed view across to the notice board and he sat down there to consider his next step.

He had been assuming all along that Parker was already somewhere in the vicinity, and the more he thought about it the more likely it seemed. The man had shown himself to be imitative; he was certain to have remembered Gill's experience in this same place and he'd want to make sure from the beginning that no trap was being laid for him. He'd also want to satisfy himself that Mallory had actually visited the notice board, because otherwise he'd be sticking his neck out for nothing. The chances were great, therefore, that he was already established in his hideout, wherever it might be, and that at this moment he was watching the Heath.

If so, what would he do next? It was perfectly true that he could choose his own time to pick up the money, but now that Mallory thought about it again he could see that the temptation to make an early move would be almost irresistible. For one thing, Parker would scarcely relish the idea of leaving two hundred pounds—or what he believed to be two hundred pounds—lying around on the Heath for a moment longer than was necessary. People did occasionally use that path, and someone might turn the notice board over. Also—and this, too, Mallory had overlooked—by leaving the scene of action and returning later he would be throwing away all the fruits of his initial care, because he couldn't be sure that the police wouldn't move in after he'd moved out. On the whole, it seemed more than likely that he'd seize his first opportunity, which would come when night fell.

Looking at the situation from Parker's point of view, Mallory suddenly realized that the opportunity would be brief. If there were any delay after dark, someone else—the police, or he himself—could approach the notice board unobserved and lie in wait there. Parker would need to get in first, while he was still sure that the Heath was

empty; and the few minutes after twilight would be his best chance. A quick dash at dusk—and a final disappearance!

Mallory frowned. It was all terribly speculative—yet he'd got to build his own plans on something. If his reasoning was sound, his own course of action was clear. He must choose that same moment, the first of the dark, and get quickly to the notice board so that he'd be able to intercept Parker. It would need almost split-second timing.

Once he had that idea in mind, Mallory realized that he wasn't very strategically placed. It was twice as far from the holly tree to the notice board as from the edge of Oakham New Inclosure to the notice board. He'd be far better off if he could work his way round the Heath and take up a new position directly opposite where he was now.

For a moment or two he debated which would be the safer way to make the half circuit of the oval space. He wanted to keep the notice board in sight, just in case Parker should be rash enough to make a move in daylight, and that ruled out a wide detour. To the right of the Heath there was a belt of tall Scots, with hundreds of seedling pines scattered around them. The young trees would give good cover—but possibly to Parker, as well as to himself. Parker might be concealed there now. To the left, the forest fringe was mostly deciduous—ancient oaks and beeches, with little undergrowth. Parker would almost certainly have avoided those.

Mallory picked up his raincoat and set off slowly along the edge of the wood, keeping well inside the tree line. His progress before had been cautious—now it was barely perceptible. He took each step with infinite care, stopping repeatedly to gaze around him, studying the lie of the land and the position of any cover, advancing mainly in the gusts of wind, when all other sound was drowned. There were a few seconds of unavoidable exposure as he darted across the road. After that he was in the high forest and could take full advantage of the huge gnarled trunks as he made his way from glade to glade. In a little over an hour he had worked round without incident to the belt of trees that stood in front of Oakham New Inclosure.

Now there was nothing to do but wait. There was no place that offered complete concealment, but he found a fairly good spot on the sheltered side of a cypress that gave him a clear view across to the notice board. Parker, he imagined, was unlikely to make any move now until the final dash, so he felt reasonably safe from discovery.

The quarter hours passed slowly. Mallory had plenty to occupy his thoughts, but little that he could bear to dwell on. The prize of success in this extraordinary undertaking seemed altogether too remote and uncertain to offer any comfort. For a while he tried to concentrate on the possible circumstances of an encounter with Parker and to plan some action, but the pictures that leaped to his mind were such that it seemed better to face the reality if and when he had to. As time went on, with nothing happening to break the monotony of his vigil, he began to have new doubts about the whole situation. Perhaps he was deluding himself—Parker might be miles away. He might have decided to wait, after all—to wait a week, perhaps, as he'd said, before he came along! Crouching there under the cypress, watching the wildly tossing branches of the big trees and listening to the wind hissing in the pine needles, Mallory found it increasingly hard to believe that anything would come of his enterprise. It had been all very well to talk glibly of limitless patience, but how long in fact could he stay here? A night, a day, another night? Not more, with little food and drink, no sleep, and a lot of exposure. There'd be mental limits, too, if no one came and nothing happened and hope faded. He sat on in cold depression, his mind shrinking from the prospect.

When he next allowed himself to glance at his watch, it was seven o'clock. The sky was a forbidding gray—dusk would come early tonight. It couldn't come too early for him! At least there'd be the possibility of action then, to break the tedium of the wait—and however slight the possibility, he had to be prepared for it.

As the light began to fail, and the risk of being seen grew less, it seemed worth while to try to improve his position. Fifty yards away there was a wedge-shaped group of Corsican pines that jutted out onto the Heath and offered an appreciably better jumping-off place for the notice board. He got stiffly to his feet, easing his cramped muscles, and started to move slowly in among the pines. When, after ten minutes, he emerged at the far side of them, he was barely a stone's throw from the board. A clump of ancient Douglas firs behind the Corsicans cut off what little light there was left, so that he stood in deep protective shadow.

With his back to trunk, he waited tensely for darkness to fall over the Heath. In a very few minutes, now, it would be possible for a man to cross to the board without being visible from the wood. This, by Mallory's reckoning, was zero hour. But the seconds slipped by,

and still he could hear nothing but the wind, and the surge of expectancy that momentarily had lifted his spirits slowly ebbed away. He *had* miscalculated, and Parker wouldn't come. He felt a sudden disgust at his own ineffectualness, at the unreality of the part he was trying to play. Here he was, behaving as though he were living through some tremendous experience, some great adventure, bracing himself for nameless ordeals, and nothing existed except in this own imagination. . . . Still, he couldn't give up now. In a few minutes, he decided, he would himself cross to the notice board—at least he would have a less noisy night out there among the gorse bushes than under the trees. . . .

At that moment he heard a sound behind him. It was a peculiar, scrabbling, unidentifiable sound that seemed to come from one of the big Douglas firs. As he listened, very taut and still, it was followed by an unmistakably human grunt. Someone was up in one of the trees!

In that second of revelation, many things became plain to Mallory. It seemed incredible that he had never thought of it before, but of course there was no better observation post than a tree. *That* was how Gill had been able to watch the maneuvers of the police without detection—he'd climbed to a secure lookout before their arrival, and stayed till after their departure. And Parker had copied him. Mallory knew these Douglasses well—they were over a hundred years old, more than a hundred feet high. Their tops were thick, giving good cover from the ground and adequate views through the upper foliage. And they had lots of dead branches, sprouting out of their trunks in all directions at intervals of a foot or two, from the ground almost to the tops. The perfect ladder!

Scarcely able to breathe for the fierce hammering of his heart, he drew the billhook from his coat pocket and took a firm grip on the handle. Then, abandoning caution, he made his way quickly to the tree from which the sound had come and stood beneath it, listening. The darkness was intense, now, and he could see nothing, but as the wind died for a moment he heard the peculiar noise again, and identified it. It was the noise of a careful descent—of a foot feeling for the next branch, scraping on the rough bark.

He pointed his torch like a gun, and waited. The sounds were nearer, much nearer. He held his fire till he judged that the man was within range. Then he pressed the button.

There was a hoarse yell from the tree—of fear or rage or both.

Thirty feet up, the white, distorted face of Parker was held in the beam.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

For a moment, neither of them said anything. Parker, shielding his eyes from the glare of the torch, tried in vain to make out whether the man on the ground had anyone with him. Mallory, better placed behind the light, gazed in consternation at the man in the tree, noting the massive shoulders, the huge thighs, the coarse brutality of the features. He had scarcely expected that the second blackmailer would turn out to be as puny as the first, but he certainly hadn't reckoned on a gorilla. He could have taken a bigger man than Gill by the scruff of his neck and marched him off—but not Parker. He couldn't even be sure that he'd be able to hold his own with Parker. It was a staggering bit of good fortune that he'd happened to find him in a position of such disadvantage, and he saw at once that the only hope lay in keeping him there until help came.

Parker was the first to speak. "You Mallory?" he shouted, above the wind.

"Yes—I'm Mallory."

"You on your own?"

Mallory hesitated—but only for a second. It seemed pointless to deny something that must soon become obvious. "Yes," he said.

Parker's teeth showed in a grin. "I'm coming down."

Immediately he began to lower himself from branch to branch, a clumsy, grotesque figure, heavy with menace. He had a bulging haversack slung over his shoulder and once it slipped forward so that he had to stop and shift it out of the way. But the respite was brief, and he soon came on again.

Mallory waited until the distance between them had narrowed by a dozen feet or so. Then he called in a sharp, peremptory voice, "Stay where you are, Parker! I don't want to have to use this on you." For a second, he flashed the torch beam on the bright metal of the billhook.

Parker stopped, and stared at it. "You wouldn't use that," he said contemptuously.

"That's where you're wrong." Mallory wiped his moist palm on his jacket and took a fresh grip on the handle and moved closer to the tree. On the side where he was standing most of the lower branches had snapped off short, leaving room to maneuver. "Listen, Parker! I'm as desperate as you are. You'd better believe that. If you put a foot within reach of me I swear to God you'll never walk again—not even to the gallows!"

"Big talk!" Parker sneered—but he didn't come down any further. He was astride a thick branch, fifteen feet up, his corduroy-covered legs dangling. "Just what do you think you're going to do, eh?"

"I'm going to wait here until someone comes."

"You're going to wait a long time."

"I'm prepared to wait a long time—if necessary. But perhaps I shan't have to." Mallory tucked the billhook under his arm and cupped his hands and sent a ringing shout for help toward the road.

"You think anyone'll hear you in this wind?"

Mallory shouted again.

"You're nuts!" called Parker—but now there was uneasiness in his voice. Suddenly he began to move down again, as though he'd decided to ignore the threat below. Mallory raised the billhook. The thought of slashing at a man's leg was unbearably horrible—but he would do it. He would *have* to do it. "I've warned you, Parker!" he cried.

Parker stopped once more. He was ten feet from the ground—still well out of reach. "Look, Mallory," he said, "why don't you and me do a deal?"

"A deal? What language should we use?"

"Ah, cut out the funny stuff—you sound like Gill. I haven't done you any harm, have I? I wouldn't of told that girl of yours, anyway. That was just a bluff to get a bit of dough."

"It was a bluff that's going to cost you your life."

"Don't talk so daft! You don't think you can keep me up here, do you? I'm just deciding the best way to get at you, that's all."

Mallory thumbed the edge of the billhook. "I shall be ready for you."

"Yeah? You must like suffering. Now look, Mallory, all I want's

that couple of hundred quid and a chance to clear off. I tell you it's all fixed bar the dough—I know the boat I'll take. Put that thing down and step back and I won't touch you—cross me heart I won't!"

"Considering you murdered Gill, I don't think I'll risk it."

"I never did anything to Gill."

"You can tell that to the police."

There was a little pause, as a gust of wind shook the forest. Then Parker said, "Why bring them into it? What's Gill to you, anyway? He wasn't a pal of yours, was he? I can tell you this—it was his idea about the girl. I wouldn't ever have thought of it, so help me. He was a real nasty bit of work—no loss to anyone. Why should you worry?"

"You're wasting your breath," said Mallory.

Parker scowled. After a moment he shifted his position so that his face was turned away from the light, and a long, unnerving silence followed. Mallory wondered what he was plotting and stepped back a little, keeping the torch beam on him all the time. The man didn't look as though he were about to jump, but ten feet wasn't very much. It wouldn't be safe to relax for a second—and the whole night stretched ahead! At the thought, Mallory sent another loud halloo toward the road. But the wind was blowing the wrong way, and the sound was whisked off into the forest. Parker was right—short of a miracle, there'd be no help from outside. Not before morning, anyway.

Time passed, and the man in the tree still made no move, and after a while Mallory began to feel a little easier in his mind. Providing he kept the billhook ready and remained alert, he didn't see how Parker could possibly risk coming down any further. It was true the fellow didn't look the sort to stay quietly in a half-open trap and wait to be taken, but he must see that the odds were hopelessly against him if he jumped. Anyway, by morning the wind would probably have dropped—people would be passing along the road to work—a keeper might come by. The outlook could have been much worse.

Presently Parker opened his haversack and took out some sandwiches and began to eat. His back was turned and his face wasn't visible, but the mere act seemed to indicate a disturbing unconcern. Food would have choked Mallory. . . . For ten or fifteen minutes Parker ate steadily, completely disregarding the man on the

ground, and when he'd finished he washed the meal down with a long swig of something from a bottle.

Suddenly he leaned over and said in a gloating tone, "Getting a bit dark, isn't it?"

With a shock of alarm, Mallory saw that the light from the torch was beginning to dim. The battery must be almost used up. He moved closer to the tree and said in as confident a tone as he could manage, "It won't help you, Parker. I've got cat's eyes in the dark."

"We'll see," said Parker. "I'm going to tear them out when I get at you. Why don't you go home while you're still in one piece?"

Mallory gazed around in desperation. The battery was failing rapidly. In a few minutes they would be in total darkness, and most of his advantage would be lost. Perhaps he could light a fire—it would be difficult in this wind, but he could try. There were plenty of fir cones and pine needles under foot, and crackling twigs. He had an old letter in his pocket that would do to start the blaze. He bent to gather a pile of tinder. He must be quick! The torch was almost useless now. . . .

At that moment Parker launched his attack. Something flew from his hand, struck Mallory's right wrist, and shattered itself on the steel of the hook. Almost at the same instant there was a thud as Parker dropped to the ground and rolled over, out of the way.

Mallory rushed toward the sound, switching the hook from his numbed right hand to his left. In his anxiety he misjudged the distance, and before he could strike there was a breath-taking collision of heavy bodies and the hook flew to the ground. Disarmed and half disabled, he drew back, hoping to avoid his adversary till the strength had returned to his wrist. But Parker came on and grappled with him and they fell together, both striking out wildly in the darkness.

They were too close for decisive blows. For a full minute they tore and battered at each other on the ground, grunting and gasping. Once Parker gave a bellow of pain as a shap protruding tree root jabbed into his side, but the ferocity of his attack didn't weaken. With only one good hand, Mallory found it more and more difficult to hold him off. Suddenly, as they twisted and writhed, Parker found his throat. Two huge hands clutched at it, two thumbs pressed deep into the gristle of his windpipe. Mallory was forced down until his head and shoulders were hard against the ground.

The whole weight of Parker pressed upon him. Gasping and choking, he clawed helplessly at the pine needles.

In that moment of terror, he knew he was going to die. His fingers tore at the ground for something—anything—that he could strike with. A stone, a piece of wood. They found sharp glass. His hand closed round it and he struck out blindly.

As the broken bottle neck drove into soft flesh, Parker gave a cry and his grip loosened. Mallory seized his chance and heaved with his legs and the great muscles of his back. Parker, thrown off balance, fell to the ground and rolled heavily over. He was back in seconds, sprawling on Mallory, his hands clawing—but feebly, now, without purpose. He seemed in convulsive agony. From his throat came a hideous gurgle. Warm blood spurted in a stream over Mallory—over his face, his hands, his clothes. It was too dark to see where the blow had landed, but he knew that Parker must be badly hurt to bleed like that. He thrust the sagging body from him and got up, swaying dizzily, and fumbled for matches. Then he saw the torch, still faintly glimmering, and grabbed it. Parker was lying face downward, and Mallory turned him over and dropped to his knees beside him and held the torch to his white, drained features. Almost at once he found the wound—a deep gash in the neck where the big artery had been severed. Parker was unconscious now, and there was nothing that Mallory could think of to do. The last of the blackmailer's lifeblood was steadily pumping away. In a few moments, it had stopped flowing altogether.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mallory struggled to his feet, turning away in revulsion from the ghastly object on the ground. A body-shaking nausea racked him, leaving him weak and trembling. He leaned against a tree branch, his clammy forehead pressed against his arms, his eyes closed. At that moment he felt no gratitude for survival—only horror and a deep self-loathing. His whole being cried out against what he had done. He hadn't wanted to kill Parker. It seemed like a last act

of malice, that the man should have died from one wild, undirected blow.

He stayed by the tree for some time. When at last he felt able to move he set off across the Heath mechanically without another glance at the body. His mind was dazed and almost incapable of thought. He was conscious only of shock and pain. As far as he could tell he had suffered no major injury, but the minor ones were bad enough. His throat hurt abominably, his body ached as though it had been beaten with rods, his wrist was still out of action, and his left hand was throbbing from a deep cut where the broken glass had jabbed into his palm.

He reached the end of the path and turned in the direction of home, head down against the buffeting wind. Every step was an effort, and twice he stumbled and fell as he lurched from side to side of the dark, deserted road. For a time it seemed as though he would never get to the fork. Then, at last, he saw the glow of the house lights ahead. Almost at the same moment, he remembered that the police car would be there. He'd have to tell the police everything now, of course—but he needed a rest first. Perhaps he could work his way round to the back of the house without attracting attention. . . . He took a cautious step or two and stopped again, abruptly. What was he thinking of? He couldn't possibly go straight in as he was. His appearance must be terrifying, and some of the children might be still up. He must warn Linda what to expect, and find out how the land lay. He turned along the road and staggered up to the telephone box at the Hurley junction.

The box was brightly lit and there was a rectangle of mirror over the receiver. As Mallory caught sight of his reflection, he felt thankful that he'd made the extra effort. He scarcely recognized himself. His jacket and shirt were saturated with Parker's blood, and blood had dried thickly on his neck and face and hair. Even his eyebrows were matted. He took his handkerchief and tried to clean up some of the mess but the task was hopeless—whatever he did, he would still look a hideous sight. In the end he gave it up and, with a tight feeling round his heart, dialed his home number.

He had to wait only a few seconds. Then he heard a click, and Linda's voice, "Linda Mallory here."

Mallory said, "Hullo, Lindy. It's me."

"Darling . . . ! What's happened?"

"I've got some dreadful news—I hardly know how to tell you. . . . I found him and—we fought and—Linda, he's dead!"

He heard her sharply indrawn breath, her whispered "*Peter!*"

"It was him or me. Listen, Lindy—I'm in a frightful mess. He—he bled a lot. I had to warn you."

"Oh, darling . . . ! Are you hurt?"

"Nothing to worry about, but I'm a terrifying sight. Is Anne in bed?"

"Yes—she's just gone up. Where are you?"

"At the box at the top of the hill."

Linda's voice became more urgent. "Peter, I must tell you—something's happened here."

"What do you mean?"

"Ames has been here—he only left about half an hour ago. He was furious with the men in the police car when he found you'd given them the slip. I told him it was only because you were sick of being followed and that you were seeing someone on business and would be back later, but I don't think he believed me. . . . Darling, they've *found* something—I don't know exactly what but I heard them talking about it and it's something to do with you—something important. They found it on the Heath."

Mallory gave a faint groan.

"It's made them even more suspicious than they were before. Ames asked me if he could look over the house and I said he could if he didn't disturb the children—I practically had to—and afterward he made me give him a complete description of what you were wearing when you went out, just as though he was going to start a hunt for you. Then they all rushed off—Ames and both the police cars."

"Well, they won't have to hunt for long . . . ! All right, Lindy, I'm ringing off now. I'll be home in ten minutes. Don't be scared when you see me." He hung up, and set off slowly back toward the house.

The few moments of enforced concentration at the phone had helped to clear his mind and for the first time that night he saw the utter hopelessness of the position he'd got into. It was so hopeless that, in his low state, it scarcely seemed to him worth while to struggle any more against the inevitable. The fact that the police

had found the remains of the stick would have been bad enough if the death of Gill had stood alone—but now there was this second death. There wasn't a chance they'd believe any part of his story after that. They'd say that to keep his secret, the secret that was a matter of life and death to him, he'd deliberately killed each man in turn. And with Parker dead, there was no way of proving that he hadn't. In the minds of any jury on earth, it would seem a clear case. He'd be found guilty of a double murder—and even blackmailers couldn't be murdered with impunity. He might, he thought, even be *hanged*. But all his senses were so blunted by fatigue and shock that at that moment he hardly cared what happened to him.

He reached the fork and turned into the home stretch. Linda, listening for his step on the gravel, had the door open as he approached it.

"Darling!" she said breathlessly, and took his arm and drew him quickly inside. For a moment she gazed at him under the lamp, controlling herself with an effort. "Oh, Peter!"

"It's all right, Lindy, really—it looks much worse than it is."

She turned away, white faced. "Come into the kitchen—I've got everything there."

He followed her through the hall and slumped down on the chair she'd placed ready for him.

"Here—drink this," she said, and held a cup of steaming coffee to his lips. It was strong and laced with brandy, and though he had difficulty in swallowing it he began almost at once to feel better.

"Linda—I never meant to kill him. . . ." he began.

She cut him short. "Don't try to talk yet—let me clean you up first."

He stripped off his bloodstained jacket and shirt and she set to work. She had everything ready—hot water and towels and a first aid kit—and for the next quarter of an hour she ministered to him with cool competence, washing the dark blood from his hair and face and hands, bathing his puffy features, tending the bruises on his neck, and binding up his cut hand. At first he let her work without interruption but presently he found it impossible to keep silent any longer and began to tell her, in painful, jerky sentences, all that had happened in the forest.

She listened to his story with anguished love and tenderness, sensing his bitter self-reproach.

"Try not to worry about it, Peter," she said at last. "It wasn't your fault—you couldn't have done anything else." She gave a last, matter-of-fact pat to the bandage and stood back, surveying him. "There, that's the best I can do for now. I don't know about the wrist. . . ."

"I'll be able to get it fixed at the station if necessary," Mallory said. "I think I'd better give Ames a ring right away—I may as well get it over."

"I suppose so," she said. "At least everything should be straightforward now, shouldn't it? I mean, they'll know that Parker killed Gill, and they're bound to realize that Parker's death was an accident?"

For a moment or two, Mallory didn't answer. Then he said, "It's better that we shouldn't deceive ourselves, Lindy—it's not going to work out like that." He told her about the stick, and the conclusions the police were bound to draw. "I was in a pretty desperate position before, but everything's far worse now. They'll have no doubt at all that I killed Gill, and killing Parker will just about finish me. They'll think I murdered them both."

"Peter!"

"I'm afraid it's true."

"I just don't believe it. You're worn out, darling, and heaven knows it's not surprising—you'll feel quite differently about everything when you've had some sleep. After all, you have got a perfectly good explanation for the stick, and they still can't prove anything about Gill, and if you tell your story from the beginning exactly as it happened there's no earthly reason why they shouldn't accept it. They must accept it—we'll have to make them."

"We'll try, of course," said Mallory, "but it's better to be prepared. The thing is, I did set out in secret to track the man down with a billhook in my pocket. That'll look pretty bad. I know that I didn't intend to use the thing unless I was absolutely forced to, and that it was only a precaution because I knew Parker was a murderer, and that all I wanted to do was arrest him and hand him over to the police. But *they'll* never believe that. They'll be certain I took it to kill him with."

"But you didn't use it, so they won't know you took it. You don't have to tell them."

"I left it there," he said.

"You left it!" She stared at him in horror. "Darling! Why?"

"I didn't think about it," he said wearily. "I couldn't think about anything. I just came away."

"But, Peter, it could make all the difference. If the police don't know about the billhook they'll realize just how much you were up against it, and that you simply had to use anything you could lay your hands on, and that what you did was in self-defense. . . . At least, there's a chance. . . . Peter, can't we get it back, while there's time?"

He didn't answer.

For a moment Linda regarded him anxiously. Then she said, "Look, darling, let me go—I can do it."

"No, no, you can't go—the place is a shambles."

"I won't mind, honestly I won't. . . ." She broke off, and her tone suddenly changed. "Peter, listen to me. We've got to put up a fight. I don't believe we're finished and I don't think you will tomorrow. We've done nothing wrong and we can't just give in. I'm going to get that hook."

Mallory stirred. "You might not be able to find the tree, and anyway I'm not sure where it fell. . . . No, I'll go." He got to his feet. "It was idiotic of me not to bring it back."

"I don't think you're up to it," she said.

"I'm all right now. I'll go in the car—it won't take me long."

She still looked doubtful. "What about your hands? Can you drive?"

"I'll manage—it's not far. Is there another torch?"

"There should be one upstairs—I'll go and look. . . ."

He changed quickly into the clean clothes she'd brought down for him. Then he went outside and slid his feet back into his gum boots. By the time she returned, he was ready.

He took the torch from her. "All right, Lindy," he said, "we'll make a fight for it. Don't worry about me—I'm perfectly all right. . . . See you in about half an hour."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

He drove at an easy pace, holding the wheel lightly with his damaged hand and relaxing against the seat. Linda's care had worked on him physically like a blood transfusion and though his body was a mass of aches he was no longer in a state of near-collapse. But his mind remained full of foreboding, and it was with grim determination rather than with hope that he parked the car among the gorse bushes and set off for the trees to retrieve the hook. In spite of what Linda had said, he could see no real likelihood that he would ever get out of this mess. The case against him was too strong, and it would be a miracle if the verdict didn't go against him. On any cool calculation of the odds, he hadn't a chance. . . .

Even if the miracle happened, life in the Mallory household would never be the same again. He'd have had to say publicly that he'd struck Parker with a jagged bottle and killed him, and Anne would have to know about that. Whatever explanation she was given, he couldn't believe that her attitude to him wouldn't change. He could foresee her reaction so clearly—incredulity, then shock, then an instinctive drawing away. She would listen to him, of course, she would want to understand, she was intelligent and reasonable enough to understand—with her mind. She would agree that if a criminal attacked you, you had to defend yourself, and that if he were killed it might not be your fault. But emotionally she would be repelled by what he'd done. A jagged bottle in the neck! The shadow of violence would always lie between them. . . .

But now he had reached the tree, and could think of nothing but finding the hook and getting away from the place as quickly as possible. He flashed the torch around, hoping it wouldn't be necessary to shift the body. The first thing he saw was his raincoat, which he'd thrown down at the moment of his meeting with Parker. He might as well take it now. He picked it up, and shone the torch over and beyond the dead man, and almost at once he spotted the hook. He went over to it and examined the blade. There was no blood on it, and he slipped it back into his coat pocket.

Before turning to leave, he took one last look round. As far as he

could see, there was nothing else that could possibly suggest an intention to kill on his part. How could there be, when in fact everything had happened accidentally . . . ? For that matter, he suddenly thought—and it gave him an odd feeling of surprise—there was nothing that pointed positively to himself as the man who'd killed Parker.

He stood frowning beside the tree. Was he, perhaps, being over-hasty in planning to tell the police everything? Naturally, they'd suspect him, as they'd suspected him over Gill—and much more so. But did he have to play into their hands by going to them and admitting the whole thing? Was he certain they could *prove* he'd been there?

He looked around again, more carefully—and almost immediately he realized that he'd been wrong in thinking there were no traces. The expert eye would find traces everywhere. There was the glass neck of the bottle—that was pretty sure to have his fingerprints on it. There were the marks of his gum boots on the blood-soaked ground—it wouldn't be hard for the police to identify those. And of course he wouldn't be able to account satisfactorily for the way he'd spent the afternoon and evening, when they questioned him. Besides, who else would have killed Parker? It would be madness to remain silent until the evidence accused him. Frank admission of the whole truth was surely his only chance.

Still, it was tempting. He could probably blur the footmarks so that the police wouldn't be able to identify them. He could find the bottle neck and wipe it clean of fingerprints. . . . No, that wouldn't help—if they found no prints they'd know it had been tampered with and when they saw the cut on his hand they'd know that he'd done the tampering, and why. . . . Sweat gathered on his face as he thought of the dangers, of the possible oversights, of his utter inexperience in these things. He'd never get away with it. It was lunacy even to consider it.

And yet he lingered. Suppose, he thought, he were to take the bottle neck away with him! The police would realize that some weapon had been removed, of course, but would that matter . . . ? Or perhaps there was something else around that might have served—something that didn't show fingerprints. A sharp piece of wood, for instance. He switched the torch on again and shone it on the ground. There were the cones and twigs that he had thought to use for a

fire, but he could see nothing that anyone could have snatched up and used as a weapon. His glance came to rest on a protruding hazel root near the body, a root still moist from the fountain of blood that had splashed everywhere, a root with a bayonet-like spike where the woodman's axe had severed the sapling . . .

He continued to stare at it for a while. Then his gaze lifted to the tree directly above it, and the tossing, windblown boughs. Slowly, the germ of a new, fantastic idea crept into his mind. Suppose the whole thing could be passed off as a *real* accident—an accident in which he himself had no part, at which he hadn't even been present!

He was suddenly shaking with excitement. It might be possible—already he thought he could see how it might be done. But it would be a fearful gamble. If he were found out, it would almost certainly be the end of him. Any faint hope there might be of making an effective plea of self-defense would be gone if it were discovered that he had deliberately set out to make the death look like an accident afterward. It wouldn't seem like the act of an innocent man. It would be taken as the callous, calculated act of a murderer, and he would forfeit any sympathy there might otherwise be for him.

But if it came off . . . ! Why, then he would have no direct connection with the death at all, and his whole position would be transformed. If the police accepted the death as an accident, they wouldn't even suspect him any longer of having killed Gill—not with Parker's existence proved. He would be safe and free again. Anne would never know about the fight, and it might even be possible after all to keep secret the facts *about* Anne; to achieve everything he had striven for. The prize, like the penalty, was tremendous.

He switched off the torch and stood quite still in the darkness, debating the most momentous issue of his life. By nature he was no gambler, but desperate straits seemed to call for desperate measures. He hated all duplicity, and a week ago the idea of deliberately setting out to deceive the police and hoodwink the law would have been unthinkable. Yet he was innocent of the things the law was going to hold against him, and surely he was entitled to fight for his liberty and happiness, and the happiness of his family, in whatever way he could? The means were repugnant, but at least he wouldn't be doing anyone else any harm.

Was he equal to the task? That was the thing. Could he carry out his plan without a single mistake? A week ago he would have

thought that unlikely, too—yet now he saw no reason why he shouldn't be a match for Ames. . . .

Abruptly he stopped debating, and began to rehearse in his mind the things that he must do—here in the forest, and when he got home, and later. Presently he set to work.

It was just before ten when he reached home for the second time. Linda greeted him with an anxious: "Did you get it, darling?"

He nodded, and drew the billhook from his pocket and put it back on the porch where he'd taken it from.

She looked at the haversack slung over his shoulder. "Where on earth did you get that?"

"It's Parker's—I brought some things back in it. . . . Any developments here?"

"No."

"Good! Listen, Lindy, I had an idea when I was out there. I'm doing something absolutely crazy, but I think it may work. I'll have to make a phone call straight away and then I'll tell you."

He dumped the haversack in the hall and went to the telephone and called County Police headquarters.

"This is Peter Mallory," he said, as the connection was made. "I've got to speak to Superintendent Ames right away—it's desperately urgent."

An unhurried voice said, "Hold on, sir."

Mallory waited. In a few seconds, Ames was on the phone.

"Mallory?" he said sharply.

"Yes, Superintendent. Listen, I've got news for you. Parker has just rung me up—the man you don't believe in. I've arranged to meet him in the forest at half past eleven, with some money."

CHAPTER TWENTY

There was a short silence. Mallory waited tensely, fearing an outburst of skepticism, a barrage of questions about where he had been all day, even a curt instruction to stay where he was till the police arrived.

Instead, Ames said quietly, "That's very interesting. Where's the meeting place?"

"Not far from where we waited for Gill. There are three big Douglas firs standing together, near the path from Oakham Heath to Oakham New Inclosure. . . ."

"I remember them."

"I'm to meet him beside the middle one."

There was another little pause. Then Ames said, "Where does he expect you to get money from at this time of night?"

"He isn't asking for much. My impression is that he's flat broke and desperate for a few pounds so that he can get away. He said I should bring what I'd got in the house."

"I see. . . . All right, I'll round up some men and we'll go straight along there and get into position. You keep the appointment, and we'll close in and arrest him while he's talking to you."

"There won't be any hitch this time, will there, Superintendent? I feel I'm taking a frightful chance. He's sure to be watching out, and he threatened diabolical things if I didn't come alone. . . . Also, his arrest's rather important to me after what's been happening lately!"

"We'll do our best," said Ames. "We'll get him—if he shows up. You just go along to the rendezvous and leave the rest to us."

"Right—I'll see you there," said Mallory, and rang off. Then he turned to Linda and told her in a few words of his plan, and the way he hoped it would work out.

She looked really frightened. "Darling! It *is* a risk."

"It seemed worth taking."

"Well, it's done now, but—oh, I hope you know what you're doing."

"Everything's all right so far."

"Yes, but suppose you've overlooked something. . . . Are you quite sure nobody could have seen you at any time?"

"I think it's most unlikely. I didn't pass anyone on the road, and I hid the car away, and there wasn't a soul on the Heath."

"What about that place? Aren't there any marks of a struggle?"

"I couldn't see any—and I looked very carefully. The ground was too hard."

"But afterward? If there was such a mess, your boots must have left marks. They'll know you were there!"

"I thought of that. But if I'm there again later tonight, and walk around a bit, they'll assume that any footprints were made then."

"Oh, yes, of course . . ." She frowned. "Peter, won't they find marks on *him*?"

"Nothing that necessarily points to a fight, I shouldn't think—he came off pretty lightly until the end, and after all they'll expect a few bruises. His clothes are filthy, but then they would be anyway—especially in this wind. There's lots of stuff blowing about—leaves and twigs and things."

She gave a little nod, and picked up the jangling haversack. In addition to the spent torch, there were several bits of broken glass inside it, one of them the bottle neck. The pouring end, which had caused the wound in Mallory's hand, was chipped and jagged. The other end was a sharp, thin spear. There was blood on the bottle, and blood on the haversack.

She looked at the things with revulsion, but her thoughts were practical.

"Did you gather up all the glass?" she asked.

"All I could see."

"Suppose they find some more pieces?"

"They won't find any large enough to have been used as a weapon."

"Perhaps not—but won't they wonder where the small pieces came from?"

"I shouldn't think so—picnickers are always scattering broken glass about."

"What if they decide the wooden spike couldn't have made the wound? It may be too big or too small or something."

"It's just about the same size as the bottle neck—pretty well the same shape, too. I don't see why they should have any doubts. Anyway, let's hope we're lucky."

She was very pale. "What are we going to do with all this stuff?"

"We'd better bury it—the haversack, and the glass, and all the clothes I was wearing as well."

"In the garden?"

"Among the rhododendrons, I should think."

"All right, I'll go and do it. You can't possibly dig a hole with those hands." She gathered up the things, and took the torch, and went out to the shed.

While she was away, Mallory made sure that nothing had been left around that might arouse suspicion. To a receptive mind, the smallest thing might be enough to suggest an earlier meeting with Parker and a hasty cleanup afterward—a stain on the wall, a streak of blood on a towel, a fragment of lint on the floor. But the place now looked perfectly normal—Linda, he saw, had been over everything in his absence, methodically clearing up. And if all went well, he told himself, the police wouldn't come. He sat down and began to undo the bandage on his hand.

Linda was back in about ten minutes, very warm and disheveled. "I think that's all right," she said. "I've left the ground quite tidy—no one's likely to realize it's been dug up unless they look very hard. . . ." She suddenly noticed the bandage on the table. "Why have you done that?"

"I thought a bit of plaster would be less conspicuous."

Slowly a look of consternation spread over her face. "Heavens, I'd forgotten about your appearance! How are you going to explain everything?"

"They're not likely to notice much in the dark."

"Perhaps not—but suppose they want you to go along to the station again?"

"They'll have a lot on their hands, and it'll be very late. I'm hoping if they've anything to ask me they'll leave it till tomorrow."

"And then what?"

"Ames knows I got my face bruised at the fire—he's already seen it. With luck, he'll merely think the marks have come out a bit more. I could have cut my hand there, too, though he probably won't notice that if I keep the bandage off. And he won't know about the wrist. Anyway, the numbness is going—I don't think it can be anything serious."

"I don't like it, Peter—I don't like it a bit. If he's suspicious . . ."

"If he's suspicious," said Mallory, "everything's going to be very difficult indeed—but provided all goes well, he won't be. He'll be concentrating on Parker's recent activities, not on me."

"God, I wish it were all over," she said.

It was just after a quarter past eleven when Mallory once more approached the wood. The wind had died away, quite suddenly,

and a light, cold drizzle had begun to fall. The darkness was more intense than ever, and his nerves were on edge. Though by now he knew every curve and contour of the path by heart, he was glad he had the torch to light the way. He used it freely until he drew near the Douglasses. Then he began to direct its beam with caution. When he was still some yards short of the spot where Parker lay, he stopped. It was important that the police should be the first to come upon the body.

He turned up his collar and drew his coat closely around him and sat down to wait. He wondered how long it would be before the Superintendent's patience was exhausted. There was no sign or sound from the police, but he remembered that it had been just the same on the night of the rendezvous with Gill, and he hadn't any doubt that they were somewhere close at hand, listening and watching. Any time, now, they would show themselves. He longed to get the encounter over. He had rehearsed with Linda the reactions he must show when they emerged frustrated, and when they found the body, but in his nervous state it was going to be hard to appear natural. There was no longer even a boisterous, distracting wind to cover his agitation. . . .

He shone the torch on his watch. Eleven thirty-five! Ames must surely be growing a bit restive by now? Perhaps he ought to seem a little more concerned himself. He got up and began to move around the spangled trees, flashing the torch on a bush here, along a track there, sometimes drawing near to the body but never quite near enough to bring it within range of the beam. . . .

Eleven fifty! And still no sign of Ames.

He began to feel anxious. Something might have happened that he didn't know about. He recalled Ames's strange behavior at the time of the phone call, his unexpected mildness and odd readiness to co-operate over Parker. Had that been deliberate? Were the police engaged in some cunning maneuver of their own? If they didn't show up soon, if the body weren't discovered that night, the whole plan would be thrown into confusion. . . .

At that moment a light flashed on in the undergrowth scarcely a dozen feet away from him.

He drew a long breath, and took a step toward it. "Is that you, Parker?" he called softly.

Figures emerged from the bushes behind a range of torches—three men—no, four. Mallory moved nearer to them, but nearer to the body as well. Ames approached.

"You don't seem to have much luck with your appointments, Mr. Mallory," he said grimly.

"I can't think what's happened. . . ."

There was a sudden ejaculation from one of the men in the background, and they both turned sharply. Ames swung his big torch like a searchlight and caught the body squarely in the beam.

"Hullo! What's this?" he exclaimed.

The four policemen converged quickly on the sprawling figure. Mallory went too, moving around behind them, trampling the ground, leaving the impression of his gum boots everywhere. That part of the plan, at least, had worked—he needn't worry any more about possible footmarks.

He craned forward, peering down at the white, smeared face. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"He's dead, all right," Ames said, over his shoulder.

"Do you suppose it's Parker?"

"Could be. He's an ugly-looking customer, whoever he is. . . ."

The policemen had become a tight, official circle, now, a ring of dark, broad backs round a pool of light, and Mallory felt excluded. He couldn't see what they were doing, and their grunts and mutterings were unintelligible to him. But presently they seemed to come to some decision. One of them sat back on his heels and said, "I don't think there's a doubt about it, sir. . . ."

"I agree with you," said Ames, and got up. "We don't need to look any further for Gill's murderer."

The pool of light had shifted, and Mallory was suddenly the center of it.

"What do you mean, Superintendent. . . ?"

"I'll tell you," said Ames. "The fact is, we had a bit of luck this afternoon when we were searching the inclosure. We found the spot where we think Gill was strangled. It was on the bank of a stream, and the ground was slightly moist—just right for taking prints. There were three marks—not footprints—three little depressions. We think one of them was made by the back of a man's head being forced hard against the ground, and another by his shoulder. The third was definitely the imprint of a knee. The murderer's knee."

Mallory waited, speechless.

"We photographed the imprint," Ames went on, "and enlarged it. It showed quite clearly that the cloth of the murderer's trousers had a tear at one of the knees." He took Mallory's arm and drew him toward the body and flashed his torch close to Parker's right knee. The corduroy trousers were caked with blood and dirt, but the tear was there, plainly visible.

For a moment there was no sound in the forest but the hiss and drip of rain. Then Mallory said, in a shaky voice, "I always knew he did it, of course—but is that enough proof?"

"If the tear isn't," said Ames, "the cloth will be. Cloth is like fingerprints—no two bits are exactly the same. And the pattern of the corduroy has come out very well in the enlargement."

"Yes—I see. . . . Then that's why you were searching my house, Superintendent? That's why you asked my wife what I was wearing?"

"That's right, sir. We had to make sure."

Mallory nodded. He understood now why Ames had been so conciliatory over the phone. It wasn't the silver plate that they'd found in the forest, after all—it was the print of the knee, exonerating him and pointing to someone else. They hadn't found the plate and they probably never would find it—they'd hardly go on searching at the pyre with the murder solved. Not that it mattered any more, one way or the other.

"Well, you've cleared up one thing," he said, "but now there's Parker. What on earth can have happened to him?"

"There's not much doubt how he died, if that's what you mean," said Ames. "There's a huge hole in his neck. Look!"

He shone his torch again, and Mallory gazed down.

"God, yes! But . . . what could have caused it?"

"It looks rather like a stab wound to me, but it's hard to say at this stage."

"Could he have tripped and fallen on something?"

Ames swiveled the torch, and for a moment the beam rested on the hazel spike. "I'd have thought he'd have thrown his hands out and saved himself. It would take a pretty heavy fall to make a wound like that."

Mallory hesitated. He'd intended to let the policeman form his own conclusions—but suppose the important one escaped him? Now that speculation had gone so far, the temptation to carry it a stage

further was irresistible. He looked up—and gave a sharp exclamation.

“Superintendent! I’ve had an idea. Is it possible that he was waiting for me up in the tree—and fell? That might have been where they hid, you know—Parker *and* Gill . . . ! That would account for your not seeing Gill that day.”

Ames gave him a curious stare. “Well, we’ll look into it,” he said impassively. “I’ll call and see you tomorrow, if I may, when I know a bit more about things.”

“Any time,” said Mallory.

He lingered a moment, but Ames had already begun to give instructions to his men and there seemed nothing more that he could usefully say. He called “Good night” in as confident a tone as he could manage, and turned away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It was nearly six o’clock on the following evening when Ames turned up at the house. Mallory had just driven in from Lyndhurst; Anne was finishing her tea in the kitchen; Linda had taken the boys onto the Heath for a game of French cricket.

As the police car swung into the drive, Mallory with difficulty resisted an impulse to rush to the door and get the verdict over. It was vital, he knew, that he should appear unperturbed at this interview, but his misgivings had grown overnight. It was true that, thanks to Parker’s proved guilt, Ames must have started his investigations in a favorable frame of mind. But Linda’s fears about Mallory’s physical condition had turned out to be well founded—he had wakened that morning almost voiceless and with angry weals at his throat and he had had to wear a scarf all day to hide them. Comment at the office hadn’t bothered him much, but if Ames was at all suspicious about what had happened in the forest, he might ask for the scarf to be taken off. And that, Mallory realized, would probably be the end.

Well, he’d soon know the worst now. He walked slowly to the door and opened it.

"Ah, it's you, Superintendent," he said huskily. "Come in." He turned and led the way into the sitting room. "Sorry about the voice—I'm afraid I caught a bit of a chill in the rain last night. . . . Have a chair, will you?"

For a moment they faced each other. Ames was staring at the bruises round Mallory's eyes. His expression was enigmatic. In that second or two that seemed like an eternity, Mallory had an absolute conviction that the game was up. With his cut hand thrust awkwardly into a pocket, his throat swathed in the scarf, his stiff right wrist and his marked face, he *felt* like a man who'd been beaten up in a fight. It must be obvious to anyone. He waited for the policeman's inevitable words—"No, thank you, sir, I prefer to stand." The stiff official attitude—the verdict of "Guilty!"

"Thank you, sir," said Ames, and sat down.

Mallory gave an almost inaudible sigh and dropped into the chair opposite. From the kitchen came the sound of plates being cleared away, and the voice of Anne, singing to herself.

"Well, Superintendent, what's the news?"

"We've found out what happened to Parker," said Ames.

"Yes?"

"You were quite right—he *was* up in that tree. There are marks on several of the boughs where his feet scraped the moss away."

"Really! So he *did* fall."

"No," said Ames quietly, "he didn't fall."

"Then what happened?"

"I think, Mr. Mallory, you can probably tell *me* that."

"I don't understand, Superintendent."

"You ought to. You were there—weren't you?"

Mallory became very still.

"You see," Ames went on, "we found a footmark of yours this morning—the mark of a gum boot on blood-soaked earth. It was similar to several other marks you left around last night—but this one was *under the body!*"

Mallory sat as though transfixed. Of course! He remembered now, now that it was too late. He'd turned the unconscious man over after the fight, to look for the wound, to see if there was anything he could do to help. And in moving Parker, he'd covered up the print of his own foot.

He hesitated—but not for long. A denial would be worse than

useless. He'd made his mistake, his fatal mistake, and his plan was in shreds. Ames knew there'd been a fight. The way he was looking now, at the bruises, at the scarf, showed that he knew. There was only one thing to be done.

"Yes, Superintendent," he said, in a voice scarcely above a whisper, "you're quite right. I *was* there. . . ."

Ames nodded, and waited.

"It all began with a telephone call from Parker. . . ." Mallory plunged into his story, giving the policeman a faithful account of everything that had happened during the previous twenty-four hours. He told of the encounter at the tree, the disabling blow on the wrist, the unequal fight, the deadly outcome. He showed his injuries—the livid marks on his throat, the cut on his left hand, the still slightly swollen wrist.

Ames examined them with interest, but without comment. Then he sat back in his chair again.

"Well, Mr. Mallory," he said at last, "I don't know that there's any reason why I should doubt your story. We know that Parker was a murderer. Naturally he would be desperate. He was also an unusually strong and dangerous man. Your injuries seem to confirm what you say. But since everything you did was in self-defense, it seems a pity that you thought it necessary to try to mislead me."

"I didn't know whether you'd believe me or not. I was in a pretty frightful mental state after what had happened. I thought you might decide that I'd killed him—intentionally."

"H'm! Well, I can set your mind at rest on that point, sir. The fact is, you didn't kill him at all!"

Mallory stared. "But I did."

"No, sir. The blow you struck landed in the fleshy part of Parker's right shoulder. We found the cut this morning. A clean cut, fairly deep and no doubt painful, but not lethal."

"But the wound in his neck . . . ?"

"That was caused by the hazel spike we looked at. You weren't so far from the truth after all! He must have rolled onto it."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain. When we probed the wound, we found a tiny piece of bark. It exactly fits a missing piece from the side of the hazel spike. There's no question about it."

A wave of thankfulness surged through Mallory. There was, perhaps, only a shade of difference between stabbing a man in self-defense and throwing him to the ground so that he happened to stab himself—but in feeling, there was a world of difference. For a few moments he sat in silence, trying to adjust his mind to the new situation.

Finally he said, "Then you—you really haven't anything against me?"

The flicker of a smile crossed Ames's face. "Possibly a slight feeling of resentment, Mr. Mallory, that you should think it so easy to hoodwink the police. Apart from that—nothing. It's absolutely clear from the evidence that Parker met a well-deserved but accidental end in the course of a fight which he began. You have nothing whatever to blame yourself for."

Again there was a little silence. Then Mallory said, "Superintendent, I gave you one reason why I tried to cover up what happened.

There was another. I thought that if my part in Parker's death weren't known, it might still be possible to keep the details of the blackmail business from becoming public property. Is there any chance of that now?"

"I don't know," said Ames gravely. "I'd say it would depend entirely on the coroner."

"The thing is, Superintendent—well, the fact is that the blackmail was never anything to do with me—not directly. The threat was a threat to the happiness of—of a third party." He hesitated. "Of—a child."

"A *child!*" Ames echoed.

"Yes."

"I see." Ames pondered. "That makes a great deal of difference, Mr. Mallory. In fact, I'd say it makes *all* the difference. Of course, the coroner would want to know the whole story. Would you be prepared to take him completely into your confidence?"

"Yes," said Mallory. "I have no choice now."

"Then I honestly don't think you've anything to worry about. I'm not saying it'll be easy, but a coroner can do pretty well what he likes, and if he's satisfied that it's in the public interest to keep certain things quiet, he can find a way. If you like I'll have a word with him first and explain the circumstances."

"I'd be most grateful. . . . As a matter of fact, Superintendent, I'm grateful for a lot of things. I owe a good deal to you. I was a fool not to trust you. I'm sorry."

"If it comes to that," said Ames, getting up, "there are things I'm sorry about, too. It would have saved us all a lot of worry if I'd realized where Gill was hiding that day." He held out his hand, smiling. "I'm afraid it was a case of not seeing the trees for the wood!"

Linda turned in at the gate just as Ames was driving away into the dusk. For a second she stood as though frozen, gazing after the car. Then she saw Mallory approaching and caught his reassuring wave. Telling the boys to go ahead, she walked slowly to meet him.

He took her arm and smiled at her. "It's all right, Lindy—it's all over. *Really* over, this time." In a few words, he told her what had happened.

"Oh, Peter!" She leaned heavily against him, her eyes closed, and for a moment he thought she had fainted. Then she took a deep shuddering breath and opened her eyes. "There just isn't anything to say," she murmured, and clung to him.

Mallory, too—now that the news was told—grew silent. He felt a measureless relief, but it was a negative relief, like that of a sick man freed from pain. There was release from fear, but nothing like elation or triumph. He had reached the end of the track, but he knew that his encounter with Gill and Parker would leave a deep, disfiguring scar upon his life. The memory of the brutal struggle in the forest would constantly return to haunt him.

He looked down at Linda. Her face had in it such tenderness and compassion that he felt she could read his mind. Still clasping her hand, drawing strength from the contact and certain of her understanding, he entered the house. From the sitting room came sounds of an amicable uproar, and with one accord they turned toward it. The children were all there. Teddy, with Anne's bulging satchel harnessed to his back, almost obscuring him, was pounding round the room being the Coronation Scot. Anne was pretending to chase him, enjoying the romp. She was laughing and her cheeks were flushed. She had never looked prettier. Richard, with an occasional admonition to "mind the rails," was working busily on the engine.

As Mallory stood watching them, a sense of peace came back to

him. He had preserved his united and carefree family whole; he had protected it, so that not even the shadow of Gill and Parker had touched its consciousness. If their happiness had been bought at a price, it was a price that he was glad to pay. They were good kids, they would grow up into decent, civilized people. . . . They would flourish—and the scar would fade.

With a loud cry of "Station!" Teddy puffed to a halt and released the satchel. Anne gathered it up and swept the hair from her eyes and prepared to go off to work. At the door she stopped. "Mummy, you won't forget about ironing my white frock, will you? I'll need it tomorrow."

"You always need something," said Linda.

"I need a new engine," said Richard accusingly. "And you did say. . . ." He broke off, with a speculative glance at his father.

Mallory grinned. "I'll talk to Mummy about it."

"Well, will you talk to Mummy about me, too, then?" said Teddy. "'Cos I need a fort an' some Life Guards."

"We'll see," said Mallory.

Anne exclaimed, "Good gracious, you are being rash! Have you come into a fortune or something?"

"Not exactly," said Mallory, "but I dare say we might run to a Life Guard or two."

"I wish I were a boy," said Anne. "They get everything."

"They don't," said Richard. "You've got a bike."

"Only because I ride to school, and it's practically falling to pieces. The brakes are a positive menace." She put on an injured air and added, without much conviction, "Nobody bothers about me."

Mallory glanced at Linda, and smiled.

"No," he said, "nobody bothers about you!"

DEATH WALKS ON CAT FEET

BY

D. B. OLSEN

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CHAPTER ONE

It was close to eleven o'clock of a hot, sunny morning, and traffic on Sunset Boulevard approached the saturation point, both in the number of vehicles jamming the pavement and the steam compressed by the tempers of the drivers. As the light changed at the corner of Sunset and Vine, a big Los Angeles Transit bus started up. At the same moment one of the women passengers emitted a scream, leaped from the seat, and ran to the rear door and attempted to pry it open. When this failed she beat on the glass and then worked on the bell cord. The driver was glaring into his rearview mirror at her, but she persisted.

"Sit down, lady!"

"I won't! Let me off this bus at once!"

"You'll get off at the next stop like anybody else!"

"I can't wait!"

He tried to ignore her hammering at the door, but she now began to let forth such shrieks of pain, rage, or terror—the driver couldn't tell which—that he suddenly swung into the curb and released the door mechanism. She literally fell out upon the sidewalk.

The bus's erratic behavior almost caused a collision at its rear. Two little old ladies in a new Buick sedan let out simultaneous gasps. The one driving put on the brakes. One ended flattened against the wheel, the other with her nose to the dashboard. "My stars and body!" cried the second, who was the taller and more angular of the two, and whose name was Jennifer.

The second sister, Miss Rachel Murdock, said something under her breath which Jennifer, because of all the honking around them, was unable to catch. It sounded like *damned stupid fool*, but Jennifer decided, in the moment of getting back into her seat, that it couldn't have been. It wasn't ladylike. Or rather, it was even unladylike for Rachel. She said, "Did you see that?"

"I'm still watching it," said Miss Rachel. "Look!"

The bus had pulled away with a roar from the traffic snarl in its wake. The woman who had burst from the door had picked herself

up, frantically jammed her belongings back into her purse, which had come open, and was now looking around as if seeking some quarry.

"It's not even a bus stop!" Jennifer cried.

"She was screaming in there. Couldn't you hear her?"

The car slid forward into the space vacated by the bus.

"What are you doing?"

"Parking."

"Now, Rachel——"

"Oh, it won't hurt to watch for a minute. She's looking for someone. Someone, probably, she saw on the street from inside the bus."

There now ensued a scene which caused Miss Jennifer to cry out and to blush for womanhood. The big blond woman from the bus let out a yelp, lifted the purse like a weapon, and took off. At the same moment a man down the block, who had been looking into a store window, turned around and seemed rooted by fright as she bore down upon him. When she was almost on him he looked about swiftly as if for cover and then seemed to nerve himself for action. He caught the hand holding the outstretched purse and swung the woman around violently. With a final shriek she went through the plate-glass store window. There was a great crash of glass. The man ran through a service station and a parking lot and was lost to sight.

"Oh, my goodness! She went through head over heels! You could see her unmentionables!" Jennifer panted.

"She probably cut her throat," said Miss Rachel, who was getting nimbly out of the car.

"Rachel! Get back into this car this instant! There's something not—not *delicate*, about this situation!"

Miss Rachel's eyes widened at Jennifer's choice of words, but she continued to move away. "They may need someone to apply a tourniquet, or to run for a doctor——" She left the excuse hanging and dashed down the block and into the store. It was a pet shop, now filled with a bedlam of howls, chirps, and splashings. The woman who had been thrown through the window lay amid a welter of glass and flopping goldfish. A cage of parakeets had toppled beside her and the birds were escaping one by one like blue arrows shot from a crossbow. Two skinny little men in green aprons were dashing about in the confusion, doing nothing useful so far as Miss Rachel could see.

She slammed the door on the remaining birds, pushed the cage aside, and bent above the woman on the floor. The big blond was conscious. Her eyes met Miss Rachel's in apparent bewilderment. "What happened?"

"You fell through the window." There were scratches on the woman's face, bare arms, and hands; but none seemed deep or serious. Her hair was wet, the flaring skirts lay soaked against her legs. Apparently the tanks she had overturned had been big ones. "Lie still until we can find out how seriously you've been hurt."

But the woman pushed herself into a sitting position. "I don't think I'm hurt at all. I feel a little dizzy. I guess I hit my head. It aches on top. Not bad, though." From the handbag she extracted some paper tissues and mopped at the scratches on her arms. "I guess I was lucky."

"Awfully lucky," Miss Rachel agreed.

The little men in the green aprons had started scooping the fish into a new tank. Miss Rachel picked up a few, tossed them in, found herself meeting the furious eyes of one of the proprietors. "Our lovely fish. The birds gone!" He had a voice like one of his own parrots and a face that reminded Miss Rachel instantly of a mule in miniature. He glared from Miss Rachel to the dazed blonde. "We'll demand payment for damages! She'll replace our plate glass and our stock, or we'll sue!"

"Aren't you worried as to how she is?"

"Not at all! Anyone stupid enough to fall through a plate-glass window deserves a knock on the noggin!"

"Well, she's not in condition to haggle about damages now," Miss Rachel argued. "Anyway, she isn't the villain of this piece. A man pushed her through your window."

"I didn't see any man," the other proprietor snapped. Miss Rachel saw that they were twins, two little mule-faced men amazingly alike in their green aprons. "She won't get off by making up a story that she was pushed!"

"My sister and I are witnesses," Miss Rachel said coolly. She turned to help the blond woman, who was getting to her feet though obviously quite wobbly. "If you decided to sue, we'll have no hesitation about coming to court and telling the truth. I wouldn't invest in a lawyer until I was sure of my facts if I were you."

Both little men were shaking with rage. They retired to the rear

of the shop to mutter together. The blond woman looked curiously at the wreckage on the floor. "Did I do that?"

"I guess you did."

"I can't understand how it happened."

"You were running full tilt at a man on the sidewalk," Miss Rachel reminded. "You had a hand out, in greeting I suppose, and he simply grabbed your wrist and swung. Your momentum carried you right on through the shop window. It was pretty noisy."

A strange look had come into the blond woman's face, a mixture of astonishment and revulsion, as if she were hearing a tale about two horrible characters she hoped never to meet. "It—it sounds dreadful. This . . . man. What did he do afterward?"

"Ran like a rabbit."

The woman shut her eyes as if at some painful thought. "Do you suppose many people saw us?"

"Well, more or less about everybody at Sunset and Vine. It's crowded now. I think the bus passengers were still looking back, too."

The woman was pale and haggard, much more so than she had been when Miss Rachel had entered. She was well over thirty, Miss Rachel decided. Close to forty, but well preserved, with a good figure, nice clothes, and skin which showed thorough and expensive care. "You see, I'm under court order to leave him alone. That's why I wondered——"

Miss Rachel noted that the two mule-faced little men were still in the rear of the store arguing, or consoling each other. Birds fluttered overhead, pups yapped, and some monkeys squealed in their cage. "I can't see why you're worried about what *you* did. After all, he——"

The blonde made a silencing gesture. "Sorry. I know you mean to be helpful. But take my word for it, I had a narrow escape. I could have been arrested, taken to jail, fined. Or worse, sentenced to serve time. I'm thankful it didn't happen."

"You're going to be stuck for damages to this shop unless you identify the man who threw you in here."

The woman swallowed and her eyes bugged out. She made a choking sound. Then she ran. She darted out through the door and her footsteps clattered for a moment or so and then there was noth-

ing. Miss Rachel and the two little men were left flat-footed in surprise.

It took several moments for the proprietors to recover and come forward. Then they minced toward Miss Rachel together, their movement and gestures so exactly alike—and somehow so ridiculous—that she couldn't repress a giggle. The two men chose to ignore this. One said to her, "What's wrong with that lady?"

"I think something scared her."

He bent forward, his long face solemn. "You don't suppose she had a concussion or something?"

"It's possible." Miss Rachel sensed something new in their manner. The rage was gone, had been replaced by a cautious politeness. "At any rate, she's able to walk and talk. I think she'll make it home."

They exchanged a glance. "Do you know her?"

"No, I don't."

"You spoke of her getting home——"

"She must have one somewhere."

"I see. Then you don't know her name or address?"

"I can't help you. She wasn't to blame for the damage, anyway."

"No, no, we've forgotten about that. We were just wondering if *we*—if somehow she could collect from *us*. Saying the window fell on her, or that we'd placed an obstruction that tripped her. You know. Chiselers rob business people that way all the time."

"I don't believe she has any such intention," Miss Rachel said. "Still, if you're worried, my offer applies to you as well. I'm willing to go into court and tell exactly what happened."

"Would you?" Their eyes met again, sidewise; and Miss Rachel wondered if they expected her to bolt as the blonde had. "You'd leave your name and address with us, in case there is any trouble over this accident?"

"Certainly."

One of the little men scurried over to a counter, from behind which he produced a brown-backed notebook and a pen on a chain. Miss Rachel dictated her name, home address, and phone number and saw the painstaking scribble with which they were entered in the book.

They thanked her humbly and profusely; she bought a can of cat food; they offered to show her some Siamese kittens and seemed

elated at her promise to come back some other time to see them. Driving home with Jennifer, she interrupted a discussion of what to do about the aphids on the nasturtiums with a remark: "Now we'll never know what it was all about, or how it ended."

"What?" said Jennifer, though she very well knew.

"The woman who fell through the window."

"Fiddle-faddle. One thing's certain," Jennifer sniffed. "The stuff she wears for undergarments wouldn't keep a flea warm."

The car swung from Sunset into Parchly Heights Boulevard, began to climb toward the low green hills where old homes sat amid flowers and lawns. "She wanted to kill that man on the sidewalk. She might really have done it, too—that purse had a lot of stuff in it, and she's a big, powerful woman. She could have broken his neck. I wonder why she tried?"

"I've heard of these bold females," Jennifer replied harshly. "They'll do anything, go to any limits, to get a man." Her tone implied she'd never needed one.

"Well, it's possible an old love affair is at the bottom of it. But I doubt it somehow. She was possessed with hatred and he was mortally afraid of her. There was no sign of affection. Even old affection."

"In that little moment, Rachel, how could you——"

"You had time to enumerate her underwear. At first I thought I had no impression whatever of him, that I'd been watching *her*. But all at once I find I have the most distinct idea of how he looked. He's small and dark, younger than she is. There's something broken, miscast, about his face, as if he'd been in a bad wreck, or had been a prizefighter for some years."

"Oh, now, really——"

"And when he saw her he wasn't a bit surprised. He was scared, he was literally petrified with fear. But it was a *remembered* kind of fear, if you know what I mean."

Miss Jennifer refused to state whether she knew what it meant or not. She began to gather parcels together, tied her bonnet, smoothed the black knitted gloves across her knuckles. "Kindly watch that dip at the next corner. It's getting worse. Or you're hitting it faster all the time, I'm not sure which. When the springs go, you'll know I'm telling the truth."

Miss Rachel obediently slowed, crossed the dip at a snail's pace. She turned into their drive, climbed steeply from the street, and parked before the garage. A big black cat sat on the side porch, waiting. As they walked from the car, the cat managed to convey, in a few low meows and tail switchings, that she'd been hungry and lonesome for hours, and that only the fact that she was an exceptionally well-mannered cat kept her from taking after them with her claws. It was an act, and they knew it, but Jennifer fussed and, once inside, rushed for the refrigerator.

The cat picked at the liver, had to be stroked and cajoled, given milk—the milk had to be warmed—and finally be allowed to settle in Jennifer's lap. Seeing Jennifer immobilized in the parlor, Miss Rachel headed for the extension phone in the hall upstairs. She dialed the number of Mr. Simpkins, their attorney. He was long retired—he must be well over ninety by now, Miss Rachel thought—but he still attended to the affairs of a few old and untroublesome clients. He'd been their father's lawyer and he still apparently thought of the two as the girls of his banker friend.

He had a croupy voice and a cough drop usually rattled an accompaniment to his speech. "Who? Rachel? Oh, and how are you, my dear? How is your sister? And the cat?"

"Jennifer is a long-suffering idiot and the cat is spoiled," she told him. "I have a question. When people are commanded by the court to leave other people alone, isn't a record made of it somewhere?"

"Naturally there is a record."

"Where could I find it?"

"I haven't any idea." His tone reminded her that he had been a corporation lawyer and that in his practice he had not dealt with people who had to be ordered to keep away from others. "My best suggestion would be that you consult the attorney who filed the action."

"Oh, I don't know who he is. I don't even know who *she* is." Briefly she outlined the happenings at the pet shop. "You see, I'm curious. She didn't seem the type of woman you'd have to order to leave a man alone."

"I suppose that the police department would have a record of the complaint," he said vaguely. "You'd have to know the names, though. May I speak a word of advice? Leave it alone, Rachel."

"It seems I'll have to, doesn't it?"

He waited, trying to phrase what he had to say tactfully. "In such affairs, the meddling innocent is usually the one to be hurt. I agree with Jennifer. There is an unsavoriness there."

"I'm so curious!"

"Yes, Rachel—you always were." He was too kind to say so, but he must be remembering the time when Miss Rachel, as a child, had experimented with his top hat to see if an egg broken into it would really produce a white rabbit. The magician at Jennifer's birthday party had made it seem so easy. "Just this once, listen to an old friend."

"Very well, then." It was the docile tone with which she had always reassured her bedeviled parents. Mr. Simpkins asked to be remembered to Jennifer, they said good-by, and she hung up.

She sat for a moment or so beside the small stand on which the phone rested, trying to wash the persistent curiosity from her mind. It wouldn't budge. She was glad, then, for the temporary diversion when the phone rang. She picked it up again. A woman's voice breathed in her ear.

"Miss Rachel Murdock?"

"Speaking."

"This is the . . . the person you spoke to a little while ago at the pet store." The woman was panting, from effort or nervousness. "Do you understand?"

"The tall blonde?"

"Yes. If I may, I'd like to talk to you again. You are the Rachel Murdock who had her picture in the paper a month or so ago, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You're sort of a detective?"

"You flatter me."

"I need help and advice terribly. I don't know where to turn. He's outwitted me in every move I've made——"

"The man who threw you into the store?"

"I can't talk further now. May I come to your house?" The voice died to a whisper and Miss Rachel sensed that the other woman listened, not for her words, but for some danger in her surroundings.

"Let me meet you somewhere." Jennifer would blow a fuse if the woman appeared, so soon after the fracas on the sidewalk. "There's

a small café at the corner of Parchly Heights Boulevard and Sunset. I'll be there in half an hour."

The phone abruptly went dead in her hand.

CHAPTER TWO

The blond woman was already in a booth when Miss Rachel entered the café. She sat in a shadowy corner. She had made some hasty repairs to her hair and make-up, though she still seemed pale and nervous from the ordeal in the pet shop. As Miss Rachel walked her way, she fiddled nervously with the oversized handbag, burst into speech as soon as Miss Rachel sat down. "Please forgive me for being a nuisance. I can't express my gratitude for your coming here to listen to me. I'm at my wit's end."

"How did you learn my name?" Miss Rachel asked.

"Well . . . I kept thinking about what you'd said, that I might be prosecuted for damages unless I revealed who that man was, so I finally nerved myself to return to the pet shop. I talked to those two dreadful little men. They didn't seem as stubborn as before. I told them they ought to be willing to testify that *he* had tried to kill me. Oh, that made them very excited! They declared up and down that they'd seen nothing before I had catapulted through the window. Then they gave me your name and phone number, and said I'd have to depend on you as a witness and that they were washing their hands of it all. When I heard your name, I knew why you had seemed familiar. Your picture was in the paper in connection with that murder in the Wilshire district."

"Yes. My sister still hasn't forgiven me the ghastly publicity, which is why we're here instead of in my home. What is your name?"

"I'm Ruth Rand." She waited as if the name ought to mean something and then added, "I'm a television actress. You know, character parts."

It added up, Miss Rachel thought. The woman had a professional gloss, and the hair, skin, and figure showed the care an actress would bestow on her person. "Have you been in Hollywood long?"

"I was on the stage in New York until a few years ago. My father and I came to the Coast in '51."

"And this man——"

"He married my niece." A look of grief shot through the blonde's eyes. "I introduced them. You see, I used to attend the races quite often and once at the track through mutual friends I met this——" She motioned as if no words were equal to what she thought of him. "He'd been a jockey. He'd had a bad spill and lost his nerve and then had become an exercise boy and general hanger-on. You wouldn't know it, but the tracks abound in characters like that. Hopeful kids and has-beens, like moths around a flame."

"Yes, I've heard as much."

"Well, my niece went to the track with me one day—Santa Anita, I think it was—and met Bax Bonnevain through me. And that was the beginning of the end. They were married in less than a month. They lived in a little house in Creek Canyon—you know, it's up above Hollywood, it branches off Laurel Canyon—and she supported them by teaching piano."

"How long ago was this?" Miss Rachel asked, trying to keep the narrative straight in her mind.

"Four years ago. They lived there for almost a year and she seemed happy. He spent his time at the tracks. I don't think he made anything at his betting. He might have done as well as to break even. At least they never showed any signs of dire poverty, and what she made would just about have kept them. Lila was such a beautiful girl and in her teens and early twenties had shown such promise. Everyone who knew her was sure that she'd become rich and famous, and marry marvelously."

"How old was she when she did marry?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Where were her parents?"

"Dead. Lila's father died when she was fourteen, and her mother—my sister Sheila—when she was just past twenty. She was grown by then, of course. She knew she had me and Dad to depend on. There was enough money in a trust fund for her to finish school and go on with dramatics and piano. Oh, Miss Murdock, she was so very, *very* talented. Almost too much so. Do you know what I mean? She could do almost everything well, and yet—not any *one* thing so well that she'd concentrate on it."

"I've known people like that."

"She painted portraits for a while. Then she taught piano. Meanwhile she was hoping for a chance to get into a Broadway production. And then it seemed, while she sort of drifted, she grew past that first youth when most of our opportunities show up. She followed Dad and me to the Coast and I could see she no longer had any hopes as an actress. Still, she could paint and she never lacked for piano students."

"She married, then, shortly after coming West?"

"Six months, more or less."

"You keep speaking of her in the past tense."

"I know she's dead." Now tears filled the blond woman's eyes and she turned her head, fighting for control. Miss Rachel waited. The café was almost empty. In the quiet she could hear the sobs choking Ruth Rand's throat. Finally, she went on: "They rented the house in Creek Canyon to another couple three years ago and drove east. He claimed that he had a chance to get a job as a trainer at some small eastern track. We heard once from Lila, a postcard mailed at Niagara Falls."

Ruth Rand searched in her purse for a handkerchief.

"Of course as time passed we worried, and we tried through friends of ours in the East to find some trace of them. I also got into the habit of driving up the canyon every few weeks and looking the place over. The tenants had let the yard go to pot. Everything looked dry and shriveled. Lila had had the same easy knack for gardening as for other things, and flowers just burst with bloom wherever she chose to put them."

Ruth Rand stopped talking for a moment and in her eyes Miss Rachel saw the dregs of bitter memory; all that she had hoped for the brilliant girl, the promise and talent so glittering, the ending somehow nothing but ashes.

"About a month ago I noticed that the house was empty. I went back two days later, and he was there. He told me that Lila had left him in Albany, New York, more than a year ago and that he hadn't heard from her since. I—I guess I sort of lost my head. It was such a bald, obvious lie. Lila would never have caused Dad and me such grief and bafflement, dropping from sight without a word. We had a terrible fight, and then I went to the police and demanded an investigation, and I—I accused him in front of them of murdering her."

"Why would he?"

The question agitated the blond woman. Her face turned quite pink. "Don't you see, sooner or later she'd realize what her life had come to? She'd find out what he *was*. She'd wake up to the truth that she was supporting this—this shoddy character and that he wasn't worth wiping her feet on."

Miss Rachel could tick off the names of quite a few, even among her limited acquaintanceship, who had resisted knowing the truth for a lifetime. But she didn't attempt to argue with the overwrought woman. "Are you sure that the card from Niagara Falls was written by your niece?"

"No. It was typewritten."

"The signature."

"Typed in. She *did* do that, when she was hurried."

"But he might have sent it."

"I suppose so." Bewilderment was growing in Miss Rand's eyes. "You—think that . . ."

"It's much too early to conclude anything," Miss Rachel said. "What other steps did you take to trace your niece?"

"We wired the police in Albany at once. There was no proof that Lila and Bax had been there when he said they had. No hotel registration, or anything. Niagara Falls—well, we knew that was hopeless before we tried. Then we filed a missing person report with the Los Angeles police. They went up to the house in the canyon and talked to him, and he told them the same thing, she'd deserted him in New York State. Apparently there isn't anything more the police can do."

Miss Rachel suspected that the police might be doing more than Miss Rand knew. "What about her personal belongings?"

"The police asked about them. I know she stored some of her things with a friend, but I don't know where, and I'm afraid to breathe a word of it to Bax because I don't think he knows either. Her paintings and her piano are gone, I know—they left only the minimum furnishings in the house, nothing they'd worry over. As for her clothes and jewelry, he must have them. Or has disposed of them."

"Tell me about this court order thing."

Ruth Rand drew a deep, quivering sigh. "Last week a man came to the house, introduced himself to Dad as a lawyer, and said he was

representing Bax and was getting a court order to keep me away from the house and to quit molesting him in any place whatsoever. When I got home from a job, Dad was terribly upset. That's why I lost my temper today, I guess—oh, it's all just more than I can stand!" She covered her eyes with her hands.

"What name did he give?"

"I don't know. Dad might remember."

"See if he does." Miss Rachel gave the blond woman a friendly pat on the hand. "Your problem, of course—the thing you wanted my advice about—is how to locate your missing niece?"

Surprisingly, Ruth Rand shook her head. "I just want you to prove he did away with Lila. We'll never find her remains. He's got her in a . . . a cellar somewhere, buried. . . ." Tears overwhelmed her and she put her head down to cover them.

"I don't think it's wise to go at any situation with a preconceived, fixed summary of it in our minds," Miss Rachel warned. "For instance, you might have gotten much more out of the husband if you had approached him without enmity, if you had abandoned for the time all your suspicions and hatred and had simply gone seeking information. Even what he *didn't* tell, in such instance, might have been valuable. Now you have no method of approach whatever."

"—I hired a private detective," Ruth admitted. "He didn't get anywhere. He followed Bax around, and said he shops here and there in the mornings, or visits people, and goes to the track every afternoon. He couldn't, or wouldn't, penetrate any deeper into Bax's activities."

"There may be nothing more to discover," Miss Rachel said. "Whether his wife left him as he says, or whether she rebelled and he killed her as you believe, the affair is finished. He's back here, he's resumed what must be his ordinary routine. I think you may have been wasting money on the detective."

"Yes—I feel that I was. That's why I dared to telephone you." Her teary eyes surveyed Miss Rachel's small figure, the smooth white hair under the brim of the little straw hat, the perky suit, the air of energy and curiosity. "No one would ever take you for anything but a modish little old grandmother."

"I never married."

The blond woman shook her head. "I'll bet you had plenty of chances."

Miss Rachel smiled. "Thank you."

"If you do help me, I want you to know I can stand a fairly stiff fee. I make good money, and Dad has some, too. He's anxious, of course, to find out what happened to his granddaughter."

"We'll discuss fees when we see what there is to be done. By the way, I've placed you now. You're the widow in that new police series. How is that going to turn out, by the way?"

"I'm getting murdered tomorrow," the blonde answered with a faint smile.

"Oh dear."

"All in the day's work. I'll have to practice screaming tonight."

"Neighbors won't mind?"

"We're in the foothills above Glendale. Fairly isolated. Perhaps I'd better take time now to write down my address and telephone number."

She put the information on the back of a personal card and handed it to Miss Rachel.

"Will you see what you can do?"

Miss Rachel nodded. "I think I shall." She looked curiously at the other. "You have some plan in mind as a beginning, I'm sure."

"It's past one now. He's at the track, or getting there. We can go up the canyon and I can show you the house. There's that court order, but I'll have to risk it."

They left the café. Ruth Rand suggested that they both ride in her car, since she knew the winding roads of the canyon. They drove west on Sunset, turned on Vine—the blond woman cast a brief, embarrassed glance toward the scene of her encounter that morning—then turned west again on Hollywood Boulevard, drove until they reached Laurel Canyon Drive. Though the day was warm, the tree-lined slopes of the canyon gave off a breath of woodsy coolness. They climbed the steep drive toward the summit, where Mulholland Drive crossed the ridge, but just before reaching Mulholland, Ruth Rand swung the car into a narrow defile. The one-lane road was hemmed in by giant eucalyptus, which grew out of a thick hedge of lantana and blue sage. It was beautiful, Miss Rachel thought. Beautiful and wild. The narrow cleft between the hillsides opened into a tiny canyon. She could see houses here and there, perched amid the greenery. None were large, and they wore a rustic

air, almost like vacation cottages. Ruth Rand pulled the car off the road into a pocket in the wild hedge.

"We'll leave the car here and walk. It isn't far. From this direction we can slip down into the backway." She turned on Miss Rachel a look of hopeful determination, and for the first time Miss Rachel found herself remembering Mr. Simpkins' warning: The innocent meddler is usually the one to be hurt. Wasn't Ruth Rand in that category? There was a peculiar innocence in her attitude about her niece—she'd obviously never thought of the girl except as a brilliant, lovable martyr. And there was no doubt—if the man she called Bax had a guilty conscience—that she was, from his point of view, a most obnoxious meddler.

"Will we be seen by the neighbors?" Miss Rachel wondered.

"Not on this little path." Ruth had ducked under some rampant honeysuckle, through a hole in a ragged wire fence, and was picking her way down the slope through dappled shadows. Miss Rachel followed. The air under the high old trees was dry and winy. It was very quiet here. Insects must be drowsing under the noonday heat; birds, too. All at once, in the middle of the almost nonexistent pathway, there appeared a cat.

He was a gray tom, with big jowls, tattered ears, a blind eye. At the sight of him, Ruth Rand gave a choked cry and hurried forward. "Oh, it's Lila's cat! Oh, Tom Boy, where've you been?" She squatted on her heels and caught the cat to her bosom, but he spat and bounded loose again. "He's forgotten me!"

The cat paused under some shrubbery some distance down the path and looked back at them. It was a more baleful glare than Miss Rachel could remember on any cat, even her own in Samantha's worst moods.

"I can't understand it!" Ruth Rand was exclaiming. "He used to be the dearest old pet! I've brought him fish and liver dozens of times, fed it to him, too!"

"It's been three years since you've seen him," Miss Rachel reminded, though, to herself, this didn't seem quite to account for the cat's wild animosity. Cats had pretty long memories when it came to fish and liver. "Or perhaps it isn't the same cat but just resembles the other one."

Ruth Rand looked at her doubtfully. "If it isn't Lila's cat, it's his

twin brother. I'd forgotten that blind eye, but I recall now how he got it. Bax was shooting at ground squirrels up here one day and got the cat instead. Or—that was the story. Actually I think he hated Tom Boy and injured him deliberately."

Ruth Rand took a step downhill; the cat hissed and sprang into the shrubs and disappeared. They went on cautiously and finally below them Miss Rachel saw a small house, a lattice-work arbor covered with dried vines above a bricked patio. She was struck at once by the look of abandonment. All of the vegetation which had been set into the slope above the bricked area, all of a row of hanging potted plants, the vines, some shrubs in containers, and geraniums in the slope below the house had been allowed to die of neglect.

Ruth Rand stood at the edge of the brick paving and wrung her hands. "You should have seen it when Lila was here. It was gorgeous. She had fuchsias in those hanging baskets, the most brilliant display I've ever seen outside a flower show. Those plants in tubs were camellias. The creeping lantana was blue and she had interplanted it with pink geraniums. The place was like a dream!"

Miss Rachel stepped over to a window and looked into the house. She saw a small service porch and a tiny, though modern, kitchen. It looked neat and spruce, in contrast to the decay outside. She heard a sudden exclamation from Miss Rand.

"Now I know why he came back! To sell the place!" She was pointing, and Miss Rachel saw a sign nailed to a stake, thrust into the middle of the dead lantana. They walked down, crunching the dry stalks under their shoes, to read the lettering which faced the road below. It was as Ruth had guessed. The sign said, FOR SALE, and gave an agent's phone number in Hollywood.

"Well, at least now I shall have a logical reason to come up here and go through the house," she told the blond woman. "The agent will be with me, of course, but I doubt if he knows any of the history of the house. I'll time it to arrive in the afternoon. Tomorrow."

Ruth Rand had rushed over to another window and was peering in. "He's taken out most of the furniture. Sold it, I'll bet." She flung around; there was desperate grief in her eyes. "Don't you see, when this is gone, the furniture sold and the house occupied by new owners, there won't be *anything* left of Lila? It'll be as if she'd never even been alive!" Her voice broke and she beat the vacant pane with a clenched fist.

"Don't despair," Miss Rachel said. "We're not beaten yet. You wait here. I'm going to have a word with some of the neighbors."

CHAPTER THREE

At the first two places where she inquired Miss Rachel found people who had moved in during recent months and who therefore had known only the tenants of the Bonnevain house. When she displayed curiosity about these tenants, they were described to her as a young athletic pair who spent their free time at Muscle Beach, doing handstands and other acrobatics. Their name was Elvore. Dick and Jessie. The girl had worked at a bank and the man sold records in a music shop in Hollywood. They were nice people, if slightly eccentric about exercise.

The third house sat high above the road and was reached by a flight of rustic stone steps. It was a small place but pleasantly located among the eucalyptus which filled the little canyon. Miss Rachel mounted the stairs to the porch and rang the bell. A woman in a white cotton shirt and blue shorts answered the door. She was about Miss Rachel's height, which put her below average, and she had a mane of black hair, which shone like water, green eyes, a trim figure. She was around thirty somewhere, probably looked younger with make-up on. "Hello," she said.

"I noticed the sign on the house down the road."

"Oh yes, the Bonnevain house."

"I won't have time to come out again with the agent this afternoon. I'm trying to find out a little about the place, to see if I'd want it. Do you have any idea of the price being asked?"

The woman opened the screen. "Come in. The owner left a card with me, giving some information, in case someone came looking without the agent. I can take you through, too, by the way."

"Oh. Fine," Miss Rachel said, somewhat surprised.

The room was large for the size of the house. The furniture was old, but it looked comfortable. Across the room by a big window which gave a view of the eucalyptus climbing the hill behind the house, sat a grand piano, and there was sheet music and music man-

uscript stacked and spilled on every available flat surface in the room.

"Do you compose?" Miss Rachel hazarded.

"I arrange," the girl said briefly. She walked to a little desk in the corner and came back with a square card in her hand. "Bax wrote it down for me. He wants nine thousand for the house. There's a quarter acre of land there, too, you see. City water, electricity, and everything like that, except gas. There's no gas line available in the canyon." She glanced up at Miss Rachel. "The electric range goes with the house, by the way. It's a nice one." Apparently she decided that Miss Rachel was really interested, for she asked her to sit down.

Miss Rachel sat on some music. The girl sat on the edge of a box-couch and went on reading. "One bedroom and a tiny den. You could use the den for a guest room, if that would be more suitable. Living and dining room are all together—about as big as this one." She glanced about her. "But no garage has ever been built there. You'd have to put one in if you wanted it."

"It's odd to find a place minus a garage these days," Miss Rachel said. "Don't they own a car?"

"Oh yes, but Bax never worried about keeping it in out of the weather. He just ran it under some trees. I used to tell him it got dripped on all night. But he didn't mind that either."

"Is the owner living there? Or . . . owners . . . perhaps a married couple?"

She had made her tone light and idly musing, but the girl looked at her sharply. "Mrs. Bonnevain isn't there now, no."

Miss Rachel smiled a little, looking mildly puzzled, and the girl went on: "They've separated. She's away."

How far away? Miss Rachel wondered silently. "There wouldn't be any difficulty getting her to sign the deed, I presume?"

"Oh, I'm sure not." The girl continued with information about the Bonnevain house. Miss Rachel interrupted to remark that the garden looked so dismal. The girl explained that tenants had neglected the place, and that it wouldn't take much to refurbish the grounds. "Everything grows like mad up here, shade plants best of all, though you couldn't kill *lantana* with a spade, of course, sun or shade—if I were you I'd start out with a lot of quick-growing an-

nuals, things like poppies and lupines. I believe if you'd water some of the ground cover, it might come back to life." She dangled a key on a string. "Would you like to go indoors and look around?"

Miss Rachel was tempted, but she remembered Ruth Rand. Ruth might see them coming and get out of sight. Or she might not. They could catch her unawares and things could become difficult. "I'm rather tired right now. I think I'll go back to town and come again tomorrow."

"Will you let me show you through?"

I think not, Miss Rachel thought. The girl was obviously a friend of sorts to Bax Bonnevain. She'd keep a close eye on anyone exploring the house. "It's a good idea," she said vaguely.

"If I sell it for him, Bax has promised me a commission," the girl put in with a smile. She had a lovely set of teeth, white and glistening. Miss Rachel noted the absence of a wedding ring. "My name is Carol Callahan. I'm in the phone book. Call me before you come up and I'll meet you at Bax's place."

Miss Rachel nodded and the girl took it for a promise.

Miss Rachel, rising, asked: "Will the owner be there tomorrow?"

"Mr. Bonnevain is busy afternoons."

"I see."

They walked toward the door. Beyond the screen, a cat walked into view and stared through the mesh at the room. It was the cat she and Ruth Rand had met on the path. "You have a pet," said Miss Rachel.

The girl was looking out at the animal somewhat oddly. "I guess I've inherited him. He was with the Bonnevains when they left. Now that Bax is back, he won't stay at home any more. He's just a tramp cat."

The cat gave a deep, lonely howl and the girl made a face.

"Awful noise! How do they get it so deep in their throats like that?"

"He's a baritone," Miss Rachel said, and the girl giggled. "I have a cat. She's a long-haired black, spoiled as sin." She wondered then if Jennifer was still sitting in the rocker, Samantha's prisoner. "Perhaps he's hungry."

"I often put out food. He won't let me watch him eat. He's so wild now. I don't know whether he's getting it or the squirrels are."

The cat glared at them and Miss Rachel thought then that he looked lost and frustrated, rather than angry. "Cats don't move well. They like to be settled. Perhaps that's what's wrong."

"But this canyon is his old home," the girl said. "He'd be familiar here, wouldn't he?"

"He's unhappy about something," Miss Rachel decided.

"I think he is, too," the girl agreed, something uneasy under her tone.

They went out on the porch, and the cat hissed at them and fled.

"Call me tomorrow!" Carol Callahan cried after her, and Miss Rachel nodded again and smiled as if agreeing. The girl went back into the house. The cat was off among the trees and when he saw Miss Rachel watching, he ran farther off until hidden in the shadows. Miss Rachel turned and went back down the canyon road and climbed to the Bonnevain house where Ruth waited. Ruth's eyes were watchful, her manner expectant.

"I seem to have run into a friend of Bax Bonnevain," Miss Rachel said.

Ruth sucked in a breath.

"Miss Callahan. She has the key to this house."

"She offered to show you through?"

"Yes, she did."

"What did she have to say about Lila?"

"Merely that she was away."

Ruth fanned the heat from her face with a handkerchief. "I never did trust that woman."

"Was she friendly to your niece?"

"Oh, on the surface it seemed as if they were good friends. They were in and out of each other's houses all day. They had a common interest in music, of course. Lila used to help Carol with her arrangements. I think really that Lila was better at it than Carol was. Carol had studio contacts, that was all. She's been married and divorced; never talks about her ex-husband. I used to suspect she was kind of sweet on Bax."

"And he with her?"

"Yes. Wasn't her manner the least bit guilty?"

"She had something on her mind," Miss Rachel said. "I doubt if it's a serious crime, or the covering of one. A problem of some sort has her jumpy."

Ruth leaned forward, her eyes pin-pointed with sudden anger. "You just *think* it's not serious! She's as guilty as Bax!"

They left the patio and started to climb the hill toward the car. "What other close friends had Lila Bonnevain?" Miss Rachel asked.

"She knew a few people in Laurel Canyon. Parents of her pupils, mostly."

"You said that she had stored her piano and her paintings with a friend."

Ruth turned a blank look at her. "Did I say that?"

"Yes, you did."

"Well, those things just disappeared at about the time Lila and Bax went East.

"Could she have left them with Miss Callahan?"

Ruth stumbled in the path. Her mouth made a tight line, her hands were clenched on the handle of her bag. "You looked around in there, didn't you? What did you see?"

They reached the car. Miss Rachel turned to face the tall woman, who refused to meet her eyes. "If I'm to help you in this, there has to be honesty between us. Why didn't you tell me that the purpose of our visit up here was for me to spy on Miss Callahan?"

Ruth put her back to the car as if guarding some last line of retreat. "You're a gentlewoman. If I told you the full extent of my suspicions, you'd call me a nasty-minded hysterical fool."

"Those are strong words for a gentlewoman. And I'm not the prude you think I am. I can't work in the dark, or rather, I won't."

Ruth seemed cornered by some quandary. Perhaps, as an actress, the playing of a part was more natural than frankness. Or perhaps, as Miss Rachel was beginning to suspect, she preferred a tool, a dupe, more than an intelligent friend. "Even my father, worried as he is—even he makes me shut up when I start on Bax and Carol."

"Do you want to tell me?"

Ruth measured her, and Miss Rachel got the impression that she felt she'd lost control of the situation. It had been Ruth's crusade and now it was turning into Miss Rachel's puzzle, and the big blonde resented it. She wanted the personal retribution and excitement; the rest was just work.

Ruth said finally, "Well . . . there are libel laws. If Bax has an

attorney working for him, I can't risk broadcasting all that I think."

Miss Rachel smiled slightly. "I see."

Indecision flickered in Ruth's glance. "You're not angry?"

"Not at all."

"What will you do about seeing the inside of the house?"

"Nothing."

She tried to cover her relief. "You're quitting?"

Miss Rachel nodded with animosity. "I'm going home." Ruth turned to open the car door for her. "I think you'll ask to see me again, Miss Rand. For that reason I'm going to tell you something about myself. I hate posturing and pretense. I like people who—though they keep up a polite show for the world—are at least honest with me about their motives."

Ruth let the door swing out. It caught Miss Rachel across the hip and she winced.

"When you come back to see me—if you do—I want you to give up pretending a terrific fondness for your niece. Perhaps you liked her somewhat, but you felt also that she was too stupid to see the truth of the situation she was in; and when we find stupidity in others, we can't help but despise them. You despised your niece for being blind about her unworthy husband; and then she went away and never came back, and what you feel now is *guilt*."

Ruth swayed toward the car, put her hands on the swinging door, rocked on her toes. "An ugly thing to say——"

"To yourself you'd dismissed her as beneath sympathy and now you think she is dead. So the guilt must be covered up by a tremendous show of energy and anger. Blame must be fixed upon others so you won't have time to think of how you treated her."

Ruth Rand said something under her breath, hurried around to the other side of the car, and leaped in behind the wheel. The motor turned over as she pressed the switch. Then she saw that she had forgotten to insert the key and had to rummage in her big purse. While she was doing this, Miss Rachel got into the seat and closed the door on her side.

Miss Jennifer had accused her sister of all sorts of reckless capers in driving, and a total lust for speed; but never in her career as a motorist had Miss Rachel ever approached the disregard for safety of that ride out of Creek Canyon, down Laurel Canyon Boulevard, and so to Hollywood. It was a roller coaster with trees. It was a

bobsled on wheels. A wind-splitter, a jackknife dive, and a stomach extractor.

"Good-by." This was all Ruth Rand said when she let Miss Rachel out beside the corner café.

"Until we meet again," Miss Rachel answered to the disappearing rear license plate.

At home, Jennifer had put on an apron and a dust cap and was taking down all the upstairs curtains to wash them. The cat was on the side porch, haughtily disgusted. When Miss Rachel went inside Samantha followed, twitching her tail and complaining of neglect. Jennifer leaned over the bannister in the upstairs hall, curtains in her arms. "Rachel! Where on earth have you been and what are you up to? Someone called here about a horse."

Miss Rachel paused with her bonnet in her hands. "Who?"

"A thoroughbred race horse named Forelady."

"I don't know any horses named Forelady!" Miss Rachel protested.

"Well, the number's there by the phone. Are you gambling now, Rachel?"

"Life is a gamble," Miss Rachel pointed out. She went into the front room, put down her hat and bag, and read the number written exclamation-size on the pad by the phone. Bax Bonnevain had been a jockey; he had met his missing wife at a race track; and now someone was offering a tip on a horse. The sequence held promise of something fascinating. She dialed. A man answered. He had a cultured, somewhat oily tone. "Harper speaking."

"My name is Rachel Murdock. Someone called with racing information."

"Oh . . . Miss Murdock! Glad you called back. This is the Hooded Groom. Are you familiar with our service? Of course you must be," he added hastily. "We had your check in the mail this morning. Our super-special for today runs in the fifth at Hollywood Park. Forelady. Do you understand?"

"I hope this animal goes at a good price," Miss Rachel told him. "I hate hot-dog horses."

"Oh . . . The tone suddenly flattened. "Of course, we have another service, entirely separate from our super-special."

"I thought you might have." A web seemed to be spinning on the other end of the wire.

"Our long-shot special costs a little more."

"How much?"

"Ten dollars. If the horse we give you doesn't win, you get the long-shot special free for the following day."

"That seems reasonable. Where do I mail my check?"

"Why . . . uh." He wasn't going to remind her, then, that she was supposed to have mailed him a check already, for Forelady, and therefore should know the address. "If you want to catch today's long shot, I suggest you drop by on the way to the track. It's going in a late race."

"Fine. Where are you?"

"We're on the corner of Sepulveda and Sunnydoon. You'll see our sign in the window."

"I'll be right down."

She put up the phone and glanced toward the door. Jennifer was there, trailing curtains, which the cat was getting ready to tear into. "Rachel, I smell a rat!"

"You smell a horse," Miss Rachel corrected. She picked up her hat and planted it on the smooth white pompadour, tucked in a stray lock, took the bag off the chair. "*I'm* the one who smells a rat."

Miss Jennifer's sharp eyes took on a disapproving gleam. "Don't you remember anything of what Father taught us through the years? He'd turn over in his grave if he——"

"Father was a banker. He didn't dare go near a track. There'd have been a run on the bank. Father'd have been killed in the crush."

"You're behaving very peculiarly today."

"Not I." She whisked out of the house, followed by Jennifer's prophecies of disaster.

CHAPTER FOUR

The corner of Sepulveda and Sunnydoon was on the fringe of a small business district in the southwest part of town, and as Mr. Harper had said, it was near Inglewood and the race track. She found a brown stucco building with four shops on its ground floor.

The front of one shop was completely curtained in expensive-looking green faille, and a sign in gilt on the glass said: *Harper Services*. Below, a card propped against the pane read: *The Hooded Groom. Enter.*

Miss Rachel didn't enter. She went back to the corner drugstore and bought an afternoon paper, turned to the sports section, folded it back to the page filled with racing information. Forelady was indeed running in the fifth. She'd been picked as a walkaway winner by practically every handicapper polled. She was a fast young filly, had placed in her last three starts against older and better horses than these, and this afternoon she was being ridden by the champ among jockeys. The only thing that should prevent her from winning was a broken leg. "If they say I sent a check for this, they really think I'm stupid."

At the bottom of the page were the advertisements of turf advisers. Among them was that of the Hooded Groom. The Hooded Groom was in possession of such highly secret information that his identity had to be guarded. If you rushed him some cash or a check, he'd split his secrets with you. You had to *know* to win.

Miss Rachel clucked in a way that reminded her unexpectedly of Jennifer. Then she stuck the paper back into the rack and returned to the curtained shop. She walked in. The place was fitted up nicely. There was a small waiting area with a rug and comfortable chairs, a mahogany railing, and two big desks with a lot of telephones.

The indirect lighting gleamed in the bald spot of the heavy man who rose from a desk to greet her. He was the only one in the place. "Miss Murdock?" He came to the railing and held out a hand. "Nice to meet you."

"You certainly give personal service, Mr. Harper."

His eyes flickered a little. "Of course during the morning this place is hopping. But this late in the day—well, you see it—" He motioned slowly and gracefully at the empty room. "Come in and sit down."

She sat opposite him at the desk.

"Forelady is running in the fifth, Miss Murdock, and I doubt if you could make it there by then. It's past three now. Post time is three-thirty. They may be running late, but probably not much." He leaned back and smiled.

She smiled back. "Forelady won't pay over three dollars to win,

two-forty to place, and two-ten to show," she said. "I wish her all the luck in the world, but I don't bet on something that just pays me enough to buy a hot dog."

He nodded affably. "I see you're an experienced bettor."

"I want a fifty-to-one shot and I'm willing to pay." She patted her handbag. "You see, I don't want this trash you peddle the public. I want something really good."

A flash of interest lit his eyes before he returned to whatever path he had laid out for himself. "Well, we'll see what we can do for you. As for today, our ten-dollar horse is going in the eighth. He should close at six to one or better. Do you want him?"

She appeared to debate with herself. "The traffic out of there after the eighth race is terrible." She watched him closely now. She was feeling for her lines.

It had been the right line, for Mr. Harper nodded energetically. "As a matter of fact, I'm going down there myself to bet on this horse. I'd be glad to offer you a ride." He hesitated, then added: Of course you don't know me from Adam, and you may think a turf adviser isn't the most reliable sort of businessman, but I'd like to assure you, Miss Murdock, that I'm as decent and respectable as your corner groceryman and that you needn't have any qualms about being seen with me."

"I'm sure that you're right," she agreed. There was indeed something likable about this rascal. She wouldn't have labeled it respectability. Probably he would draw the line at killing his mother. "If you're ready, I am. When do I pay you the ten dollars?"

He had risen. For a fat man he moved lightly. He took his hat from a cupboard. "I'll tell you what I'll do. It's not often we get a sweet little lady like you in here. I'm going to give you the ten-dollar horse. Just as a starter."

"You won't forget that other offer I made you?"

"Certainly not. I'll call you when we have something inside and really worth the trouble."

He ushered her out through an empty back room to a parking lot at the rear, and into a red Cadillac. He was very polite. He held her elbow at the steps and made sure that he didn't catch her skirt in the car door. He opened the ash tray for her in case she smoked. At the track, he paid her way in and bought programs.

It was useless, this late, to look for seats in the grandstand. They

stood on the mezzanine and watched the running of the sixth race. During the seventh race, Mr. Harper went away on a mysterious errand. Miss Rachel borrowed a racing form and studied the records of the horses in the eighth. Then she had a drink, a screwdriver, at one of the bars and talked to a woman who had bet Forelady to show and had made a profit of thirty cents.

She walked around after that and studied faces casually. She was looking for Bax Bonnevain but didn't see him. The redcoated bugler blew, and the horses came out on the track and paraded past the grandstand. Mr. Harper popped up suddenly by her elbow, all smiles; under the smiles, she thought, pretty nervous. He said, "All right, little lady. This is it. Blow your wad on It's Pouring."

"It's Pouring?" She searched her handbag. It's Pouring was a seven-year-old gray gelding who hadn't won a race in three years. "Here's twenty dollars. Bet it for me, will you?"

He patted her shoulder with affection. "Be right back. See you here——" He scurried out of sight toward the row of ticket windows. She waited until he was gone and must be in line, then ran to a different rank of sellers and bought some for herself.

The five-minute buzzer split the babble, and the announcer's voice warned of the time. Miss Rachel was standing straight and serene when Mr. Harper came back beaming. "May I buy you a drink?"

"After the race. I'm too excited now." She had to admit to herself that she *was* excited. Also that if Jennifer could see her now she'd die of a fit.

They moved over, to crowd in a little closer to the railing. The horses were going into the gate. There were two favorites in the race, at seven-to-two. It's Pouring was closing at twenty-two to one. The bell clanged and the gate opened, right before the grandstand since this was a long race, a mile and a sixteenth. It's Pouring was easy to keep track of, since he was a pale gray amid the darker horses. They all tore away together except for him. He seemed to be poking along. Mr. Harper made mock groans into her ear.

She patted his fat hand as though he were a child. "Don't worry. He's going to win." Mr. Harper stuttered and strangled on something, perhaps a lump in his throat for having touted such a sweet little old lady off on such a nag. "I had a strong hunch," she added.

The dark horses, all six of them, swept around the clubhouse turn

in a knot and spread themselves in the backstretch. It's Pouring was running a trifle better now. He still had the rear spot all to himself, but at least he had stopped loafing along. He even began to edge up a little, finally, nearly clipping a horse's heels to swing in close to the rail. And then, suddenly, he had passed two of the others.

"Oh, he'll never make it!" moaned Mr. Harper in a tone that promised he wouldn't.

"Yes, he will," said Miss Rachel. (If he doesn't, I'd better not go home.)

The horses pounded into the stretch turn, began to bunch again as the jockeys fought for favorable positions for the stretch run. It's Pouring seemed lost in the shuffle, briefly; but at the head of the stretch he was fourth. Mr. Harper's breath began to rattle in his throat and his eyes bugged out. Miss Rachel was screaming. She'd never enjoyed screaming so much.

The announcer's voice on the loud-speaker was lost in the roar. That frenzied yelling seemed to electrify the old gray gelding. He pounded on into second place and in the final eighth he pushed his big gray nose forward and held it there, beating out the favorite. The screams of the crowd rose to a vast crescendo and then died. The trailers swept past the finish line and the race was over. The day was over. Miss Rachel looked around for Mr. Harper. He was standing beside a post, leaning on it in fact, and his face was the color of the gray gelding's hide.

She kept an eye on him, but he made no move to hurry away. She stayed within sight of the tote board until the prices went up. It's Pouring had paid his followers forty-seven dollars for a two-dollar bet. She walked back to where Mr. Harper stood pale and trembling. "Well, those tickets you bought for me are worth four hundred and seventy dollars."

"How did you do it?" he croaked.

"As I told you. I had a hunch. I've gone by my hunches for years. I see no need to change just because I'm at a track."

"Nothing about that damned beetle——"

"He's a thoroughbred animal and doesn't deserve to be called a beetle. Of course I had a basis for my hunch. We kept carriage horses when I was a child, and I remember our groom saying that an old horse feels better on a hot day. His old bones loosen up. And that the longer he runs, the better he feels—within reason, of

course. It seemed to me that a mile and a sixteenth might give the gelding enough distance to prove himself." She paused and studied Mr. Harper's quivering features. "Aren't you going to give me my tickets so I can collect?"

He made several false starts before the words would come right for him. "When I got to the window . . . oh God, I'm ashamed to tell this . . . when I got right up to the ticket window it hit me, a feeling the horse might not do what we expected him to do——"

She waited a minute or so and then said softly, "You're a crook, Mr. Harper. You thought the horse would lose and that you'd be ahead the twenty dollars I'd given you to bet for me." Then she took the tickets *she* had bought out of her purse and spread them before his anguished eyes.

He fished the twenty from his wallet, mechanically handed it over. She tucked it from sight along with the fifty dollars in win tickets which she bought for herself. "Now I think we'll talk a bit. We'll discuss Mr. Bonnevain and why he set you on me. Probably he has seen others become so involved in betting that they neglected their regular affairs, and he hoped it might happen to me. I see a bench over there, and everyone's headed for home now, so we'll have privacy." She led him and he followed with head down, feet dragging.

At first he wanted to maintain that he didn't know anyone named Bonnevain; but she ignored his puny lies. "Just tell the truth."

He spread his hands mutely.

"If I were to go to the track officials with the story of our little transaction, they might well bar you from the premises. I don't think you'd like that." She'd sized him up for an old tout whose one interest was betting.

He thawed under the prospect she had spread for him. "Well, yes, I guess I do know Bax."

"For how long?"

"Oh, I've known him since his salad days. He used to be a jockey. Not a bad rider, either. He had a fall and a horse stepped on his face and after that he was through. Kaput. Lots of young guys get ruined that way. They have a bad fall and lose their courage; and in that trade, guts is the whole works. You got no guts, you couldn't bring in Man o' War himself."

"Mr. Bonnevain didn't quit racing entirely, though."

"No, he had other jobs. He was an exercise boy, and assistant trainer, and whatever he could find to do around the barns, and then he began to try the other side of it, betting. He'd rake up enough tips to keep going. I hired him as a clocker—you understand, somebody to clock the workouts in the A.M. and try to get a line on what's coming up that's good. We have to deliver a winner now and then. Well, he worked for me before he went East three years ago. We were pretty good friends."

"He's working for you now?"

"No, he's not." Mr. Harper's glance was briefly clouded, as though with regret, or puzzlement, over Bonnevain's activities. "I see him around."

"And today?"

"He called at the office after one. The place was jumping with last-minute calls, clients on all the wires; but he said it was important, so I listened. He was in trouble and wanted a line on somebody. You."

Miss Rachel decided that Bonnevain had watched the pet shop from some place of concealment, had seen her come to Ruth's aid, and had later obtained her name and address from the two little men in the store.

Harper went on. "He said you were in a café with his wife's aunt."

He had followed Ruth, then. "She's worried about her niece."

Mr. Harper coughed into his hand. "Well, Bax says Lila left him in the East. He seems pretty blue about it, too. He said Lila's aunt is trying to start a stink over it, get him into trouble, make something funny out of the girl's disappearance."

"Do you think he's telling the truth?"

"Bax?" Mr. Harper tried to look as though he trusted everybody like a brother, but failed. "Oh, Bax wouldn't lie to me."

"Who suggested getting me out here?" Miss Rachel asked.

"I did. I got the idea when you walked into the office. I thought I'd wind you up with some excitement, console you when you lost, and kind of worm my way into your confidence. For Bax's sake, of course." He grinned raffishly. Miss Rachel tried to frown him down but found herself grinning instead. This perked him up. "You're not sore?"

"I'll think about it. Where is Mr. Bonnevain now?"

"Out by the paddock."

"Let's go see him."

Mr. Harper touched her arm pleadingly. "Promise . . . you won't tell him about this last race, and what happened?"

"You mean, your trying to filch my twenty dollars?"

Mr. Harper patted his bald head with a handkerchief. "No. You, having that damned long shot. If he thought I'd touted you on the horse and then didn't have sense enough to bet it myself——"

"I see." She understood that his vanity as a tout was at stake.

The empty grandstand was shadowy and echoing. A few toppers lingered at the bars. The coffee and hot-dog stands were closing. Out on the paved apron facing the track, ten thousand thrown-away tickets stirred under the evening breeze. Miss Rachel and Mr. Harper went downstairs, out upon the ramp toward the paddock. The late sunlight brought out the vivid greens of hedges, the tints of flowers. There was a smell of earth and mown grass. A small man sat on a bench by a path, under a tree, and watched them from beneath his hatbrim. Miss Rachel recognized him as the man who had tossed Ruth Rand into the pet-store window.

When he realized that they were headed his way, he rose nervously to his feet and looked behind him as if thinking of escape. Mr. Harper lifted a plump hand in warning. Bax Bonnevain took off his hat.

Miss Rachel said, "How do you do?"

He nodded jerkily, his gaze on Harper, a mixture of uncertainty and embarrassment in his eyes.

"Shall we sit down?" Miss Rachel suggested.

Bonnevain sank down upon the bench. Miss Rachel seated herself beside him. Mr. Harper plumped himself opposite, on the other side of the narrow path. Bonnevain said to Harper, "This wasn't my idea."

"It was mine," Miss Rachel told him. "I knew at once, when I first heard of Mr. Harper's phone call, that you must be behind his wanting to contact me. I've never been on anyone's tout list. I went to Mr. Harper's office and allowed him to bring me here, with the expectation that he would lead me to you."

His glance stole here and there, not quite touching her, as if something about a little old lady in the quiet, near twilight of the paddock enclosure could be frightening indeed.

"I want you to understand something at once," she went on. "I have a perfectly open mind about your wife's disappearance."

"That's not true," he blurted. "You've been talking to Ruth Rand."

"I've been listening to her. She's a highly distraught woman. She needs help and careful, considered advice."

He shuffled his hatbrim through his fingers. "What she's saying about me is a . . . it's not true. I wouldn't kill Lila."

"The thing that needs clarifying and proving is the account of your trip East. You need places, names, and dates. And things like hotel registers and witnesses to back you up. No one travels so far without a single contact."

"It all happened three years ago."

"Even so, your memory should provide you with some possible corroboration."

He went on twisting his hat, hunched on the bench, not looking at her. The next move came from Mr. Harper. He had laid his hat on the bench and was mopping his bald head again; now he suddenly leaned forward. His tone was husky and confidential. "Bax—I've a hunch this little lady might help you. Why don't you tell her the truth? Tell her about that last evening, the one I spent with you and Lila. And how Lila walked out of the house that night—and just never came back."

Bax Bonnevain's glance lost its vagueness. It was all pure hatred now, hatred for the fat man who faced him in the twilight, hatred for Miss Rachel, who had listened to the damaging confidence—and hatred for himself for being here and being in such a terrifying spot.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bax Bonnevain half rose; it was plain that he wished to walk away and rid himself of the blundering fat man who had claimed to be his friend. "You're crazy, man," he stammered to Harper.

Harper plucked at his lip as if wondering if he'd gone too far.

Miss Rachel said mildly, "Then you didn't go East after all."

"I went," said Bax Bonnevain, sitting down again. "I left shortly after we'd planned to. But Lila didn't. She just walked out on me."

Miss Rachel searched for any hint of lying. These two characters, she thought, wouldn't know the truth if it walked up and bit them. And it had occurred to her that if Bax Bonnevain had disposed of a rebellious wife on the trip East, as Ruth Rand insisted he had, the story he was now preparing to divulge might be nothing more than a smoke screen. It was humanly impossible to go looking for Lila Bonnevain everywhere at once. If he settled her disappearance as having taken place here in Los Angeles, it would cut off inquiry in the East. She folded her hands, nodded, tried to look as gullible as possible.

But he was a shrewd little man. Not just about horses, either. He cast a sidewise glance at her. "You think I'm lying. Because of what Ruth told you."

"What do you think of Ruth?" she wondered.

He seemed to look back through a long vista in his mind, to past insults and accusations and upbraidings. "I'm sure of one thing about her. She hates me."

"She impressed me as a determined woman who wants the truth."

He shook his head grimly. "No, she wants a theory proven. Her own. Actually, she doesn't give a damn about Lila and never did. Lila was always much more loyal and affectionate to Ruth than Ruth was to her. Ruth has the typical actress's temperament—egotistic as hell and all wrapped up in herself, ready to back-stab anybody who got in her way. Lila isn't like that and because she isn't Ruth got her to thinking she'd never get anywhere on the stage." His mouth clamped shut in a thin line; his angry eyes roved the empty spaces of the paddock.

"Was Ruth at the bottom of the last quarrel you had?"

"Who said anything about a quarrel?" he demanded quickly.

Mr. Harper was still plucking at his lip as if afraid of Bonnevain's reproaches.

"That last day we had together," Bonnevain went on, "was spent in packing and in planning the last details of our trip. We weren't going to have much time along the way—I was due at the job in the East in a couple of weeks—and Lila even typed up some postcards to mail here and there." He threw her another of the quick glances. Did he know about Ruth's story of the postcard from Niagara Falls?

"Like a fool, I mailed one of them."

He's worried about that item, Miss Rachel decided. "Why?" she asked.

He spread his hand against the open underside of his hat. "I don't know. What I *can* figure, it's going to be hard to explain."

"Perhaps you hated for people to know that your wife had left you."

"I guess that was it."

"She left without any explanation?"

He looked at Harper on the opposite bench. "There was just the note, and that was good-by, without any reasons given."

Harper now stirred himself from his self-reproach. "I went up to the house about seven o'clock to say good-by. Bax and Lila were there alone, busy with last-minute stuff. The car was in the road, full of their belongings. It was still somewhat light by then—being summertime, like it is now—and Lila was doing a lot of running around, outside as well as in. Then, later, we sat in the front room and listened to the portable radio they hadn't packed yet, and drank beer. I thought Lila looked tired. About eight-thirty or so, she said well there were three more bottles, no use donating them to the tenants. She went out to the kitchen to get them. And so help me, that was the last we saw of her." He was breathless, his voice running out. He fanned himself with his hat and looked at Bax Bonnevain. "Wasn't it, Bax?"

Bonnevain nodded glumly. "The only thing we found was the note, in the refrigerator, propped against a bottle of beer. It was typed. It said just that she was through and wouldn't be back, ever, and good-by. I figured she'd typed it while she was doing those post-cards, kept it in the pocket of her skirt, put it in there as she walked out. At first I couldn't believe it wasn't some kind of joke. But I waited up, almost the night through, and gradually I got the feeling she'd planned it a long time and meant what she said. She was through."

"You forget the cat," Harper prompted. He looked at Miss Rachel and something of that past astonishment seeped into his eyes. "The cat was in the icebox, along with the note."

"That's very interesting," said Miss Rachel.

"You know, she must have figured the cat might follow her and spoil some plan she'd made. She didn't leave in their car. We thought later, she must have gone out the backway, up the hill, and

somehow caught a ride. Or"—his gaze slipped briefly to the hunched figure of Bonnevain—"or perhaps had someone waiting for her in Laurel Canyon."

Miss Rachel asked Bonnevain, "Did you try to trace her?"

"No. I took it for granted she'd go back to the Rands'."

A uniformed attendant on his way up from the gates caught sight of them and stared significantly. Miss Rachel rose. The men stood, also. She said, "You have behaved with almost criminal stupidity. First, in not reporting the disappearance of your wife when it occurred. Again, in telling her family a lie about her whereabouts. Most seriously, in trying to delude the police."

His narrow face worked in anger. "You think I don't see the spot I'm in? I made a mistake—but everyone will say it's more than that!"

She ignored the outburst. "However, I'm glad that you were honest with me." She searched his manner for any hint of satisfaction, any sign that he had hoped to fool her. Either he was a clever actor or the tale was true. He seemed baffled and apprehensive, no more. "There is one thing, though, that you'd best get straight. Ruth Rand really believes that your wife is dead and that you killed her. She may be a selfish and self-centered woman as you say. Right now she's an almost maniacally determined one."

"I got a court order for her to leave me alone," he muttered.

"Somehow, I doubt that," she snapped. "I think some pal of yours, perhaps Mr. Harper here, went to the Rand home and tried to frighten the grandfather with that story."

The men exchanged an angry look.

"Now, your course is obvious. You must go to the police and tell them what you and Mr. Harper have just told me."

"You're on *her* side!" he spat.

"Miss Rand doesn't care for my methods."

He blinked. "You're not . . . not working for her?"

"I warned her to get rid of preconceived ideas. She didn't like it."

He stood there as if undecided, his pale eyes uneasy in his scarred face. "You probably hold it against me for tossing her into that shop window."

"It was a dangerous thing to do," she agreed.

"I lost my head."

Miss Rachel decided against this. Bax Bonnevain's training as a

jockey had given him cool judgment and the power of split-second decisions. In tossing Ruth into the shop, he'd acted with the ruthless confidence with which he might have plowed a mount through the pack. It was the expedient, necessary means to an end. "You owe her an apology."

"She'd never give me a chance to get it out of my mouth."

"At least, go to the police with the truth."

He shifted his glance from hers. "I'll . . . I'll have to think it over." He nodded good-by, gave Harper a final stare—Miss Rachel thought it contained a warning—and excused himself, and walked away.

Mr. Harper seemed not to want to follow Bonnevain. "Aren't you going to cash your tickets?"

"It's late now. I'll come back tomorrow. You'll have another good tip for me, won't you?"

His pretense at embarrassment made her want to laugh. "You wouldn't believe me if I had one, would you?"

"If it coincides with a hunch of my own——"

"I'll tell you what. Meet me here at three-thirty, and you give *me* a tip."

"Three-thirty?" She wondered what scheme was hatching under his bald dome. Undoubtedly it had some designs on the cash to be realized from those tickets. "Very well."

He took her back to the office on Sepulveda and they parted, apparently the best of friends. When he spoke of Bonnevain, briefly, as they said good-by, it was simply to assure her that Bax was a good kind fellow, fundamentally, and, in spite of losing his wits and tossing Ruth through the shop window, really wouldn't knowingly hurt a fly. Miss Rachel let him hold her hand in farewell and look into her eyes while she made up her mind regarding a couple of items. This old tout had begun to worry over the impression she must have of Bonnevain's ruthless behavior. Also, Mr. Harper knew, or suspected, more about the disappearance of Lila Bonnevain than he was telling. He had a secret hidden away, and he skirted it, conversationally, like an elephant walking among eggs. Whether it was guilty knowledge remained to be seen.

During the interview beside the paddock, he had stayed carefully to a single line—his astonishment at Lila's going. He had pretended a brief break in composure, looking at Bax as if in fear, when he

had half suggested that Lila might have had a lover waiting to spirit her away.

Getting into her own car, Miss Rachel decided that this was the particular point at which she had sensed his elaborate vocal maneuvering. He had talked about the cat in the refrigerator, and his surprise, and a possible lover, to hide what he had really been thinking about.

Had Lila Bonnevain confided in this unlikely character?

"Hardly," Miss Rachel said aloud to herself. So then, what? Well, Mr. Harper had long been a student of human foibles, and he must sense a desire to gamble no matter how carefully wrapped. There were ways of gambling which didn't involve money, but the future. Had he found in Lila Bonnevain a hint that she might throw away what she had on the chance of happiness with someone else?

Miss Rachel didn't turn toward the house in Parchly Heights, but directly into Hollywood. She parked near the pet shop and walked to its door. The front of the shop had been boarded with fresh planks, on which was tacked a crude, hand-lettered sign: *Open for Business As Usual*.

It was past six. She was not surprised to find the shade lowered in the pane in the door. She rattled the doorknob and listened. The little men might have duties of feeding and of cleaning cages which would keep them here past normal hours. Presently she heard footsteps, and then a muffled voice said, "Sorry—we're closed now."

"It's Miss Murdock."

The shade was drawn aside a bit and she found an eye peering at her. "Who? Oh—you've come back about the kittens? Well, I'm sorry, but——"

"I've come about Mr. Bonnevain."

The shade dropped into place and a muttered conversation took place behind the pane. Finally, a key scratched in the lock and the door swung inward, and one of the twin proprietors stood facing her. He was wearing an expensive-looking dark blue suit. His gray hair was sleek. Under the narrow, mule-like face a jaunty bow tie of crimson set off a gay pink shirt. "I can spare but a minute," he said primly. "What's this about a Mr. Bonnevain?"

"You gave him my name and address," she reminded, squeezing past him into the store. It was shadowy inside. There was light in a rear room, and near the passageway the twin to this jaunty figure

stood in overalls, with a wet mop and a pail of water. The contrast between the two was so great as almost to hide the fact that they were twins. "I want to know how he got the information."

The well-dressed twin drew himself up haughtily. "A gentleman came in, saying that he was a relative of the lady who jumped through our glass. He explained that she's having treatment for a mental disorder and isn't always responsible for what she does."

"In this case, she wasn't—since he threw her in," Miss Rachel said.

"I'm sure you must be mistaken," the little man squeaked.

"I saw him do it."

The well-dressed twin stamped his foot in childish anger. "I tell you, what you're saying is impossible! The woman fell, or jumped, through our window. At first we wanted to force her to pay damages, but then it occurred to us that she might lie her way out of it and somehow make us seem at fault—so we decided to let the matter drop! It's going to *stay* dropped!"

His manner was so vehement that Miss Rachel grew curious. "Do you know these people—the Bonnevais, and Mrs. Bonnevain's aunt, Ruth Rand?"

He seemed almost to emit sparks. "Of course we don't!"

The man with the mop waved its handle wildly. "Not at all! We'd never seen them!"

"Mrs. Bonnevain owned a cat," she offered, feeling her way. "Perhaps——"

The little man in the pink shirt pushed her bodily through the door. "Madame—Miss Murdock, I mean—my patience is exhausted——"

"Why did you give Bax Bonnevain my name and address?" She clutched at the door and his panting breath whistled past her ear.

"He"—*puff, puff*—"asked for it!"

Her fingers were pried from the door, the door was slammed shut, the key turned in the lock. She kicked at the panel, but this was futile. In the shop she could hear a furious argument in progress. She laid her ear on the pane, and the rush of words came abruptly to an end, so she judged her shadow on the shade had warned them. She went back to her car.

At home, Jennifer was eating a solitary dinner. Jennifer and the cat both regarded Miss Rachel with such hostile suspicion that she

felt that she should explain where she had spent the afternoon. She sat down, picked up her napkin, opened her mouth. But Jennifer spoke first.

"A woman telephoned and asked for you."

There was so much meaning behind these words that Miss Rachel expected the next item to fall from Jennifer's lips to be the name of Ruth Rand. But now Jennifer digressed. "When I replied that you weren't in, but that I was your sister and would take a message, this person made a remarkable statement. She said that you had called at her home posing as a buyer for a friend's property. She said that you had attempted to worm from her certain information, under guise of interest in the house which is for sale. In spite of these underhanded tactics—she says—she holds no animosity and is perfectly willing to engage in another interview. This time, as she put it, all cards will be on the table."

Miss Rachel began to sip the chicken broth.

"Rachel, who is this woman?"

"Carol Somebody," Miss Rachel answered with pretended vagueness. "There is some mystery there, a . . . uh . . . mystery about a cat. What would you say in a case like this, Jennifer? Three years ago on a summer night, a woman walked out of her home, leaving only a note in the refrigerator with the cat."

Jennifer started to bristle.

"No, that's the way it was told to me—really. She was never seen again by her husband or her family. Apparently then the husband took the cat East with him on an extended bit of wandering. Now he's home again, but the cat won't recognize old friends or old surroundings. He's lost and angry. He refuses all friendly overtures."

Jennifer's nostrils had widened and her eyes had narrowed. She looked like a large female ferret which has just placed the whereabouts of a choice rat. "I'm beginning to understand. This is part of that—that unpleasantness we witnessed, the woman being dashed through the store window—" She ended on a yelp of indignation. She wadded her napkin and dashed it to the floor. For Jennifer this was an indication of such fury that Miss Rachel put down her soup spoon to stare appalled. "I told you, Rachel," cried Jennifer loudly, "that I wouldn't permit another riotous scandal like that affair in Trafalgar Place. I do mean it! I won't endure having our pictures in the papers like a pair of freaks, the neighbors peering at us,

weird characters phoning all hours of the day and night to tell us their problems—not to mention that we'd consorted with *criminals!*"

Miss Jennifer had risen to her full five foot seven, glared about in desperation, and then for emphasis jumped up and down on the napkin with both feet. Then her rage seemed to abate and she even looked a little embarrassed.

Miss Rachel picked up the soup spoon. "It's not a murder, Jennifer. It's just a disappearance."

Jennifer's fury spurted back on a new tide. "Not a *murder*? A woman's gone for three years, nothing left of her but a cat, and the cat grieving—and she's not dead? Oh, balderdash!"

Miss Rachel cocked a white eyebrow. "You think so?"

Jennifer flounced from the room without trusting herself to make a reply. Miss Rachel ate the broth and studied her own cat. The big black animal was curled in the cushion of a small rocker by the windows. She was watching her mistress with possessive, slightly irritated, critical green eyes.

Of course, Miss Rachel thought, cats don't grieve the way dogs do, all woebegone and sickly. A cat's . . . well, he's a cat. His grief has claws in it.

She remembered the searching way the cat had looked into Carol Callahan's house, as if expecting to find his mistress in it. When she had come out of Carol's house he had run away and waited, and she had felt his anger sizzling at her from his hiding place in the shadows.

He was lost and lonely; and all at once she examined Ruth Rand's theory about her niece with new interest and new apprehension.

CHAPTER SIX

In her dreams Miss Rachel was having her feet tickled. She awoke to the dark room to find the cat poking her in the toes and the telephone ringing in the hall outside her door. She padded out to answer; a blue night light made the gloom spookier, and it seemed natural that the voice on the wire had a far-off, unearthly quavering. A man. She said, "Speak up, please. I can't understand you."

The old voice took on a little more life. "I said that my name is Rand. Stanley Rand. I believe that you met my daughter Ruth today."

"Ruth Rand. Yes, sir, I did."

"She's been hurt. I believe an attempt has been made on her life. She wishes to talk to you at once. I know it's very late——"

Miss Rachel looked at the clock on the stand with the phone. It was thirty-two minutes past midnight. Jennifer poked her head out of her room and watched round-eyed. The cat played with the phone cord.

"—if you will take a taxi to our home here, I'll be glad to pay the fare and to see that you return home also. If you would be so kind——"

"Is she able to talk?"

"Oh yes. The doctor's been and gone. She's going to be all right. But she's afraid, and the attack seems to have had such weird overtones, and I don't seem able to reassure her. . . ." The words dribbled into silence and he waited for her reply. She could hear his breathing on the wire.

"I'll dress and be over as soon as possible."

"Rachel!"

Miss Rachel returned the phone to its cradle and said, "Somebody tried to kill her. Again," she added, remembering Ruth's flight through the window. "I just feel that I have to talk to her."

"Very well. But I shall come along. I am determined that this affair shan't get out of control. After all, it's *my* name too!" She swept into her room with a rustle from the tentlike nightgown she affected.

"You're curious about that cat," Miss Rachel sent after her.

The answering sniff was loud enough for Miss Rachel to hear it in the hall.

Well wrapped up, they went down together to the garage. Jennifer insisted on leaving lights burning in the house—to discourage burglars. "He thought I might take a cab," Miss Rachel explained, backing the car from the garage. "I guess he thought I'd feel timid, running around at this hour."

"He doesn't know you," Miss Jennifer pointed out grimly.

It took more than forty minutes to find the Rand address, tucked as it was among oaks at the end of a blind street in the hills above Glendale. A lantern fixture stood on a pole in the lawn, and by its

light Miss Rachel sized up the place. The house was of white stucco, roofed in red tile, and she judged it to be more than twenty years old. There was a settled permanence about the arrangement of the grounds. Trees and shrubs were big. The cement driveway had been patched. There were no houses on the adjoining lots.

They rang the bell and the door was opened almost at once by a tall, white-haired man. He'd been handsome once, Miss Rachel thought, but now there was a suggestion of dissipation and weariness, and his silver hair was thin. He wore a smoking jacket over a stiff white shirt. "Miss Murdock?" His glance went from one to the other.

"I am Miss Rachel Murdock and this is my sister. She came along as a chaperone," Miss Rachel explained.

"Please come in." He moved aside, then ushered them down the hall to a big room at the rear of the house. It was furnished as a game room and den. There was a pool table under a hanging globe, a soft-drink cooler, a pin-ball game, and one corner held a group of easy chairs facing a television set, a big one. A bank of windows apparently overlooked the yard; heavy draperies were drawn over them. By a fieldstone fireplace on a hassock sat Ruth Rand. She wore black slacks and a pink blouse. Her clothes were smeared and dusty. On her forehead near the left temple was a patch of white gauze and adhesive tape; her left eye was swollen and discolored.

She looked at Miss Rachel defiantly. "Go on. Say it, 'I told you so.' You said we'd meet again."

"I'm sorry that you were hurt," said Miss Rachel.

Stanley Rand had placed chairs for them and they sat down near Ruth. He said politely, "Would you ladies care for a drink? Scotch, perhaps? Or a sherry?"

Before Jennifer could blast him for offering to sully her lips with alcohol, Miss Rachel put in, "If you have it, I'd like a cup of coffee. It's cool outside."

"Certainly. And you, Miss——" to Jennifer.

"Nothing, thank you." Jennifer obviously suspected him of being capable of spiking the coffee. "I'm a teetotaler," she added.

"Oh? No offense meant, you understand." He smiled slightly and then withdrew.

Ruth Rand said impatiently, "I've never been so—so *mad* in my life! Attacked in my own yard, within ten feet of my house. And the

police could find no trace whatever——” She stood up from the hassock and moved over in front of the empty hearth. “You see, I went outdoors tonight a little after ten. I hadn’t been home long. I’d done a radio show in Hollywood——” She broke off to look at Miss Rachel. “Perhaps you remember what I was supposed to rehearse——”

“Getting murdered,” Miss Rachel recalled.

“Yes—the screaming scene. I decided to go out into the rear yard and practice a little. I walked a short way from the house and opened my mouth, drew a deep breath, and let it out in a long, ringing screech. And right away I knew I wasn’t alone out there.” She trembled, as if at the memory of terror. “The back of the lot rises a bit, and it’s all thick shrubbery up there. Dark, too. I think the little sneak thought I’d caught sight of him and had screamed because of that. There was a terrific noise, branches crackling and so on; and I looked around, not really scared yet, and called out something like, ‘Who is it?’ Then I heard running steps, and this—this *object* flew through the air and knocked me flat.”

“What object?”

“A can of cat food.” Ruth Rand cupped her injured eye with a shaking hand, stared meaningfully from her good eye at Miss Rachel. “He had come snooping, on his way from the store, and had the cat food with him, and used it because it was handy. He could have killed me!”

“You mean Bax Bonnevain?”

“Who else?” Ruth Rand cried.

“Did the police look for footprints?”

“The ground back there is covered with leaf mold. There weren’t any prints.”

“How did he leave? Did you hear a car start?”

“I was unconscious for several minutes,” Ruth said, somewhat sulkily. “I don’t know how he got away. He was long gone when the cops got here. And then, they seemed to think it might have been a stray prowler.”

“You accused Bonnevain to the police?”

“Well, I gave them his name.”

“You should have had your father check by telephone at once, to see if he was at home.”

“He’s only staying until he can sell the house. He hasn’t a phone.”

“Miss Callahan might have been willing to check up for you.”

Ruth Rand stamped an impatient foot. "How could I believe anything she'd tell me? She's crazy about Bax. She'd lie to protect him."

Miss Rachel looked at her coolly, and the big blonde made a noticeable effort to calm down.

"All right . . . we mismanaged the thing. It doesn't help the knot on my head to know I goofed. What I called you here for is to tell you I'm sorry about this afternoon. I really do want you to look into Lila's disappearance and I'll try to be honest with you, and not to interfere."

At this moment Mr. Rand came into the room carrying a tray with a thermos jug, some cups, spoons, and cream and sugar. He set the tray upon the soft-drink cooler and began to pour coffee from the jug. "Have you told them about the race ticket I found on the driveway?"

Ruth Rand seemed momentarily stumped. "Uh . . . I hadn't, no."

Mr. Rand came forward, drawing from his smoking jacket a pari-mutuel ticket which he gave to Miss Rachel. "This was in the gutter beside the drive. The police apparently overlooked it. You'll note that the date's today's—or yesterday's, perhaps I should say, since it's past midnight. I think it must point very definitely toward Bonnevain. He's an habitual race-goer."

Miss Rachel looked at the ticket. It was a ten-dollar win ticket on It's Pouring. Jennifer's gaze was all but boring holes in it; and Miss Rachel wondered if her sister were thinking about that long absence of hers. "Well—I don't suppose it's any good," she offered. "Else it wouldn't have been thrown away."

Mr. Rand put it back into his pocket. "I'll check the morning's paper. If it is good, and it's worth much, Mr. Bonnevain might try to reclaim it."

An interesting train of thought ran through Miss Rachel's head. Mr. Harper had touted her on It's Pouring as the Hooded Groom's long-shot special. Presumably he hadn't picked the horse's name out of thin air, even though he hardly expected him to win. Could Bax Bonnevain have supplied the information on which Mr. Harper's long-shot special had been based? And had Bonnevain then, logically, put a bet on the nag himself? It seemed very reasonable to suppose that he had—in which case it was also reasonable to suspect that this lost ticket was Bonnevain's.

Mr. Rand finished pouring coffee for the four of them, brought

the filled cups on the tray and offered them along with cream and sugar. Miss Rachel tasted the coffee. It was hot, but weak.

"Getting back to what I was saying," Ruth put in, walking around before the hearth, "I'm willing to go with you to Bax and sit by while you talk to him. I know what he'll tell you will be lies, but as you warned—I'll try to keep an open mind."

"I met Mr. Bonnevain this afternoon," Miss Rachel admitted.

There was a stunned silence on the part of Ruth Rand and her father. Jennifer straightened and a lot of questions were ready to burst forth. Miss Rachel went on quickly. "He telephoned the house while I was gone with you to the canyon," she said to Ruth, "and left a message purporting to offer racing information. I pretended to bite. A man named Harper met me in an office—he calls himself the Hooded Groom and gives tips on the races. I persuaded him to take me to meet Mr. Bonnevain."

Ruth Rand was chewing her lips in anger. Her father seemed bewildered by what Miss Rachel was saying. He sat down on a hassock and fumbled for a handkerchief, patted his temples with an affectation of distress. Jennifer said: "Rachel! Where did you go to meet this man?"

"At a race track. Where else?"

"You care nothing for my feelings. I told you——" She broke off, and a new horror dawned in her eyes. "You . . . didn't . . . bet!"

"Just one horse," Rachel admitted.

"Everybody starts with *one* horse," Jennifer cried, practically breathing fire. "Don't you remember the unfortunate young man, Mr. Pumphill, and how the police caught him right in Father's bank trying to cash a bad check, and what Father told us that night at dinner?"

"It was something about slow horses and fast women," Miss Rachel said, "but it wasn't original with Father. And I don't think he really knew much about either."

"Ladies——" Mr. Rand jerked to his feet, spilling half a cup of coffee on his knees. "Let's get back to Mr. Bonnevain. It seems to me that in contacting him you broke faith with my daughter. Undoubtedly he filled your ears with his lies. Ruth—are you sure you want to go on with this?"

They exchanged a glance; but again Miss Rachel saw that Ruth

had suppressed her anger. "Dad, I'm sure that Miss Murdock is too shrewd to be taken in by Bax. I want her to work on our side."

"Let me explain again—I'm on nobody's side. I'll try to find out the truth. I won't try to prove preconceived ideas," said Miss Rachel.

Ruth kept her air of patience. "That's what we want too, the truth. We feel that Lila is dead, but we won't force our conviction on you. You may believe what you will. Just try to find her."

Miss Rachel nodded. "I might put in here a statement which Mr. Bonnevain made this afternoon. He says that his wife walked out on him the night they were supposed to have gone East, and that he believed she was through with their marriage, and so did not look for her. He is supposed to have left on the long trip alone."

This seemed to hit Ruth Rand like a cannon ball. She felt her way to a chair, glazed-eyed, dizzy. Mr. Rand closed his eyes and murmured something about Bax's ability at lying.

"Let me add that this man Harper backed up a part of Bonnevain's story," Miss Rachel continued. "He says he was at the house during the final preparations for departure, and that when Lila Bonnevain was missed he helped look for her, and was present when her farewell letter was discovered in the refrigerator—along with Lila's cat, which had been shut in, also."

Such dead silence greeted these remarks that Miss Rachel thought they suspected her of a fantastic lie.

Finally, though, Ruth Rand muttered, "A farewell letter? Why wasn't it shown to us?"

"Bonnevain's account is that he went East, believing his wife had gone home to you, and made no effort to reach her. He implied that he hadn't known of her disappearance until he came back to California."

"He knew, all right." Ruth Rand seemed lost in thought then for some time, as if trying to square Bonnevain's tale with facts already at hand. "If he did go East alone, it simply means that he killed her here."

"It does give you a new line of inquiry," Miss Rachel pointed out. "You must ask the Los Angeles police, and the sheriff's office, to check their files on unidentified bodies of three years back."

Mr. Rand had been wandering in the rear of the room. Now he spoke in a harsh, strained tone. "Ruth, I'm feeling pretty rocky. I'll have to lie down for a while."

"We'll excuse you, Dad. I'm sorry it has to be like this."

He gave Miss Rachel an unreadable look. "Good hunting, Miss Murdock."

His manner was so peculiar that she couldn't phrase an answer. She watched him go. He was undoubtedly disturbed, all right, and the idea that Lila Bonnevain might have been buried as a nameless corpse long ago had proved the finishing touch. But Miss Rachel wondered in that moment how fond he had actually been of his granddaughter.

As if answering the unspoken query, Ruth said: "You know, what you said this afternoon up there in the canyon—that my feeling toward Lila was one of guilt as well as love—applies to Dad just as much as to me. He's been an actor all his life. He was furious with Lila when she gave up all idea of trying for a stage career. Even after we were out here, he tried to force her to join a school or a little theater group, to keep her hand in. And she wouldn't do it."

"I would like to see a photograph of Lila," said Miss Rachel.

Ruth hesitated. "So much of her beauty was in coloring and in the way she moved——" She walked slowly to a cabinet recessed in the wall opposite the hearth, opened it, took out a cabinet photo in a silver frame. "I don't expect you to realize from this how remarkably beautiful she was."

The girl in the picture was shown, waist-length, seated on a bench in a garden setting. She had fair hair and a lovely, serene, oval face. "I think she is very beautiful," Miss Rachel said. "How much of a temper had she?"

Ruth spread her hands. "She was calm and sweet, almost all of the time. Once in a while when she felt something particularly outrageous was going on, she'd fly out like—like a cat." As if the word brought forth the memory of the weapon used against her that night, Ruth touched gingerly the bandage on her temple. "I know you're curious about her, her appearance and so forth. But this isn't getting us any closer to finding her. What are you going to do next?"

Miss Rachel gave back the photograph and stood up. "I'll call you in the morning."

Ruth seemed suddenly uneasy. "Do you have some sort of plan for looking for Lila?"

"I'll think of something."

Ruth Rand urged a final cup of coffee on them, then saw them to the door. In the car Miss Rachel said, "Off again, on again. There's something peculiar about those people, Jennifer. I'll bet they made Lila Bonnevain's life a hell with their determination that she should stick to acting. I wonder why she came out here to be near them?"

Miss Jennifer was sleepy. She muttered, "To some fools nagging is better than loneliness," and fell into a doze. She didn't snap awake until they were almost at the crest of Laurel Canyon drive. As the car turned into the side road under the sweeping trees, and the dark and empty cup of the little valley engulfed them, she cried, "Heavens to Betsy! Where are we? This isn't home!"

"People expect little old ladies to stay tucked in at night," Miss Rachel explained. "I'll surprise them. I hope." She drove slowly down the incline into Creek Canyon until she found the space amid the shrubbery where Ruth had left her car that afternoon. She put on the hand brake and switched off the lights, then opened the dash compartment and took out a flashlight. A few bird twitters broke out in the trees over their heads, then died into silence. "Do you want to come along?"

"Where on earth where?" squealed Jennifer, peering at the dark.

"I think it's a good time to call on Miss Callahan."

"She didn't say past 2 A.M.!"

As Jennifer hesitated, from some distance away a cat howl split the quiet. It was an angry, anguished sound. It spoke of loss, and waiting, and despair. Of claws, too, wanting to scratch back at hurt. Jennifer shivered. When Miss Rachel left the car, following the bobbing beam of the flash, Jennifer was at her heels.

CHAPTER SEVEN

By the beam of the flash they saw an army cot set up on Miss Callahan's front porch, and someone in it. An instant later the girl propped herself on an elbow and looked down at them. "Bax? Wait till I get a robe." She tossed a cigarette off into the dark; apparently

she'd been lying awake and smoking. She swung her legs off the cot and stood up, and Jennifer let out a muffled grunt. Carol's garment was a shortie-gown in every sense of the word.

Lights came on in the house as she entered. Miss Rachel and Miss Jennifer waited on the porch, Miss Rachel meanwhile switching the flashlight here and there to see if she could find the cat. When Carol returned, she was wrapped in a robe made of blue toweling. She peered through the screen.

"Wait a minute! Who in the world——" She must have recognized Miss Rachel then; a sneer touched her vivid mouth. "Oh, it's you, dear. Won't you come into my parlor? Only it should be the other way around, shouldn't it?"

"She means you're a spider," said Jennifer, "and if you have the spunk of a goose, you'll——"

"Let her get it out of her system," Miss Rachel interrupted. "After all, I did try a trick on her."

After a moment's hesitation, Carol opened the screen. "Come in, since you're here. I'll admit, I invited you. I wanted to give you a piece of my mind." Her glance went from Miss Rachel, neat in her snappy suit, to Jennifer's more Mother Hubbard attire. "You brought reinforcements—in case I was violent?"

"This is my sister with whom you talked on the phone. She's very much opposed to everything I've done in this affair, so you may consider her an ally."

Carol measured Jennifer as if sizing up the sort of ally she would make. Then she indicated chairs and they all sat down. Carol offered a pack of cigarettes. Jennifer sniffed, and Miss Rachel shook her head, so Carol proceeded to light one for herself, taking her time over it. Miss Rachel noted that the room had been straightened somewhat as if for company.

Carol began, "First, I want to tell you, in case you misinterpreted anything I said this afternoon, that I am positive Bax is telling the truth—the exact truth—about Lila. She left him in the East."

"Well, the exact truth has been changed somewhat. Mr. Bonnevain told me that his wife deserted him here on the night they were supposed to have gone away. Walked out. Left a farewell note in the refrigerator, where she thought he'd find it when he looked for the beer."

Carol tried to look astonished but wasn't a good enough actress.

Miss Rachel judged that she had known the tale for a long time. "That's . . . amazing!"

"What amazed me was the cat being in there, too."

Now Carol's surprise was real. "I hadn't heard *that!*" It was a break, and she tried to cover. "I mean, well, it's sort of ridiculous, isn't it?"

"A refrigerator is a good place to shut up an animal who is persistent about following," Miss Rachel pointed out. "It would also in time permanently dispose of a troublesome animal without any visible injury."

"*He* wouldn't hurt Tom Boy!"

"He blinded him in one eye."

"That was an accident. Bax was hunting ground squirrels!" As if feeling on the defensive, Carol got out of the chair and moved over to the piano, sat down on the bench there. "I know who's been talking to you. Ruth Rand!"

"Miss Rand is anxious to locate Lila Bonnevain," Rachel said. "Can you blame her? The girl has been missing for three years. A long time. Her husband should have notified her family when she dropped from sight."

Carol crushed out the cigarette in an ash tray. "Look, I'll be honest about it, I knew Lila walked out on Bax that night. If there'd been anything funny or unexpected about it, I'd have been in touch with Ruth Rand long ago. But I didn't think Lila wanted to have much to do with her relatives—they'd preached and nagged so. Ruth Rand is an egomaniac and the old man is nuts. I mean literally nuts. Lila told me once that her grandfather threw fits—real frothing fits—when she refused to try for a movie role after she got out here. He fell down and had convulsions and claimed his heart was going." Carol lit another cigarette with irritable haste. "Furthermore, at the end Lila definitely had something or someone on her mind."

"You mean, romantically?"

"It's hard to say," Carol evaded. "She wasn't herself at all. She was short, abrupt, in her manner. I wondered at the time if she and Bax could have had some knockdown and drag-out fight. Though I couldn't imagine why."

"In your opinion, she just decided to drop from sight?"

Carol looked at the dark pane beyond the piano. "You don't sound

as if you believe me. You think I'm cooking up some lie. That Rand woman has pointed out to you that Bax and I were friends—and she's made it sound nasty."

Miss Jennifer gasped behind her glove.

"I just want to trace Lila Bonnevain. I'll believe whatever sounds logical," Miss Rachel promised.

Carol's glance was probing, vindictive. "This affair doesn't really concern you. I think Lila, wherever she is, wants to be let alone."

Surprisingly, it was Miss Jennifer who now spoke up. "You can trust my sister with a clue to Lila Bonnevain's whereabouts. She's nosy, but she respects confidences. If Lila doesn't want to meet her people again, Rachel won't inform on her."

Carol laid an elbow on the keyboard and there was a jangle of piano notes. As these died away, she said, "I wish you could have heard Lila sometimes when she discussed that pair. Of course she spoke lovingly of them, but from what she said I knew they had moved in like vultures as soon as her mother died. They thought they'd make a star of her and share in the loot. They like to live high; the money would come in handy. Lila could act a little, of course, in an unexciting way. The thing was, the drive, the ambition, was missing. She was too easygoing. They couldn't push her up there, and she wouldn't fight for it." Carol rose suddenly from the piano bench. "I want you to talk to Bax. Let's go see him. Maybe you'll believe, then, that I know what I'm talking about."

This move, Miss Rachel sensed, was not as unexpected as it was meant to seem. Under Carol's restlessness her shrewd mind had been casting about for some diverting action. The fact that she had been lying awake on the porch in the dark, smoking instead of sleeping, spoke of something on her mind, some preamble to this move. But Miss Rachel rose eagerly. "He won't mind if we wake him?"

Carol shrugged. "He won't care."

And Miss Rachel used the flashlight on the dark road. Jennifer was at one side, Carol lagging at the other. Their echoing steps on the asphalt paving were the only sounds in the little valley.

Carol moved into the lead as they approached the Bonnevain house. There was a wet smell on the air and she said, "Bax must have been watering. I suppose the real estate people advised him to. She climbed the steps to a bricked space before the door, where

the paving of the patio had been extended to form a little porch. There she halted. "Look! The door's open!"

Miss Rachel tilted the light. It shone on the half-open door and into the dark interior of the little house. Vaguely she made out the bulk of an overstuffed couch and two trousered legs laxly protruding from it out upon the carpet. "Someone's in there."

"Yes, I see," said Carol, distinctly nervous. "Can't you light it up better than that?"

"Let's go in and see who it is." Miss Rachel walked to the door, put a hand in, felt along the wall for the switch. The lights came on under her touch. She couldn't control a start of astonishment. Across the room sat one of the twin owners of the pet shop—the natty, dressed-up twin—and in that first moment of surprise all she grasped in addition to his identity was the thing which sat beside him on the upholstery . . . a torn brown paper sack from which a half dozen or so cans had rolled.

They were cans of cat food.

On each can was the picture of a Persian kitten with a fish in its mouth. A couple of the cans were dented slightly, as though the fall off the couch had nicked the tin. One can nestled against the side of the little man's highly polished black shoe.

Behind her, Carol let out a thin, terrified screech; and Jennifer cried, "Call a doctor!"

Miss Rachel looked again at the little man and took in details she'd missed before. A knife stuck straight out from his white shirt front. It had a bone handle, like a steak knife, and the handle was smeared with blood. There was a lot of blood, too, on the little man.

His staring eyes and contorted face were hideous.

Miss Rachel hurried in, touched one of the lax hands briefly. It was much too cool to be the hand of a living person. "It's not a doctor we need, but the police."

"Come away, then," Carol Callahan cried. "Bax hasn't any phone! We'll use mine."

"You can go and telephone," Miss Rachel said. "First, a couple of questions. Was Mr. Bonnevain at home this evening?"

Carol looked around the room as if reading the wallpaper for her answer. "I—don't know."

"Did you notice lights on over here, after dark?"

"I believe I did," Carol chattered. "But I didn't come over to see who was here."

"He's been dead for a while," Miss Rachel pointed out.

"I don't know anything about it! I didn't hear any rumpus, or see Bax at all, at any time since early afternoon. Don't you try to drag me into this!" She moved closer to Miss Rachel with a ferocious face.

Miss Rachel kicked her in the shin. "Don't try to bully me, Miss Callahan. You'll be sorry if you do. One more question. Do you know this man?" She nodded toward the sprawled figure on the couch.

Carol was rubbing her bruised shin. Her eyes flickered over to the pet-shop owner for an instant, Miss Rachel thought, a positive hatred gleamed behind her lashes. She knew him, all right.

"What's his name?" Miss Rachel asked.

"Jacob Sutter. He owns a little store near Sunset and Vine. He sells pets and pet food. His place used to be a bookie joint, before the federal law went in. He wouldn't buy a federal permit, of course—it's an invitation for the local cops to pounce on you. So he and Bax had a falling out." She checked herself angrily. "There, I suppose you think it looks bad for Bax, again. Well—it wasn't much of a quarrel. They've been friends since."

"A rather shy type of friendship," Miss Rachel commented, "since he told me he'd never heard of Mr. Bonnevain. I presume in saying that there was a falling out, you mean that he and Mr. Bonnevain were in the bookie business together and that Mr. Bonnevain wanted to continue."

"Presume what you please," Carol spat at her, and ran from the room. Her heels were sharp on the wooden stairs leading down to the street.

Jennifer was just beyond the patch of light from the doorway, fanning herself with a handkerchief. "I think I shall faint!"

"Go lie in the wet geraniums," Miss Rachel counseled. Then: "*Wet!* Someone ran the sprinkler, not too long ago. Past sundown, obviously, or the foliage would be dry by now. I think Mr. Bonnevain must have been here much later than Miss Callahan believes."

"I shall lie in no geraniums, wet or otherwise, Rachel. How can you stand there within sight of that c-corpse?" She staggered off to a rustic bench under the patio shelter. Miss Rachel could barely make her out by means of the reflected glow from the house, but

the moving white handkerchief reassured her that Jennifer was still conscious. "Besides," Jennifer went on after a moment, "the flowers being wet doesn't mean that Mr. Bonnevain was here to turn on the hose. You say that a real estate man has listed the place. He'd want the flowers blooming."

"Possibly." Miss Rachel stepped back into the room, past the corpse and into the small kitchen. She inspected the stove. It was clean, perhaps as clean as the departing tenants had left it. If Mr. Bonnevain were cooking for himself, he was much neater about it than most bachelors. She looked into the cupboards. The few dishes looked dusty. Behind another cupboard door she found only a box of corn flakes, a small sack of sugar, and a jar of instant coffee. The refrigerator held two cans of beer and a quart of milk. Apparently Mr. Bonnevain's usual meal at home was breakfast, and it consisted of corn flakes and coffee. This would account for the neat range and the generally unused air of the kitchen. It also indicated a tolerance of monotony and a lack of imagination.

Next to the kitchen, off a tiny hall, were a bedroom and bath. The bed seemed to have been slept in for at least several nights without straightening. Blankets were rolled into a wad on the bare sheet. In the bath were shaving things, a toothbrush, and a bottle of mouthwash. The closet which opened off the hall held several suits, which looked as if they might fit Mr. Bonnevain. What appeared to be soiled shirts, socks, and underthings had been kicked into a corner. On a high shelf was a corrugated-cardboard box.

Miss Rachel brought a chair from the kitchen to get the box down. In it, thick with dust, were mementos of Lila Bonnevain. There was a photograph, a duplicate of the one shown to her by Ruth Rand, backed by stiffened paper minus a frame. A scrapbook held clippings, most of them dating back at least eight years, apparently to the time of Lila's stage career in New York. A snapshot album, which Miss Rachel ruffled through, had pictures in it of Ruth Rand and her father, and of another woman who must have been Lila's mother. There were no pictures in it of Bax Bonnevain. At the bottom of the box were some scraps. Miss Rachel carried them into the brighter light of the kitchen and pieced them together on the sink board. This was a snapshot, perhaps three by six inches, and simply showed Lila Bonnevain in a slim dark suit, coming out of the door of a bank.

The picture had been taken Broadway of the film, and so included the front of the bank building and the street marker at the curb.

After a few minutes study, Miss Rachel replaced the scraps in the bottom of the box, put the other dusty articles on top, and returned the box to its place on the shelf of the closet. When the police arrived, she was sitting with Jennifer on the bench in the patio, and Jennifer was telling her some of the things Father had pronounced on the subject of Crime.

Father's principal advice seemed to have been that Crime didn't pay as well as banking. "Didn't he notice a moral distinction?" Miss Rachel wondered.

Jennifer exploded into a torrent of correction; but at this moment a detective came to interview them. He had raised a shade in the kitchen window, giving a better light in the patio. He introduced himself as Lieutenant Shaw. He was young, tall, well built, handsome. In spite of her disdain for what she called "man-chasers" Jennifer was noticeably calmed down by his appearance. She even fluffed her hair a little.

He began, looking at Miss Rachel: "I believe you know Lieutenant Mayhew, don't you?"

She wondered in what sulphurous terms Mayhew had described her meddling in what he considered his business. "Quite well, though I haven't seen much of him and his wife these past months. They've bought a chicken farm near Ventura, haven't they?"

"I believe so." He seemed to be sizing her up cautiously. "You had something to do with a case of his, I think."

"That was some time past."

He nodded. He offered cigarettes politely before lighting one for himself. "You're working now as a private detective?"

"I would like to," Miss Rachel admitted, "but my sister feels that to go into it professionally would cause a scandal. As it is, you might say that because of undeserved notoriety, occasionally I get a chance to advise people in trouble."

"In this affair, you were advising Bax Bonnevain?"

He spoke the name with a certain amount of familiarity. Miss Rachel judged, therefore, that Mr. Bonnevain had some acquaintance with the police. Through the bookmaking activities in the pet

shop, perhaps? "No. I had talked to Mr. Bonnevain, but my original contact in the affair was with a woman named Ruth Rand."

He nodded and murmured as if to himself, "The aunt," and Miss Rachel was suddenly enlightened. He knew all about Lila Bonnevain's disappearance and probably had a well-stocked file on the husband, facts compiled by the police who hadn't been as indifferent or as easily put off as Ruth Rand had supposed. "Tell me how you *were* involved, please."

She went back to the scene on Sunset Boulevard, the bus jamming to a halt in the midst of traffic, Ruth Rand's flying attack on Bax Bonnevain, the crash through the pet-shop window. When she reached the part about Mr. Harper and the meeting with Bonnevain, a dry smile touched the lieutenant's lips; but he listened to the whole story without interrupting. When she had finished, he turned to Jennifer. "Do you have anything to add to your sister's story?"

"Nothing at all," said Jennifer, in a tone of having washed her hands of it.

He returned to Miss Rachel. "Do you know of anything to account for the death, here, of this Jacob Sutter?"

"No." She looked thoughtfully at the young, intelligent features of the detective. Undoubtedly he was far ahead of her in this affair. "There is one unnecessarily ludicrous item."

"Yes, Miss Murdock?"

"Ruth Rand was attacked tonight by someone who used a can of cat food as a weapon."

A slight, regretful sigh escaped him. "Yes, I know that. We have the can at headquarters. The unfortunate thing is—it's not the same brand."

A long, long way in the distance Miss Rachel thought she heard Tom Boy give a bitter cry.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I guess you know of Lila Bonnevain's cat," she hazarded.

He nodded above the glowing cigarette. "Bonnevain is supposed

to have taken it East with him. We haven't been able to check his account of his travels back there with much success, so we can't prove whether he had the cat along or not. We'd like to make sure that this is the same cat which belonged to his wife."

Miss Rachel said, "Ruth Rand seemed convinced that it was the same animal." She wondered why he had brought up the point but knew better than to ask it directly; subtlety in dealing with cops she had developed during her friendship with Mayhew. "She seemed surprised, though, when Tom Boy—as she called him—showed no signs of friendliness."

"We can't get close enough to catch him," said the lieutenant with a touch of exasperation.

"Along the same lines—I keep thinking of that canned cat food in there with the dead Mr. Sutter," Miss Rachel added. "Presumably he brought it up here, and the sack was torn in his struggle with his murderer. But according to Miss Callahan, she'd taken over the care and feeding of the animal, perhaps as a favor to Mr. Bonnevain. It seems odd that if Sutter were delivering the food for Tom Boy, he brought it here instead of to Miss Callahan."

There was a significant silence on the part of the lieutenant. He was keeping some idea under wraps, Miss Rachel decided.

Jennifer quit fanning herself long enough to say, "It seems obvious—either he didn't know that Carol Callahan was caring for Tom Boy, or he wanted to trap the animal, using the fish—cats love it so, you know, Rachel—as bait."

Lieutenant Shaw said politely, "I've enjoyed listening to your theories. I guess you know more about cats than I do. I would rather, though, that you talked over your ideas only with each other." Under the courtesy was the thinly veiled command to keep their mouths shut.

"People rarely listen anyway," Miss Rachel pointed out, "since little old ladies have such a reputation as chatters."

"You might be surprised who'd listen," he warned. "I'm going to let you go now, and take for granted you'll be home when I want to talk to you again."

"Oh, I'll be home!" Jennifer cried. The lieutenant took it as a joint promise, and excused himself, and left. Jennifer was on her feet, holding her skirts from contact with the wet bricks. "I meant

it, Rachel! We're going directly home and to bed like decent folk!" She tried to catch Miss Rachel's sleeve.

"Wait a minute. There's one last thing I want to see." Miss Rachel ducked out of reach, hurried to the front of the paving. In the shadows she made out the snakelike plastic hose, angling down into the ruined bed of ivy geraniums. She pulled it back about ten feet, found a big round sprinkler head at its end. Water oozed and dripped from it to the damp paving. She dropped the sprinkler and traced the hose, back around the opposite side of the house, to a faucet against the wall. It was very dark here below a windowless wall. Using the flashlight, she examined the ground, but though everything had been wet down, the rock-hard gravelly earth had retained no footprints. The faucet, she noted, was tucked away behind a tangle of leafless shrubbery.

Not easy to locate, she decided, unless you were familiar with the place or had explored by daylight.

Lieutenant Shaw's voice said gently, "Going, now?"

"Yes. Going." She snapped off the light and rejoined Jennifer in the patio. Jennifer was over beside a hanging basket, poking a forefinger into the desiccated growth. "You'd think, with everything so damp, they'd have given these poor things a drink!"

"Yes, wouldn't you?" Miss Rachel's tone was agreeable but absent-minded. She was aware of Lieutenant Shaw, watching them from the front of the house, and of the sounds of police activity within. She wondered when they'd get to the box in the closet and what they would make of its contents. One thing sure, only the barest and most innocuous facts would get to the papers at this stage.

She was unusually quiet all the way home, and Jennifer decided, hopefully, that Rachel must be sleepy.

When they walked into their house, the phone was ringing. Miss Rachel tried a dash, but Jennifer blocked her. She lifted an imperious hand. "I shall answer, Rachel!" She went to the phone, lifted it, and in a tone which underscored the disgracefulness of the hour, said: "This is Miss Jennifer Murdock. Who is calling, please?"

She listened, while Miss Rachel danced on one foot in impatience. Then she said firmly, "You may call again at eight-thirty," and hung up.

"Who was it?"

"Mr. Stanley Rand."

Miss Rachel looked at the phone as if secrets might be torn out of it. "Well, what did he say? Come on!"

Miss Jennifer was taking off her hat and little cape. "He said that he is dying of a heart attack and has something to tell before he goes." She stuck her hatpin between her teeth while she smoothed a velvet flower on the brim. "Don't take on so, Rachel. His voice was quite strong. He'll still be with us at a decent hour in the morning."

At a certain stage of bullheadedness Jennifer was not to be crossed. There was nothing to do but to go to bed, count sheep—somehow they all had feline faces—twiddle her toes, and drowse.

She was jerked awake before seven by the pealing of the doorbell. She lifted her head, expecting Jennifer to go bounding down to answer, but heard instead the shower running full tilt in the adjoining bathroom. Jennifer hadn't heard the bell. Miss Rachel hopped out of bed, put on robe and slippers in a hurry, and went downstairs. Before she could open the door, she found a narrow, mule-like face peering in to watch her.

He was red-eyed, his lips shaking, and the stare he bent on her held such unadulterated hatred that she paused. Seeing her hesitation, he beat fiercely on the panel. "Open up!"

She unlocked the door, expecting him to rush inside. But he stood on the threshold, obviously fighting for self-control, panting damply through a half-open mouth, watching her with popping eyes. "I came to tell you—I hope—I hope you're satisfied. You caused my brother's murder. Hounding us. You wouldn't leave us alone. Oh no, you had to prowl and pry. And now he's dead. You can't quiz him any more."

She looked with pity at the angry, quivering little man. He had on a shabby suit of grayish tweed. His general air was unpressed and untrimmed. He was far from the dandy his brother had been, and grief had made him shabbier than ever. "Don't you want to come in?"

He glanced past her and tried to show his scorn; but his emotions were suddenly too much. He covered his face with his hands—dropping an old gray hat—and he wept.

"I'm sorry that you blame me for your brother's death," Miss

Rachel said. "I can't understand why you think I caused it. Won't you come in and sit down and explain?"

He wobbled in through the door, leaving his hat. Miss Rachel picked it up from the porch floor, then ushered Mr. Sutter into the parlor.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?"

After a minute he lifted his head slowly and nodded.

Miss Rachel said, "I'll only be a minute." She hurried off to the kitchen. She ran water into the electric percolator, put coffee into the basket, plugged in the cord. Then she went back to the parlor. The little man had moved over to a chair beside the windows and was looking out like a bird yearning for freedom.

She sat down facing him. "You know that I found your brother's body?"

"The police explained all that," he said through stiff lips.

"Perhaps you know why he was carrying all that cat food?"

"I can only suppose that he was taking it to Bonnevain. My brother was easily fooled, easily taken in. He considered Bonnevain still to be his friend." The words came a little easier now, though Sutter's breathing still had quivers in it.

"You believe that he was taking the canned food to Bonnevain's cat?"

Sutter seemed to retreat into sulky meditation. After a moment he said, "Why else?"

"When did you last see him?"

"Last night at about eight o'clock. We'd had dinner at a little café on Gower Street. We rent a duplex not far away. I went home and Jake went to pay a call—he didn't say where."

"Did he have the sack of cat food then?"

"Of course not!" Sutter said with a touch of irritation. "He wouldn't run around with such a bundle. Jake was careful of his appearance."

"He must have gone back to your shop, filled the sack there?"

Sutter shook his head. He put an elbow on the arm of the chair, leaned on his hand, his fingers covering his eyes. "No. We don't carry that brand. He must have picked the cat food up at some market."

"Then, you think, he took it up to Creek Canyon as a favor to Mr. Bonnevain?"

"Why do you keep harping on that point?" cried Sutter with a flash of fury. "It has nothing to do with Jake's death! So he was carrying a parcel! What matters is how you hounded us——"

"I hounded you?"

"I won't be harassed!" he screamed like a child. "I have a business . . . clients . . . animals to feed. I can't forever be answering questions about Lila Bonnevain's cat."

"Who's been asking?"

A sudden quiet fell on him. His small eyes glittered with a shrewd light which puzzled her. "Old man Rand. He swears we've covered up some trick of Bonnevain's."

"And did you?"

"Try to find out," he sneered. "You aren't the police. You can't search our records." In spite of his defiance, his manner showed an increasing nervousness. He jumped from his chair and ran across the room to sit in shadow, as if for concealment. Then he began to weep again. He seemed torn by some terrible dilemma. ". . . all your fault . . ." he got out in a muffled whine.

"I'm trying to be patient. How am I to blame?"

He shouted then, "You won't keep quiet, you old witch!"

This was when Jennifer whammed him from behind with a vase full of cattails and straw flowers. His face went blank and he sagged, the dry bouquet showering from his shoulders to his lap, and to the floor.

Jennifer inspected the vase. "Chipped." She came walking in, ramrod straight, set the vase on the table, inspected the fallen foe. "Do you think I've killed him?"

The apparition of Miss Jennifer wielding the vase had scattered Miss Rachel's wits. It took a moment to pull herself together sufficiently to examine Mr. Sutter for signs of life. "You seemed to have stunned him. There's a bump but I think that's all."

Miss Jennifer stood in the middle of the room with the air of a schoolmistress dispensing justice. "You should demand courtesy in our home, Rachel. If you don't, I shall. I shall take it upon myself to see that, here at least, we are addressed as ladies." She folded her hands and waited for Mr. Sutter to wake up.

He roused almost at once. He plucked some of the flowers off his clothes and examined them dazedly. Then he felt of his head. He looked behind him. "Something fell on me," he gasped.

"Nothing fell on you, sir," said Jennifer. "I administered a short lesson in manners. Rachel is too mealy-mouthed and too eaten by curiosity to bother with proper address. But I was reared to think that one does not insult a lady at home."

He cringed away from Jennifer, recognizing in her a ferocious propriety which would not hesitate at direct measures.

Miss Rachel brought him a cup of coffee and he gulped it in nervous haste. She tried to get his mind back into the proper channels. "I can't imagine what I might have said to cause either you or your brother any trouble or danger."

It didn't make a dent. He kept his gaze fixed on Jennifer, who hadn't moved, who faced him with the air of being perfectly able to wallop him again if she felt like it. When the coffee was gone he stood up, grabbed for the hat, and fled out through the hall.

"Good riddance," said Jennifer, watching his stumbling flight down the walk to the street. "A thoroughly detestable little man. Who is he?"

"A brother of the dead man."

Jennifer nodded. "I noted the resemblance. He looks shabbier, though."

"One twin was a dandy, apparently. I have a notion he must be the one who engaged in bookmaking activities with Mr. Bonnevain. This one would have been scared and unhappy about such an illegal enterprise, and glad when it was finished. He doesn't like Mr. Bonnevain."

"From what I heard, he doesn't like the Rands. Nor you," Miss Jennifer pointed out coldly.

"Speaking of the Rands—I think I'd better run out to see them. I'll snatch a cup of coffee and a bite of toast."

"You'll eat a proper breakfast!"

"I don't want Mr. Rand popping off with a bad heart before I see him!"

Jennifer's lip curled. "After that, he can feel free to go? How callous can you get?"

It was nearly an hour before Miss Rachel could get away, having been forced to take on board a helping of sausage, two eggs, and some of Jennifer's special pancakes. Feeling rather logy, she drove toward Glendale. The foothills were wreathed with patches of fog; the air was unexpectedly cool. She lowered the car window,

breathed deeply of the bracing air, tried to throw off the heavy feeling left by breakfast. But at the end of the trip she found disappointment. Nobody answered the doorbell at the Rand place.

Exasperated, she walked around outside, looking the place over. It was not a flashy, actorish sort of place. Solid, settled, and far from new, it had had good care and signs of recent repair were evident. Some of the roof tiles mismatched. The garage doors had been braced with cleats across the bottom. At one spot the cement driveway had apparently broken and had been resurfaced. In the rear yard, the grass had been mowed and raked. On the hill at the back, as Ruth Rand had said, was a towering bank of shrubbery. Miss Rachel wandered up there and explored but found nothing startling, no clue to Ruth's attacker of last night.

Ruth had been felled by a can of cat food. A different brand, Lieutenant Shaw had said, from that scattered on the floor beside dead Mr. Sutter in Bax Bonnevain's house. It didn't necessarily mean, though, that Mr. Sutter wasn't Ruth's attacker. In loading a sack at a market, he might well have stuck in an odd can with the others. Pet foods were stacked closely. Sometimes in picking over the stock, people mixed up the various brands.

It wasn't necessarily true, either, that Mr. Sutter had taken the sack of cat food to Creek Canyon. Remembering Jacob's natty appearance, and that he hadn't carried such a package around with him up until eight o'clock, plus the fact that he had apparently walked in from the bus a considerable distance, it seemed unlikely that he had burdened himself so.

There were other possibilities. Miss Rachel admitted grimly to herself that there were dozens of them.

Suppose Bax Bonnevain had bought the cat food, intending to take it to Carol. Somewhere in Hollywood he had run into Jacob Sutter. Some tag-end left from their bookmaking enterprise had required discussion. Jacob had ridden with Bax to the house in the canyon. They'd argued. The can of cat food had spilled as the scene grew violent. Bax had killed his former partner.

She wondered what sort of alibi Bax had for last night.

Meanwhile, the original puzzle remained. What had become of Lila Bonnevain?

Still plagued with the stuffiness left by Jennifer's cooking, Miss Rachel sat on the back steps, propped her head against the porch

door, and tried to think. Three years ago Lila had walked out of her house into the summer night. She'd left a farewell note—typed—and a cat shut into the refrigerator.

On the surface it would seem that Lila simply didn't want the cat trailing her on a mysterious journey.

Why not, in leaving, simply shut the kitchen door on Tom Boy? Cats hadn't learned the trick of turning a knob several feet from the floor.

Why shut him up where he might freeze?

Miss Rachel closed her eyes and tried in her imagination to transport herself back to the Bonnevain kitchen on the night Lila had disappeared. Could it have happened that Bax Bonnevain, knowing his wife on the verge of revolt, had waylaid her in the kitchen and silenced her there without Harper knowing?

Dragged her outdoors? Stuck the cat away in the nearest thing handy, to keep him from following on that grisly errand?

If Harper suspected the truth, it was no wonder he skirted the subject like an elephant walking among eggs.

CHAPTER NINE

The office of the Hooded Groom at nine o'clock had begun—as Mr. Harper would say—to jump. The door had been propped open for increased ventilation. Miss Rachel walked in. Along with the fat man, three youths were busy at desks, answering phones and opening mail. The place held an air of efficiency and haste. Mr. Harper stood near the door, chewing a cigar and reading a racing form. When he saw Miss Rachel he put the cigar into an ash tray on a desk, laid the form beside it. "I thought we were going to meet at the track at three-thirty," he said brusquely.

"I'll be there if I can. I still have to cash those tickets, remember?"

His glance flickered. "Yeah. Well . . . what can I do for you?"

"I need another good horse. Something like It's Pouring."

"You didn't come here for that," he decided.

"I want to talk to you."

He spoke to one of his assistants. "Taking a coffee break. I'll be

in the drugstore." He took Miss Rachel's elbow and hurried her out of the place and on to the corner. At the rear of the drugstore fountain were two small booths. He ushered Miss Rachel into one of them, sat down, patted invisible perspiration from his bald spot with a handkerchief. "What'll it be?"

"A glass of water." He gave her an odd look, so she added: "I had a very big breakfast."

When his coffee came he ignored it. He leaned toward her and bent on her a direct stare that was supposed to convince her of the truth of whatever he was going to say. "Get this straight, ma'am. I know nothing at all about this old fellow, Jacob Sutter, nor what his business might have been with Bax, or who might have bumped him off." He moved back in the seat and exhaled a big breath.

Miss Rachel smiled dryly. "Mr. Bonnevain and the Sutters ran a bookie establishment together in their shop. I rather think you knew that much. But I didn't come here to talk about Sutter's death."

He grunted, began belatedly to stir sugar into his cup.

"I want to talk about Lila Bonnevain."

He didn't glance up. She thought a guarded expression crossed his face; but the pose of honesty and frankness had been long ingrained—for the sucker's sake—so it was hard to tell. "Well, Lila was a nice little lady. And so far as I knew, she and Bax never had a cross word between them." He put such emphasis on this statement that she was struck by it.

"People don't necessarily fight when there is deep trouble," she said. "If there is silent bitterness, unspoken hatred. But anyway—I wondered about the search you and Mr. Bonnevain made for her."

He put down the spoon and picked up a pitcher of cream. Then he changed his mind and decided to drink the coffee black. "It was a while before I realized anything was wrong. She'd left us with a remark about bringing back the beer; but he waited, and we kind of forgot. Bax and I talked about the horses a bit. Then I went outside. He'd been working in the patio, had bricks piled there, I remember. I almost stumbled into them. Then I walked down to the road and had a smoke. I guess during this time he was kind of looking for Lila, and in a way I was too—just puzzled over what had become of her. Not alarmed yet, you see. Wondering, you might say."

He didn't quite meet Miss Rachel's eye. His stare was a little off-center as if he were watching a birdy over her shoulder.

She said, "How long before you felt definitely uneasy?"

"By then, oh"—he paused to sip carefully from the cup—"close to an hour since she'd left us. I ran across Bax in the kitchen, finally, and he said, 'Hey, where's Lila?' or something like that, and I said, 'I don't know, I thought she was helping you.' Then he said, 'Well, let's have the beer, anyway,' and opened the icebox and there was the cat, all fuzzed up—almost freezing, I guess—and a piece of letter paper propped against the beer cans. The cat hunched itself for a jump and went out—excuse the expression—like a bat out of hell. Bax picked up the note. He had a funny look in his eyes, like maybe he'd been expecting something like this, only not now. And he mumbled the words out loud. 'Good-by, Bax darling, this is the end. Good luck.' Or approximately that." Harper shrugged, his plump face suddenly expressionless. "I felt real sorry for Bax right then."

"And then what happened?"

"Bax yelled, 'Oh God, I've got to find her. I've got to make her understand.' He ran around through the house as if looking for a place to start. Then I pointed out that we ought to use a system, divide the job. I went out the back and up the hill, in case she'd hiked out for a bus in Laurel Canyon. Didn't see a soul. Got lost a couple of times in the brush. I don't know what Bax did—ran to Carol Callahan's first, I guess. He was breathing hard, covered with dust and scratches, when I met him again in the front room. He'd given up, too. Just in that short time, he'd lost hope. He said he wasn't going to try to bring her back. She'd walked out; she must know what she wanted. So I said how sorry I was—and I was—and went home."

When he had finished, he drank the rest of the coffee in a gulp, as if relieved to have the story off his chest.

Miss Rachel sat silent for a minute or two. Then she asked, "Was Lila Bonnevain tight about money?"

The question seemed to astound him. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing, perhaps. Was she?"

He hesitated slightly. "You mean—stingy with Bax?"

"Yes. I understood from Ruth Rand that she supported him, kept up the home from her income as a music teacher."

He squinted uncomfortably into the coffee cup. "I guess they had some such arrangement. Bax was in a peculiar position. He'd had a taste of glory and high living when he was a jockey. He didn't enjoy losing that. He tried to keep up a certain appearance afterward, tried not to drop out of the circle of friends he had. When he met Lila, she must have fallen for him. She was willing to make sacrifices to have him. Then she got fed up and quit."

"She got progressively close with her money. Is that what you mean?"

He spread his hands. "I haven't any proof. Of course, Bax made a little money now and then. I paid him for information, and once in a while he'd set up a book with somebody like the Sutters. Nothing big or permanent. Bax didn't have connections." He smiled fleetingly.

"Did Mr. Bonnevain even mention any substantial amount she may have put away?"

"Not to me."

"Do you happen to know where he was last night when Sutter was killed?"

Mr. Harper brightened up. "Certainly. He was supposed to be sleeping on a cot in my back room two doors from here. He called me and said he didn't want to go home to the house in the canyon. Ruth Rand was raising hell. The cat was getting on his nerves, too. He asked me if the cot was still in the closet, and the back door key where I always used to hide it, and I said, yes, sure, and he was welcome. So that's where he must have spent the night."

"Have you seen him today?"

"No."

Miss Rachel rose. "I won't keep you. Thanks for talking to me."

He bounced up, suddenly full of kindly humor. "Any time! Just ask old Harper, ma'am! Glad to serve!" He ushered her to the door with the gallantry of a duke.

She didn't accompany him back to the den of the Hooded Groom. Instead she bought a newspaper from a rack and went to her car to read it. Sutter's murder had taken place too close to press time for the early editions to contain more than a sketch of the crime. There

was this, however, in bold type: the police requested Lila Bonnevain to come forward.

"I don't think she'll do it," Miss Rachel murmured to herself. Then clarified: "I don't think she'll be *able* to do it." And her thoughts snapped back to the odd detail supplied in such offhand manner by Mr. Harper, that Bax Bonnevain had lifted some of the patio bricks the night his wife had disappeared. Sooner or later, of course, the police would be prying up those same bricks. Plus digging in the seedy garden. When, for instance, they decided that Mrs. Bonnevain wasn't going to answer their appeal.

She turned to the racing page. The Hooded Groom, along with the Masked Trainer, the Peeping Jockey, and the Mystery Exercise Boy, had a spread of ads across the bottom of the page. All had highly secret tips which would insure fortunes today at the races. Prices varied. Hooded Groom had something in the third which was a bombshell.

A shadow moved against the window next the curb. She looked up. Bax Bonnevain was bent slightly, peering in at her through the glass. She reached over to roll down the pane. "Hello, Mr. Bonnevain."

He was pale, and the shape of broken bones in his face showed under the taut skin. She thought, a horse stepped right on him in that spill he had. One touch of an iron-shod hoof, and his career as a rider had been ended. He seemed undecided about how to begin. "I won't keep you—just for a minute——"

"Sit inside," she invited casually.

He accepted as if grateful. "I'd just parked—going to Harper's place with something for his sheet tomorrow." He had the ever present hat in his nervous hands, turned it over and over in a manner which seemed habitual. There was sweat on his forehead. "I've had a session with the cops."

"Over Sutter's murder?"

"Yes. I can't prove where I was most of last night. I slept in the back room over there"—he gestured toward the Hooded Groom's doorway—"but nobody saw me go in, or leave. This part of the neighborhood's dead after midnight."

She said, "Both the Sutter brothers denied ever having known you."

He glanced at her sidewise. "Yeah. They were nervous. They used

to take in a few bets. I helped them run the book. There's more to it than just jotting down names and dollar marks. You've got to know when to lay off bets—protect yourself by taking the money to the track, even if you just break even. And then sometimes a welsher has to be talked to."

"They were afraid the police might get wind of their former business?"

"Well, it was more than that. There were a couple of shootings downtown. The cops gave out that some of the Eastern gangsters were trying to muscle in. Then the federal law came, you had to buy a gambling license, and the two little guys, between these two things, got the wind up. They said their regular customers would drop away if there was a . . . a criminal taint to the place." He laughed shortly and bitterly.

"But Jacob Sutter still considered himself your friend?"

Bax stared straight ahead through the windshield. "Sure. He still liked the races, too; played them all the time. He was a sporty little old guy. That brother of his, Jonathan, is as dull as an owl. But old Jake liked to wear good clothes and kick up his heels."

"Why should Jacob Sutter go to Ruth Rand's house last night and knock her down with a can of cat food?"

The expression of hard repose didn't change. "Did he do that?"

"At about ten o'clock last night, she stepped out into her backyard. She surprised someone lurking there. This person hit her with a can of cat food and ran. In the gutter, later, Mr. Rand found an uncashed ticket on that long shot in the last race yesterday."

He said slowly, "I see what you mean. Sutter had a sack of cat food with him, according to the police. They asked me about it, and of course I couldn't tell them anything." He paused as if to gauge whether she believed it. "Carol's been feeding the cat for me. I don't know what Sutter was doing there, carrying all those cans."

"Would he have any reason to be spying on Miss Rand?"

"None that I know of."

"Were you still in business with the Sutters up until the time you went East? At the time your wife disappeared, I mean to say."

"My breakup with them, a day or so before, was one of the reasons I was anxious to be on my way." He moved in the seat as if suddenly restless, turned slightly so that he half faced her. He blurted, "Are you going to the track today?"

"Probably," she said.

He reached into his jacket pocket, brought out some tickets, held them out to her. "These will cash out to about fifty-five dollars. There's a horse in the third I'd like you to bet for me, if you will."

She took the tickets. They were a conglomeration, place and show bets on different races. "How do you want him?"

"Win. Number Three. Storm Watch."

She stuffed the tickets into her purse. "Number three in the third. I won't forget."

"I have a hunch I won't make it," he said grimly. "They'll pick me up again. Those cops are really on my back for lying to them before."

"It was a very foolish thing to do."

His lips were tight. "I made a mistake. That's all."

"Did they ask you if your wife had cleared out her bank accounts before leaving you?"

"Among other things." He snapped the door open and got out quickly. "I told them she had, and that she took her purse with her. I think she had about seven hundred dollars in it." He was facing into the car again, looking past her at the traffic in the street, something far away and remembering behind his eyes.

She thought of one last question. "Did your wife ever play the races?"

"Never." He put his hat on his head, ticked the brim at her, walked away and disappeared through the doorway of Mr. Harper's office.

She went home again. Jennifer was making apricot jam in the kitchen. The cat was in the hall, prowling back and forth, wrapped in an aura of angry neglect. Jennifer, stirring the pot on the stove, said, "She's exaggerating. I've offered cream and raw shrimp. I fluffed her pillow in the parlor."

"You spoil her so horribly," Miss Rachel pointed out, "and like an ungrateful child, she demands more and more. You should ignore her." She sat down on a kitchen stool, picked out a washed apricot and began to eat it. "How would you like to go to the races this afternoon?"

Miss Jennifer's hand froze on the wooden paddle. "I have work to do." Her tone implied that Miss Rachel should have some to do, too.

"I know, but it will still be here tomorrow. I need you now."

"Why?" asked Miss Jennifer flatly, stirring again. The fragrant steam rose around her head like a halo. She looked plain, domineering, and unutterably righteous. The cat stared at her and yowled scorn.

"I want to know who's there. It's such a big place. I can't be everywhere. You've never met Mr. Bonnevain, nor Mr. Harper, but you know the others. Mr. Bonnevain won't be there, anyhow. But he wanted me to be." She munched, deep in thought, considering Bax Bonnevain's possible motives. "He practically made sure I'd go. He gave me a horse to bet on."

"Who is it this time? Forelady again?"

"Forelady was only a hot-dog horse," Miss Rachel pointed out. "And besides they don't run them that soon again. This one's Storm Watch."

"I don't suppose there are any horses any more called Black Beauty or Dobbin."

"Probably not," Miss Rachel agreed.

"Father had a riding horse once he called Rascal. I don't think that the horse was bad-mannered, though. He was lively and spirited. Father called him Rascal more as a joke."

"That must have been when I was too small to remember."

"Yes, it was."

There was silence for a little while, and then Miss Rachel asked, "Well, are you going with me? Post time's at one-thirty. We should be there before one if we're to try to get a seat."

"I shall go," said Jennifer, pouring the jam into jars, "to keep you from making a fool of yourself."

They were in the stands by twelve-thirty, thanks to Jennifer's habitual habit of arriving anywhere early. They located their reserved seats, then left them to go two floors below. In the vast lower floor, under the grandstand, were the ranks of windows where previous days' tickets were honored. Miss Rachel cashed hers and Bax Bonnevain's and put the money into separate compartments in her handbag.

Jennifer came back from a scouting trip with narrowed eyes. "Up at the far end, at the two-dollar show windows, is that dreadful little man I taught a lesson in courtesy this morning," she announced. "He saw me and cringed like a coward."

"Did he try to run?"

"No. He was too near the window after having waited, appar-

ently, and didn't wish to lose his place." Jennifer paused to glare at the passing mob. Everybody seemed in a hurry. Some were glassy-eyed with indecision, others were reading tip-sheets. Many of them bumped, or nearly bumped, the unyielding figure of Jennifer. "He just sort of crouched and sheltered his face with his hatbrim."

You couldn't blame him for not speaking, Miss Rachel thought. He'd expect Jennifer to take another swing at him if he did.

"I shall go back and keep an eye on him," said Jennifer, implying that Jonathan Sutter's actions must be those of a crook.

As Jennifer walked off, Miss Rachel's attention wandered elsewhere; she saw a tall, dignified man turn from the fifty-dollar cashier with a wad of bills in his hand. He made a commanding, somewhat theatrical, appearance, wearing a flowered satin waistcoat under a well-cut gray flannel suit. His dark blue Homburg sat on well-brushed snow-white hair. From the looks of the money in his hand, and his satisfied expression, he had just collected on a killing.

CHAPTER TEN

She maneuvered to meet him in a brief clearing in the hurrying throng. He was putting money neatly into his wallet, a ten-dollar bill reserved against his palm. He glanced up. Miss Rachel said, "Mr. Rand, I hope that you're feeling better."

A flickering blankness crossed his face as if his memory had failed him. "Miss Murdock?"

"Your heart attack of last night," she reminded.

"It passed. When I'm in the throes, it always seems important to talk to someone. Anyone. Before I go, you know." He smiled deprecatingly. "You're meeting Bax Bonnevain again?"

"No. I'm here simply to bet on a horse."

He smiled again. His regular white teeth flashed in the light. If they were artificial, as she thought they might be, they had been wonderfully made. "The bug has bitten you?"

"I like money," she admitted naively.

He laughed, but under the laughter she sensed that he was studying her sharply. He seemed to have thrown off, too, the deep depression of last night, when he'd excused himself from her company. It

was hard to tell, though, about a man like him. He was an old pro, a gifted faker of emotion. "This is a very poor place to build a bank-roll."

"You don't recommend it above a savings account?"

"Only a madman would do so." He glanced about. "Is your sister with you?"

"She's off with an acquaintance for the moment," Miss Rachel said. "Is your daughter with *you*?"

"She's working today." He had finished with the wallet, now slid it into his hip pocket. "I was about to ask—until I recalled that you didn't drink—if you would join me at the bar."

"Jennifer is the one who doesn't drink," she told him.

This wasn't what he had expected, but he made the best of it. He touched her elbow to guide her through the mob. "I seem to see a rack of whiskey bottles in the distance."

"I like screwdrivers. They're made with vodka."

He nodded absently. She didn't add that Jennifer's nose hadn't yet caught on to vodka.

At the bar, he looked steadily at her above his drink. "I see by the papers that Bonnevain had a murder at his house last night." He spoke in the sort of tone in which he might have discussed the weather. "Some falling out between crooks, I presume."

"I think the man murdered at Bonnevain's house could be the one who whacked Miss Rand with a can of cat food," she said casually.

He digested this for a minute or so. "Sutter? Would he be spying on Ruth?" He was frowning; he was either deeply disturbed or wanted Miss Rachel to think he was. "I don't see the connection."

"Mr. Sutter seems to have gone quite late to the Bonnevain house, and carrying a big bag of canned cat food."

He shrugged. "Well, that doesn't prove anything. I think Bonnevain attacked Ruth, and so does she. In fact, she somewhat recognized him—not enough to be positive, unfortunately."

"They are both small men."

"Then, as you say"—he had raised his tone slightly and an argumentative note had crept in—"the cat food. Why, Bonnevain might have carried it home for that cat of Lila's." He bent closer, his white brows drawn together in apparent anger.

"You mean, he found Sutter waiting, there was a fight, and Mr. Bonnevain ran off leaving the cat food?" Mr. Rand was nodding

emphatically. "Wouldn't that have been rather dangerous?" she went on, "since a clerk might recall his having bought it, and identify him, and so puncture his alibi?"

"Bax Bonnevain isn't the smartest person in the world," said Mr. Rand smugly.

"How much money do you think he got out of your granddaughter?" she asked.

As in the case of Mr. Harper, the mention of the Bonnevain finances seemed to throw Rand completely off stride. "What did you say?" he asked after a moment. The five-minute buzzer cut loose just then, inspiring a new flurry among the bettors; when its hoarse screech had died, he added, "Are you really getting anywhere with this inquiry, Miss Murdock, or are you just wasting Ruth's time and her hopes?" He fished some tip-sheets out of his jacket pocket and muttered, "I'll have to buy a ticket now or it will be too late. Will you excuse me?" He moved backward and the mob swallowed him.

She went upstairs and found Jennifer settled in the section reserved for them. "Did you lose Mr. Sutter?"

"He's right over there," said Jennifer, pointing.

Miss Rachel made out the humped figure of the small man who seemed to be trying to squeeze down out of sight. He was perhaps twenty feet from them in another reserved section. He was wearing the nondescript garments of his early-morning appearance. In addition to his fear of Jennifer, he seemed shaken by an almost intolerable excitement.

Miss Rachel sat down beside her sister. "You've heard of secret drinkers?"

Miss Jennifer sniffed long and low, but apparently the vodka didn't register. "Yes, of course. Who hasn't?"

"Well, I think that Mr. Sutter over there is a secret gambler."

"There's nothing secret about him, just sniveling and cowardly."

"I meant, Mr. Bonnevain told me that it was the other brother, the dead one, who was daring and sporty. He thinks *this* Sutter is as dull as an owl."

"Being at the races doesn't give him fascination," Miss Jennifer pointed out with acerbity.

The announcer's voice boomed through the loud-speakers. The horses were at the gate. Miss Jennifer was suddenly upright, her

eyes glued to the scene at the far side of the track. It was a six-furlong race, eight horses in it, California bred colts.

"Do you have a ticket on this race?" Miss Rachel wondered slyly. Jennifer fussed with the purse in her lap. "Well, I happened to see the horses parade in front of the stands, and there was a very cute animal there, quite reddish in contrast to the others. His eyes were alert."

"Let's hope his feet are. What did you put on him?"

"Two dollars to show."

The flag was up, the crowd made a last minute rush for the rail, and the clanging bell closed the betting windows. The horses swept around the track, and sure enough, Jennifer's choice was out in front by three lengths. When the prices went up, he proved to have paid sixteen dollars and twenty cents to win. Miss Rachel then had to explain, or try to explain, why he only paid three dollars to show. "If you had a good hunch on him, you should have played him to win."

"I thought if he won, my ticket would pay to win," Jennifer said, crestfallen.

Miss Rachel spent the next ten minutes explaining the mysteries of the tote machine, or at least as much as she understood of them.

During this time she noticed Mr. Sutter sidling out, stumbling, dropping his program, casting a final terrified glance toward Jennifer. Miss Rachel suddenly stopped talking, sat looking down absently at the crowd in front of the grandstand. "Go on," urged Miss Jennifer. "What do you get if your horse comes in fourth?"

"Not a thing. Isn't he overdoing it?"

"Who? What?"

"Mr. Sutter. He's making a caricature of himself."

"A guilty conscience, Rachel. Look, on the board, as plain as you please, it gives the number of the horse who came in fourth. Would they put it there if it didn't mean anything?"

"The horse gets something. The bettors don't. I'm going down to watch him. If you can manage to run into Mr. Rand, try to find out if he has made his choice in the third."

On the mezzanine floor, Mr. Sutter ate a hot dog and drank a bottle of beer. He studied the odds on the big board on the end wall, above the bar. He leaned against a post and chewed a pencil. Finally he went into the men's rest room. He seemed to have dropped the nervousness which plagued him in Jennifer's neighborhood.

Miss Rachel went back to the reserved seats. Jennifer had vanished. Probably she had gone to cash the show ticket and to make another bet. Miss Rachel studied her program and tried to concentrate on the horses. They were on the track now, exercising, the brilliant silks of the jockeys like specks of confetti in the distance across the infield. Miss Rachel went down again and put a win bet on a nag named I'm Trying.

So am I, she thought.

But when the race was over, I'm Trying had come in fifth or sixth. Miss Rachel tore up the ticket and scattered it at her feet. Still Jennifer hadn't reappeared.

She returned to the mezzanine where she bought Bax Bonnevain's tickets on Storm Watch, plus a five-dollar bet for herself in case Bonnevain knew what he was talking about. The morning line on the big board over the bar showed that Storm Watch had opened at odds of nine to one; and he should close somewhere in that vicinity unless too many people had tips on him. He should return about twenty dollars for a two-dollar bet. Miss Rachel went back then for another five-dollar ticket.

She found Miss Jennifer on the lower floor, finally, at a coffee stand. "I lost that Mr. Rand in the mob."

"I know how evasive he can be." Miss Rachel thought to herself that Rand had the actor's ability to project or withdraw himself at will. "Here, hold these." She put all the tickets in Jennifer's hand. "If Storm Watch comes in, cash them. I'll see you in the grandstand later." She started off.

"Where are you going?" cried Jennifer, instantly full of suspicion.

"I'm curious as to who is keeping store while Mr. Sutter attends the races."

"Rachel! If the shop is closed——"

"I haven't broken and entered for years," Miss Rachel protested.

She left the grandstand by the main ramp, went through the flower-bordered paths to the gate where she checked out, hiked to the car, drove off the immense parking lot through endless rows of cars. She turned into the quick traffic on Century Boulevard and worked east, then turned north toward Hollywood. She parked in a lot near Sunset and walked to the pet store. A blind had been lowered against the pane of the repaired show window, but the door

was open. From the dim interior drifted the chatter of birds, the *cheep* of monkeys, and unidentifiable scratchings and rustlings.

She went in and at once a parrot began to screech at her.

A red-haired youth of about eighteen came from the rear of the shop.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I am Mrs. Carson Pond." She paused as though the name must mean something to him; and he of course stared back in uncomprehending blankness. He hadn't quite grown up to his hands and feet yet and the cowlick on his crown was stiff as bristle. "I came to pay my bill. Didn't Mr. Sutter tell you I'd be in?"

He retreated an uneasy step. "I don't think they give credit."

"Well, they did to me." She twinkled gratefully over the favor. "You'll find a bill for me, Tootsie Cat Food, somewhere in Mr. Sutter's things."

He glanced behind him at the counter in the corner. Behind it Miss Rachel could see the top of an old-fashioned desk, pigeonholes stuffed with papers. "Over there, probably," she suggested.

"Yeah." He gave her a studying look, as if trying to place her among the usual customers, then turned and ambled around the counter to the desk, picked up a few stray sheets there and dropped them. "What was your name?"

"Mrs. Pond."

Unexpectedly he straightened. "You want to come here and see if you can find it?"

She was at the desk a split-second later. She went through the stuff in the pigeonholes. It was all old invoices, orders for birds and animals, or receipts for feed bills. She started on the drawers. One held a stock of pamphlets, the care of assorted animals, birds, and fishes. Under the pamphlets were two well-thumbed volumes: one, *How to Beat the Races* by an anonymous author, the other a racing handbook for the year 1954. In the lower left-hand drawer was a Luger pistol.

"In case we get held up," said the red-haired boy above her shoulder. "The cops were here this morning and they sure got interested in that gun. But of course Mr. Sutter told them what it was for."

She glanced up at him. "Have you been working for the Sutters long?"

"Part time, ever since I was fourteen," he said with a touch of boasting. "I used to hang around and play with the animals and they finally put me to work to keep me out of mischief. Now of course I'm an animal expert."

"I'll bet you are," she agreed. She was losing hope of finding anything pertinent in the desk. Probably all records involving the betting transactions with Bonnevain had long since been destroyed. She was lifting blank invoice sheets out of the lower drawer on the right when something fell from between the printed pages. She bent, picked it from the floor. It was a copy of the torn snapshot she had seen in the Bonnevain house, the picture of Lila Bonnevain emerging from a bank. On the back of the picture was jotted in pencil a date of over three years before, and a sum: \$26,755.

She showed the picture to the boy. "Snapshot of someone."

He nodded. "She was a good friend of Mr. Jake's."

"She traded here?"

"Bought cat food from us. Bought a kitten, a long time ago. I had just started working here."

"How did you like her?"

"She was swell," the boy said with sudden enthusiasm. "She told me once I ought to learn to be an animal trainer, that I had a gift for it, that animals trusted me. She could see, I wasn't ever mean to anything. I have patience. Most of all, I'm not afraid." He rubbed the cowlick down with a square hand and it jumped up when his fingers had passed.

"Did she move away?"

He took out a package of chewing gum, offered Miss Rachel a stick, accepted her regrets without comment, opened three sticks for himself, and chewed them up with smacking noises. "I guess so. Haven't seen her for a long time."

"When was the last time?"

"I don't recall the exact date but it must have been around three years ago, anyhow. She came in to ask if we'd board her cat for her while she went on a trip."

Miss Rachel looked around at the dim, twittering little shop. "Do you have boarding facilities here?"

"No, and I told her that. Then Mr. Jake came in and she went out back to talk to him. That's the last I recall seeing of Mrs. Bonnevain."

"What about this snapshot?"

He frowned at it. "It's been around, in the desk, for ages."

"Did it turn up *after* she'd asked about boarding the cat?"

He scratched his collar bone under the thin T-shirt. "Gosh, I just can't remember."

She put the little picture back into the pad of invoices and shut the desk drawer. "Well, it seems I haven't found my bill."

"I'll tell Mr. Sutter you were here and looked for it."

Their eyes met, held. There was a sly quirk on his young mouth. To herself Miss Rachel damned him as an obstreperous blackmailer. "Silence is golden," she pointed out.

"But the green stuff rustles nicer," he reminded.

She took a bill from her purse and wound it around a finger. "Well?"

He shrugged and reached for it. "So what? What's Mr. Sutter got to hide? He wouldn't kill his own brother. And the store here, it's just an ordinary old pet shop." His tone told her that he had been wise to the bookie operation. "As far as I'm concerned, you came in to price canaries."

She wondered if he knew that in underworld parlance a canary was a fancy name for a stool pigeon, and decided that he did and that he was relishing his role as squealer. "Give my regards to Boston Blackie," she told him, heading for the door.

He swung, stood facing her from the counter. "You want to know something?"

She hesitated, looked back; and the parrot beside the door leaned from his perch and tried to take a chunk out of her taffeta shoulder. "What?"

"It'll cost you." He put the five-dollar bill against his teeth and blew on it. "Another one like this."

"Worth it?"

"I think."

She added another five to the rascal's loot. He leaned on the counter and studied her, smirking. "Are you a friend of Mrs. Bonnevain's?"

"I'm trying to find her," Miss Rachel admitted.

He nodded as if she had confirmed some suspicion of his. "Well, this ought to interest you, then. About a week ago I heard Mr. Jake and Mr. Jon talking, and Mr. Jake was saying, 'There's no mystery about what became of Lila Bonnevain.'"

Miss Rachel had walked back to watch this brigand more closely,

to weigh his expression along with his words. He might be the type who would take to fiction when truth ran out.

"Mr. Jon sort of grunted, as if he agreed, maybe. And Mr. Jake went on and said, "The puzzle is, what happened to her money?" "Go on."

"Mr. Jon must have noticed I was listening. He went, 'shhhhhh' and I didn't hear any more."

There's no mystery about what became of Lila Bonnevain. . . .
Where was she, then?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I know nothing at all about any large sum of money," said Ruth Rand. She was seated bolt upright on a chair in Miss Rachel's parlor. She wore well-fitted dark slacks, a pink silk shirt, a gray wool sweater tossed across her shoulders. Her hair was somewhat ruffled as if by the fast drive she had made here. It was past seven. The Misses Murdock had just finished a hasty dinner after returning from the track. "If Lila possessed any such amount as that jotted on the back of the snapshot, she must have inherited it from her father or my sister. And just didn't tell Dad or me anything about it."

"What were her parents' circumstances?"

"Very ordinary." Ruth's gaze was suddenly thoughtful. "However, my sister Sheila didn't have to work during the years she survived Graham. I took for granted that he had left her some small annuity. She was most careful with expenses. Lila continued with her music and dancing lessons, of course. But they lived modestly." Her tone had grown quiet, as though some speculations of long ago were being re-examined. "Graham was a mining engineer. He used to buy small amounts of stock in some of the companies he prospected for, if he thought there might be a profit. It has just occurred to me, Lila might have realized something on those old stocks. Perhaps new discoveries have been made. Something like uranium. After she had come out here, perhaps, or even after she had married Bax. So that she felt it wasn't any of our business." Ruth nodded slowly. "Yes, if Lila had banked anything like twenty-five thousand dollars, it must have been the result of some such stroke of luck."

“Or, since Mr. Bonnevain is a gambling man——”

Ruth seized on it. “She was fooling him,” she cried with a sudden glitter in her eyes. “Don’t you see how it all fits in with my suspicions?”

“I do indeed. It is what you would expect if Lila had begun to see her husband as you see him.”

“He caught on and followed her,” Ruth rushed on. “He took the snapshot to confront her with it. At the end there was a terrific argument, Lila refused to hand over the money, and he killed her. It’s the only explanation possible”

“It’s one answer,” Miss Rachel agreed. “Not the sole one, I think. Since the Sutters had a copy of the snapshot and have kept it these three years, they may be involved in some way. Perhaps one of them took the picture. Perhaps in doing so they were acting for Bonnevain—or for themselves.”

“I don’t follow you!”

“We don’t know enough about the snapshot to draw conclusions about it. To shut away other possibilities besides the one you want to believe. One thing’s certain. By now the police have reconstructed the torn picture and have interviewed the people at the bank. Undoubtedly, soon Lieutenant Shaw will question you about it.”

Ruth said sulkily, “You might have told me what you’d found in that box.”

“I went to your home this morning and no one was there.”

Ruth apparently thought that Miss Rachel intended it as apology; she accepted it grudgingly. “I’ll try to find out from Shaw what the police think of the picture. By the way, I’m ready to write a check for you.” She patted the big white straw handbag. “I know you said we should wait and see what the charge ought to be, but I’ve got to keep ahead of Bax. I must insure your co-operation. I know what he’s doing, giving you tips on the races. It’s his way of buying you off.”

Miss Rachel wondered if her face betrayed her wry feelings. Storm Watch had tried hard, but all he had managed was second.

“Mr. Bonnevain can scarcely expect me to believe him infallible.”

Ruth Rand rose from the chair and strode restlessly to the windows, then came back to the mantel where Jennifer kept a row of family portraits. “You keep defending Bax.”

“I think he’s a fool.”

Ruth’s sucked-in breath had in it the sound of victory. “Yes, I think so, too. He’s a fool and I shall trap him.”

"I meant, if he's guilty, he's been his own worst enemy. He lied about his wife's whereabouts. His alibi for the time Sutter was murdered amounts to nothing. He's antagonistic and uncooperative. He seems bent on damning himself by his own behavior."

Ruth was gripping the edge of the mantel, bent slightly forward, her big, firm body showing purpose in its stance. "But still, you're foolish enough to think he might not be guilty? Wait and see. When the excitement has died down he'll marry that Callahan girl. Presently he'll begin spending Lila's money, what's left of it, plus what he realizes from the house and Lila's personal things, her paintings and the piano, wherever they are. If he can get away with it, he'll have it all. Even the . . ." Ruth's voice cracked. ". . . even Lila's old tom cat."

During the moment of silence, Jennifer could be heard in the dining room stacking the dishes.

Ruth jerked as with a spasm. "No. By God, that I won't allow! Bax blinded the old cat; he hates him. I'm going up there and by hook or crook I'll bring Tom Boy back with me."

"Going alone?"

Ruth seemed indifferent. "Would you go with me?"

Miss Rachel looked at her oddly. "Are you really going up there just for the cat?"

"Look, Miss Murdock, I've admitted humbly that I was off-base, playing tricks, yesterday. From now on I'm doing just what I say I'm doing." She smoothed her hands down over her firm bust to her narrow waist. "That old cat was Lila's baby. She bought him when he was a kitten."

"From the Sutter pet shop. Where you went through the window. Where Mr. Bonnevain assisted in making book."

Ruth's lips flattened angrily. "The filthy lying little jerks!"

"The Sutters impressed me as sly and conniving," Miss Rachel agreed, "but it seems their motive in denying that they recognized Mr. Bonnevain may have been embarrassment about their former illegal enterprise." Miss Rachel headed for the doorway. "Wait a moment. I'll get my hat and purse."

Ruth's driving did not resemble the neck-jerking flight of yesterday. She was calm, careful. The twisting canyon road climbed out of the smog, the last lights dropped below, and suddenly the night wind was clean with sage, the smell of desert hills, dead grasses

toasted by the sun, and pungent eucalyptus. They entered the narrow defile near the top of the ridge; the car's head lamps swept the encroaching lantana, a tumble of color. Ruth slipped the car into the same spot, set the brakes. She took a flash from the glove compartment, clicked it on and off, then doused the car lights.

Miss Rachel slipped out, shut the door quietly. Below in the cup-like depression of Creek Canyon, a few house lights glimmered. Here it was intensely dark, closed in by shrubbery, trees shutting out the stars. On such a night as this, she thought, three years before, Lila Bonnevain had vanished.

Lila had had a husband whom she may—or may not—have trusted and loved. It was sure that she had had a house, a garden, and a pet whose care spoke of affection. She had snapped from sight like the blowing of a mirage, leaving the husband to travel alone, turning the house over to tenants who had neglected the garden. Leaving the old cat to wander the valley like a wailing ghost.

Lila Bonnevain's ghost. Woman into cat.

The breeze brushed her with an unexpected chill.

"Let's go. Don't crack any twigs," Ruth warned. She clicked the light on briefly to search out the path, then snapped it off. They went downhill in ear-pricking silence. The Bonnevain house was dark. A smell of earth rose from it. Ruth paused, sniffing. "What is it? Someone's been digging? Is that it?"

"I imagine the police have been poking around."

"You mean, hunting Lila's body?"

"Most likely."

Ruth plunged forward in the dark. There was a rattle like falling stone. The light flashed on, fell in a half circle, and clattered on the ground. By its brilliant, slanted beam Miss Rachel made out the side of the little house, stark white; and more shadowy, the interior of the small patio. Bricks had been piled here and there and a rough hole gaped in the center of the enclosed area. Ruth Rand was sitting, rubbing an ankle, just beyond the fan of light. "Oh, my God, I've broken my leg!" Her voice held agony, unwilling tears.

Miss Rachel picked her way over the mess on the floor and helped Ruth to stand. Her blouse and slacks were stained with fresh-dug earth, her hands gritty in Miss Rachel's. "Lean on me. I'll get you to that chair and you can sit down." She guided Ruth over to a rustic chair made of roughhewn eucalyptus branches. Ruth sank down

with a grimace. Miss Rachel knelt and lifted the pants leg of Ruth's slacks. Blood oozed from the smooth, tanned skin; there was a gash just above the ankle.

Behind close-set teeth, Ruth said huskily, "There's something in that hole. I fell on it. Take a look with the flash, will you?"

Miss Rachel picked up the light, wondering meanwhile if Bax Bonnevain were inside the house and if they had awakened him. She turned the beam into the hole in the floor. In its bottom, half covered with fallen soil was Tom Boy.

Miss Rachel put the light on the piled bricks, got down on her knees, lifted the cat gently in both hands. She thought him dead; but all at once he opened an eye at her—the good eye, and a low sound growled in his throat.

"Poor old cat!" Ruth was weeping into her hands.

"He's not dead, though."

Ruth lifted her head quickly. "Isn't he? Oh, I'm glad! We'll rush him to a vet." She started to stand, then fell back into an attitude of agony. A moan escaped her. "My damned ankle! I can't stand on it."

The old cat struggled in Miss Rachel's hold. When he gained his feet, however, he seemed no better able to travel than Ruth. He wobbled, limped, and finally sank down only a few feet from where he had started.

Ruth said quickly, "Miss Murdock—I've got to have a bandage on this leg. I can feel the blood running into my shoe. Now, there must be first-aid supplies in that house. Rouse Bax, and if he won't answer, go in anyway. Beat in the pane on the kitchen door and put your hand in and turn the lock."

Miss Rachel felt a stirring of uneasiness. It seemed to be her lot to do Ruth's prowling and prying. Still, she thought, Ruth couldn't have planned the fall, nor the injury. It was a bad gash, worse than one would inflict as part of a trick.

She went to the kitchen door and pounded, and when there was no sound from inside the dark house, she went to the front door and rang the bell. Then she came back and did what Ruth had advised—broke the pane with a brick and stuck her hand in. There was an old-fashioned hook-and-eye latch as well as the modern affair connected with the knob, as though Bax Bonnevain intended doubly to shut out prowlers. She turned the button in the center of the knob, lifted the hook, and went in.

She hurried through the house, turning on lights. There was no one inside. On the kitchen table were two empty beer bottles, set close together, and a couple of glasses in which foam still glittered. On a plate were the remains of a sandwich. The bread was not yet dried, so someone had had a meal here late in the day. It was the one sign of recent occupancy.

In the bedroom, the bed had been straightened, spread with a patchwork quilt, the pillows propped up stiffly against the headboard.

Miss Rachel explored the medicine cabinet. There was still a toothbrush, a bottle of mouthwash, shaving equipment. In a cabinet beside the washbasin she found a supply of towels, cut one into strips with the help of Bax Bonnevain's razor, went back outdoors to Ruth. The cat lay where he had crawled. His tail was twitching and he seemed to regard both Ruth and Miss Rachel with equal dislike.

Ruth had shifted her position, sat huddled and almost cringing, her head bent and her arms wrapped across her bosom. "What did you find?"

"No one's in there. I had to cut up a towel."

Ruth lifted her pants leg with twitching fingers. "Tie it tight, as tight as you can. I want to take Tom Boy to a veterinarian before I bother with myself. I can't concentrate, I can't drive, with blood pouring into my shoe." She bit her lip as Miss Rachel twisted the towel around the wound and pulled. In a moment the strips of towel were saturated with blood.

"You'd better have this attended to first," Miss Rachel pointed out. "I can't seem to stanch it."

"Tighter," Ruth said breathlessly.

Miss Rachel removed the sodden wrappings and started again with fresh ones. She went back for another towel. By the time the leg was bound and no longer bleeding, the section of patio floor around them looked like the scene of major surgery. Ruth was white, too. In the glow from the flash her skin seemed alabaster, her eyes big and jet black.

"Well . . ." she said. She stood up with obvious effort and tried her weight on the injured ankle. "No, not broken, after all. Thank God for small favors." She tried to laugh, but it was weak.

"I'll carry Tom Boy and the light. Be careful."

"It smells so damp here. Look at the water on the bricks. Some-

one's been watering, trying to bring Lila's garden back to life." Ruth was looking around strangely, as if taking in for the first time the conditions in the patio. "And they've dug here. Somebody dug here. They took up the bricks and poked around in the earth for Lila." All at once Ruth collapsed backward into the chair, almost missing it, so that the flimsily nailed eucalyptus stretched and creaked. Her face looked blank as if with shock and her body seemed boneless.

Miss Rachel dropped the cat and moved quickly to Ruth's side. She thought that the blond woman was on the verge of fainting, but Ruth roused a moment later and said, "Give me a minute. My underpinnings have termites, or something." She grinned a little, then added: "You know, you're a brick—and I don't mean the kind they've stacked here for people to fall over. You're a real, honest-to-God little old lady brick." She laughed and it was exactly like the laughter of someone quite drunk, so that Miss Rachel knew that the shock had gone deep.

"No. I don't think anyone wants the garden brought to life," she contradicted, hoping to attract Ruth's attention.

Ruth leaned her head back on a wobbly neck. "No?"

"There was a great deal of water about when Sutter was killed," Miss Rachel added. "I think someone wants to keep Tom Boy away from the house."

"It's crazy," Ruth murmured.

"It only seems so because we don't know the motive," Miss Rachel said. "But I did notice, at the time we discovered Sutter's body—there was water on the bricks and all around close to the house. Someone's keeping it quite damp. Wetting bricks doesn't make them grow, so there must be another purpose. Cats hate water. So I think Tom Boy was meant to stay away."

"Why? Because he might know . . . know where——"

"One guess is as good as another. What were you thinking of, when you fell back into that chair?"

"My—my father——"

"Yes."

Ruth seemed to snap back from a sort of trance. "I mean, I suppose what you're saying is about what Dad would say, too." She made an effort to stand for the third time, managed to remain upright clinging to the chair. "In a minute I'll be able to go."

It was a tortuous climb back to the car. Once Ruth paused to worry about the mess they'd left in the patio, the blood-soaked strips of towel; and Miss Rachel had had to point out that since someone had been careless enough to leave such a hole unmarked, he deserved to worry over the scene of carnage.

"The police must think they're God," Ruth said bitterly.

"I believed at first that the police might have done the digging, but now I doubt it," Miss Rachel said. "It looked like a pretty careless job."

Ruth didn't talk again until they were headed down the canyon.

"I'll never go back up there, Miss Murdock. Whatever's there that might shed light on Lila's whereabouts, you'll have to find it; I just can't take it any longer." Her hands on the wheel were so tight that the knuckles were the color of porcelain. Ruth had had a bad shock there, in addition to the fall and the injury to her ankle.

They found a veterinarian who was willing to look at a sick cat in the evening past office hours. He thought that Tom Boy had had a blow or a fall; but in spite of signs of weakness and pain, no bones seemed to be broken. Cats had nine lives, he reminded Ruth and Miss Rachel dryly.

With Tom Boy safe in a cage at the vet's, Ruth was willing to see a doctor for herself. Miss Rachel drove her to an all-night clinic, where a young doctor with a crew cut and freckles examined the leg, swabbed it, stitched it, and wrapped it with meticulous exactness in a cocoon like a World War I soldier's legging. "Nasty gouge. I'll give you an anti-tetanus booster shot now. You'll be good as new in no time."

"He says," Ruth wailed to Miss Rachel.

They went back then to the house. Jennifer was upstairs, turning down the beds. She came down and listened to Miss Rachel's account of the evening, made tea for Ruth, and told her how pale she was.

"Who hurt the cat, do you think?" she demanded.

"Whoever did the digging. They'd watered thoroughly, thinking to keep Tom Boy out of the way. For some reason he came poking anyway."

Miss Jennifer said delicately, "Do you suppose the digger was searching for . . . ah . . . you know——"

"The hole wasn't big enough for a grave," Miss Rachel pointed out. "Not a human one, that is. It wouldn't much more than hold a cat."

Of course, she added to herself as she bent above the tea—that's what the hole had been. Tom Boy's grave. They'd interrupted a funeral.

CHAPTER TWELVE

She wasn't yet asleep when she heard a car turn up their drive and stop; and the reflection of headlights vanish from her ceiling. She got out of bed—Samantha complained—and went to the window to look down. A man's figure stood on the lawn. From what she could make of him by the glow of a street light down the block, she decided that this was Bax Bonnevain.

Silently, trying not to wake Jennifer, she crept down the stairs, opened the side entry, and whispered toward him through the crack. "Mr. Bonnevain?"

He came forward, slowly, as if trying to make her out. "Miss Murdock?"

"Yes."

He was at the edge of the narrow side porch. "I'm sorry to disturb you. I wondered if you knew anything about that hole dug beside my house tonight."

"I saw it. Ruth Rand almost broke a leg in it. That's all."

"I was at home until nearly seven. Then I went down to Harper's place, intending to sleep again in his back room. But then I remembered I'd need shaving stuff and I went back. I found the place where someone had been digging."

If *he* had done the digging, Miss Rachel thought suddenly, this would be the right move. This is what a clever and quick-witted man would say. "If I were you, Mr. Bonnevain, I'd stay at home."

"Uh?" There was sharp attentiveness in his shadowy figure.

"You have the right, you know. You own the house. And if something's going on—and I think there is—you should be there to put a stop to it."

Bax Bonnevain stood silent. He turned his hat in his hands, his usual nervous habit, and the light from the corner flashed on a stone set in a ring. "You know—I—I suppose I should have told you before this. Told someone. The cops are going to get hold of it and it's going to look bad for me." He rubbed a palm against the hatbrim and the stone flashed again. "The fact was—I was paying old Jake off. I've been paying him off a little at a time over the past three years."

She stared at Bax Bonnevain's bent head, wondering how he could be stupidly secretive.

"When we closed the book in their store," he went on slowly, "there was a big deficit. The day before, a customer had made a last-minute bet and won several thousand on a long shot. The man was a kennel owner and a real good customer, and they couldn't renege. They paid off and it just about killed them, especially Jonathan. He was always such a prissy old carp. Of course, the rest of what I told you about shutting the book was true, too. They were scared about the report of gangsters moving in, and the federal law had put all the little bookmakers on the spot; but actually this big loss was what finished them. They'd thought it was worth a risk, all gravy, big profits, skinning the suckers, and then came this setback and they couldn't take it."

"You offered to pay off?"

"Well, I finally told them I pay in a couple of thousand. God knows, with them having a business, they could stand the loss better than I could. But I hated to hear Jonathan squawk."

"So, instead of still being a friend, Jacob Sutter was instead a relentless creditor?"

"Oh, he wasn't ugly over it, no. As I said, he still played the races and was a broad-minded, sporty little old guy all around. We met every so often and I paid him what I could. I mailed him some money orders from the East, too, and that's what the cops will get wind of and try to build into something big."

He sounded desperate and angry.

"I noticed Mr. Jonathan Sutter at Hollywood Park today."

There was startled stillness on Bonnevain's part and then he said, "I can scarcely believe it."

"He collected on some previous days' tickets."

"Probably Jake's. He'd found them in Jake's belongings." Suddenly Bax Bonnevain shrugged. "He'd take care of something like that."

"When the betting enterprise went blooey, didn't the Sutters press you for any hidden assets? Like something your wife might have banked in her own name?"

Bonnevain nodded. He stepped back, looked around at the car as if ready to leave. "I guess that man Shaw has been talking to you."

"No. But in the Sutter shop is a snapshot of your wife coming out of a bank. On the back of the picture is a date of more than three years ago, plus an amount in excess of twenty-five thousand dollars."

He hesitated. Then he said guardedly, "It was a cute trick, but it didn't work." With a slight inclination of his head, he moved off. He slammed the car door, switched on the lights and the motor, and backed from the drive at a fast clip. Miss Rachel went back to bed, thinking as she pulled up the covers that she had forgotten to tell him what she had intended—the whereabouts of Tom Boy.

She dozed, and an echoing memory roused her.

There's no mystery about what became of Lila Bonnevain. . . .

It sounded horribly callous. She could picture the two little mule-faced men, puttering in the dim, rustle-and-squeak atmosphere of their little store; and Jacob Sutter looking up from a bin of birdseed, slyly speaking the words the redheaded boy had repeated to her.

And Jonathan's answer: *Shhhh!*

The puzzle is, what happened to her money?

Yes—to hell with Lila. She was long gone. She must be dead by now. Forget her. Just worry about the cash.

It seemed past belief that Jacob Sutter, gay dog or not, could have been so casual in dismissing what was most probably murder. Perhaps the redheaded boy hadn't recalled the words just right.

One conclusion was unavoidable. In the Sutters' opinion, Lila Bonnevain and her money had reached different destinations. Dead or alive, she'd been separated from her savings.

In the morning, over her coffee cup, Miss Jennifer asked: "Do you see an end to this affair, Rachel?"

"No. Not yet."

"You do have *some* idea of what has been happening?"

Miss Rachel cut a piece of omelet and gave it to the cat. "I know that Sutter was killed. With—according to the morning paper—a knife from Mr. Bonnevain's kitchen drawer. I know that Lila Bonnevain has been missing for three years. Along with quite a sum of cash."

"But of course everyone knows that!"

"I suspect that her disappearance and his murder are parts of the same picture. And that the truth is ugly."

"How will you prove it?"

Miss Rachel sipped the last of her coffee. "I'll keep digging."

"Be careful."

Jennifer was thinking of scandal, Miss Rachel knew, rather than danger. When the table had been cleared, the dishes washed and put away, the beds turned out to air, and a load of laundry stuffed into the Bendix, Miss Rachel took herself to the telephone. She had not as yet had a chance to contact the Elvres, who had rented the Bonnevain house during the three years Bonnevain had been East. She opened the directory. A Richard Elvore lived on Nason Avenue. She rang the number.

There was an abrupt hello, some scratchy noises. Miss Rachel decided that the woman on the line was busy at something, eating breakfast or dressing. "My name is Rachel Murdock. I'm making inquiries regarding the disappearance of Mrs. Bonnevain on behalf of her family."

The scratchy noises came to a stop. "Because of Bax?"

"For Mrs. Bonnevain's aunt and grandfather."

"Oh. Them. Well, I'm sorry——"

Miss Rachel interrupted. "I don't wish to carry on a long conversation over the phone. May I come to see you? There was silence, so she added: "If you are still employed at the bank and must hurry now I could have lunch with you."

"No . . . no, I'm not working now. That is, I just help Dick in his place. He has his own record shop downtown. But I——" She paused. Some silent thought went on, Miss Rachel judged. "Say, could I call you back in a few minutes?"

"Certainly." Miss Rachel supplied her number.

"I'll see if Dick needs me this morning," the woman added. Lying, Miss Rachel decided. Jessie Elvore was going to check with someone, all right. But it was likely to be Bax Bonnevain.

"Very well."

She waited for ten minutes, then rang the Elvore number again. She had a hunch that Jessie would have tried to find a listing for Bax Bonnevain, and failing, might contact Carol Callahan.

Mrs. Elvore answered promptly. "Hello. Is this Miss Murdock?"

"Yes, it is."

"I'm very sorry." The tone was glacial. "I won't be able to see you at all."

She'd talked to Carol without a doubt. "What do you plan to tell the police in regard to Mrs. Bonnevain's bank account?"

"What?" It was a mechanical retort. Miss Rachel didn't repeat her words; she just waited. "Lila's bank account? What about it?"

"Where did the money go?"

"Lila took it," Jessie cried. She was uneasy, though. There was trouble in her tone.

"Don't you consider this rather important evidence?" Miss Rachel asked severely. "Mrs. Bonnevain has been missing for almost three years. Her family is frantic. You have withheld information which might have helped them find her."

"Nobody asked me *anything!*" The receiver was slammed and Miss Rachel rubbed a ringing ear. She stood up. The phone rang again at once. Jessie was back. Miss Rachel held the phone a little distance off; but now Jessie sounded conciliatory. "I'm sorry. I sort of blew my top. I'd like to talk to you. Do you want me to come to your place?"

"I'll come to yours."

"Now?"

"If you'll be there."

The address on Nason Avenue was that of an apartment building, fairly new, four stories of tan brick and steel sash, with a neat plot of green lawn, banks of yellow callas and daisies, and a spider palm beside the entry. Miss Rachel went into the lobby, a space about twelve feet square, with mailboxes set into one wall, a stair at the rear, and an elevator on the right.

The Elvore number was four-ten. She rode to the fourth floor, stepped out into a neatly carpeted hall. Four-ten was about midway back, on the right. She rang the bell. The door was opened by a short, husky woman in her twenties. Her hair was an improbable orange color. She had on white slacks, a shell-pink blouse which contrasted hideously with the color of her hair. Looking at her biceps, Miss Rachel remembered the fact that the Elvores were physical culture enthusiasts. She wondered how much strength was needed to toss a little old lady out of a fourth-floor window when

the argument grew hot. Jessie Elvore should manage it nicely, she decided.

But Jessie was quite polite. "Hello. You couldn't be Miss Murdock."

"Yes, I am."

"Goodness. Carol said you were a dragon." She moved back and Miss Rachel took it as an invitation to enter. "Of course, Carol exaggerates."

"Let's hope so." Studying her, Miss Rachel thought that the politeness covered more than a bit of nerves. Something was on Jessie's mind. She sat down where Jessie indicated, a blue brocade chair facing a tiny fireplace in which potted ferns had been arranged. "You have a lovely place here."

Jessie cast a grateful glance over the smartly furnished room. "Well, I'll have to admit—it's all a matter of credit. We'll own the stuff years from now."

Miss Rachel decided that the room had been done by a professional decorator. Jessie was an earthy and muscular type. The room showed a great sensitivity to line, color, and texture. The predominating shade was a silky blue gray. Touches of dead black, all in nubbly fabric, and a coral ceiling brought the effect a startling life. "Did you choose your things?" she asked to start the ball rolling.

"My mother has a knack for it." Jessie sat opposite, on a love seat done in dove-blue satin. "And I don't inherit a bit of it. I couldn't see what she was trying to do here, until it was finished. Sometimes when I get out of bed and come in here in the morning, I have the funniest feeling that I'm in someone else's house." She laughed wryly. "Now, getting down to business——"

Miss Rachel smiled and nodded encouragingly.

"I'm not supposed to talk about the bank's affairs. It isn't ethical."

"Neither is murder."

"You mean, that man Sutter?"

"And Lila Bonnevain."

Jessie rubbed her palms together. "Bax says that Lila left him and is keeping out of sight so he won't find her."

"Do you believe it?"

Jessie's frank blue eyes clouded a little. "You know, it wasn't what I would have expected of her. Lila was sweet, kind, and—there's a word I always thought of—docile. She *minded* people."

"She didn't mind her aunt, Ruth Rand, nor Mr. Rand, when they insisted she keep trying for a career on the stage."

"Well—she had a point where she rebelled. She'd take an awful lot, though, first."

"When did you first know the Bonnevais?"

"Dick met Bax at the gym. Bax used to be a jockey, you know, and he still has spells when he feels he wants to keep in shape. Dick used to play the races, so he and Bax struck up an acquaintance, and then we went to their house a couple of times. Then we were looking for a place to rent and Bax said we could have the little house in the canyon, that he and Lila were going East."

"What part did Lila have in the arrangements?"

A temporarily blank expression crossed Jessie's face. "Gosh, I don't know. I suppose she approved. On the surface, at least. Of course, underneath she must have been planning a getaway. That's why she drew out all that money a couple of days ahead of time."

"She had it deposited where you worked?" Miss Rachel said, expressing a previous surmise.

"Oh yes. In fact she asked my advice before opening the account. It must have been six months before she disappeared—she came in one day and asked to see me personally, and what she wanted to know was, how much question would be raised if she put in quite a lot of cash. I said, why none, unless the bills were unusually large, or something like that."

"Do you think Bax Bonnevain knew about this account of Lila's?"

"Really"—she made a baffled motion—"I haven't any way of figuring whether he did or not. At the time I took for granted that it was hers and Bax's money, and that of course he knew what she was doing with it. My goodness, at one time she had more than forty thousand dollars!"

Miss Rachel's eyes widened. "And she drew it out all at once?"

"What was left, yes. Two days before they were due to go East."

"Did she mention the prospective trip at the time?"

Jessie sat silent, apparently trying to remember; but finally she shook her head. "I just don't know."

"You were, though, positive at the time that she was closing the account to go away with Bax?"

"Yes."

"Wouldn't it have been logical in the course of closing out the

account to have said something about her leaving—wishing her luck on the trip—or even to have mentioned the house? To have asked about the care she expected you to give the place, for instance?” She was watching Jessie closely now. The woman was showing increasing signs of jumpiness.

“You make it sound as if it should have happened that way. But when Lila presented her passbook and told me what she wanted, I turned her over to one of the bank officials. It was a larger sum than I was allowed to handle over the counter. And then, in the little time we had, Lila acted oddly. I can’t recall any mention of the trip, as you might expect, but she was upset, and she talked about the—the cat.” Jessie shivered a trifle, as if the memory twitched at her nerves.

“You mean—Tom Boy?”

“Yes. We had seen the cat at the house, of course. A real ordinary-looking old tom. He had a blind eye. Bax had shot him by accident, thinking it was a ground squirrel in the bushes. Lila seemed very fond of the animal. I guess she was sorry for what happened to his eye.”

“And what did she tell you about Tom Boy in that last meeting?”

“She said”—Jessie stroked back a lock of orange hair—“she said it wasn’t really her cat. She’d been fooled. And that she intended to find the one that was. That was really her cat, you see.”

“She seemed puzzled . . . determined . . . or what?”

“She was mad enough to throw fits,” said Jessie thoughtfully.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Did she express anger at any particular person?”

“No. I sensed that she considered it a private matter, in some way. I thought at the time I might ask her about it before she and Bax left for the trip. But we never did see Lila again.”

“What about Bax Bonnevain?”

“We drove up to the house on the day we expected it to be vacant. Bax had said they’d be gone, the key would be in a niche under the step. But when we parked and walked up to the door, Bax

met us. He looked awfully tired and discouraged. He said there had been a hitch and that he would need an extra day or two. We wondered about it, wondered if there had been trouble between them. Anyway, I don't think he stayed after all. We had a hot dry spell about that time and when we went back several days later, everything was shriveled up; no one had been there to water the yard, and those plants she kept in pots, those fuchsias, they die right away unless they're kept damp. We never did get the yard and the patio back into shape. Anyway, neither of us are much good as gardeners."

"Since she had spent so much time on her yard, it's odd she didn't arrange to have it cared for."

Jessie frowned. "Yes, that's true. I had thought of it. I used to wonder, perhaps she meant to tell us all about caring for the place, but she was so angry over the business about the cat she just forgot."

"It's quite possible," Miss Rachel said, deciding that Jessie had a fair amount of insight after all. A woman in a rage because someone had changed cats on her might well forget to give instructions about a garden. "Did you hear from Bonnevain in the East?"

"Just a few postcards. A couple of months after he'd gone, Bax wrote to ask if we'd seen anything of Lila. It confirmed the hunch I'd had, that they had split up. We answered back—an address in Connecticut—that there had been no sign of her. Afterward, I used to kind of expect her, but she never came. We paid the rent into the mortgage account at the bank. We liked it up there in the canyon. It was kind of wild and shut away, and we had a feeling of being out of the city. We were sorry when Bax wired he was coming home to sell the place."

"Were you friends with Carol Callahan?"

"Oh, not especially. We had our own crowd. We knew, of course, that she had been a friend of Bax and Lila's. We saw her now and then at home, but—well, we didn't have anything in common. She's arty and musical, and kind of high-powered in the sex-appeal department, if you follow me."

"Did you think she might have been pretty fond of Bax Bonnevain?"

A small smile twitched at the corner of Jessie's mouth. "I think she liked the boys, period. Maybe Bax better than some."

"And glad, therefore, that Lila had disappeared?"

The smile abruptly went away. "I couldn't say that, Miss Murdock." She waited as if expecting further questions, but Miss Rachel was silent in thought. "Do you know where Lila is, Miss Murdock?"

Miss Rachel said slowly, "From what I have learned of Lila Bonnevain, I think she must be a girl who clings to loved ones and to loved surroundings. I remember particularly that she followed her aunt and her grandfather from the East, though they made nuisances of themselves trying to dictate to her about her life. She must have put many hours into that garden and home in the canyon. Dead though it is now, you can see the loving care with which it was laid out."

Jessie nodded, leaning forward, her face earnest and attentive.

"If she really loved Bax Bonnevain as she seems to have, she wouldn't have left him in such a cruel manner. Nor would she have kept her aunt and grandfather in such anxiety over a space of three years. It wasn't in her nature to do such things."

"You think she's—dead?" Jessie was pale under the beach tan and her short, square hands were locked in her lap. "Killed—up there?"

Their eyes met; Jessie seemed transfixed, and her breath whistled through her teeth.

"Buried—*there*?"

"I wish I knew." Miss Rachel rose from the chair and walked to the window to look out at the sunny morning. It was a strange time of day to be talking over such gruesome speculations. Below, in the bright sun some children skated on the sidewalk and two young women in red shorts and halter-tops strolled along with market baskets over their arms. "Even in neighborhoods such as this," she said, as if thinking aloud, "there have been people murdered, their bodies hidden somehow, their deaths concealed for years. Out in Creek Canyon, as you reminded me, there is silence and solitude. And good cover for a killing, in all that shrubbery."

"Why would she be killed? Who did it?"

"Someone who is becoming frightened."

"Do you think that the murder of this man Sutter is connected to what happened to Lila?"

"I'm sure. I can't prove it." Miss Rachel returned to the chair, picked up her bag and gloves. "One thing you can quit worrying about—Bax Bonnevain must have known about the money Lila had

in the bank. She made no request for secrecy from you. She couldn't have been sure that a casual remark mightn't give away the secret. Therefore she must have had nothing to hide."

"I had worried over it."

"I thought perhaps you had."

Jessie was standing. There was sweat on her short upper lip. "I suppose I'd better go to the police."

"I advise you to. Ask for Lieutenant Shaw."

Jessie offered her hand in parting. Her manner was anxious, but friendly.

Miss Rachel drove to the veterinary hospital, parked in the paved lot at the rear, and went around to the front entry. It was a low white stucco building, brilliant now under the sun, with a neat gilt sign above the door: *Pet Haven Hospital*. The small waiting room was furnished antiseptically in chrome and white leather, with a planter in which rubbery artificial greens rioted according to pattern. The doctor who had attended Tom Boy the night before stood at the counter talking to a woman with a droopy canary. The woman was crying into a handkerchief. The doctor seemed concerned; and only the canary was indifferent. The doctor glanced at Miss Rachel and nodded. She sat down to wait.

A picture of Man o' War stared down at her from the wall.

The whole affair, she thought, had started in a manner of speaking over a horse. Ruth Rand had been playing the races. She had become acquainted with Bax Bonnevain, had introduced him to her niece. Lila had found him lovable. Ruth had had great hopes, great plans for her niece and somehow the marriage to Bax had made an end to them. How much ruckus had she raised at the time of the wedding?

Plenty, Miss Rachel decided.

If Lila Bonnevain had chosen to disappear, it might be quite logical for her *not* to contact her aunt, or the grandfather who threw fits—foaming fits—because she disobeyed his wishes.

Miss Rachel retraced her line of thought, correcting the premise. Somebody *wants* it to sound logical, she decided. Who had stressed the hatefulness of the aunt and the grandfather?

Bax Bonnevain. Carol Callahan. Echoing each other.

I was right, Miss Rachel told herself, when I said to Jessie Elvore

that a gentle and tenderhearted person like Lila wouldn't have let her family grieve and worry. Even if she chose not to go near them, she'd relieve their fears. Carol Callahan made it sound as though Lila were at the end of her patience with the pair, but after all, as the old saw put it, blood is thicker than water.

It was an odd time, an odd place, to decide once and for all that Lila Bonnevain was dead.

I won't ever see her, Miss Rachel thought, and I'd have liked to. It seemed that on the edge of consciousness something trembled away like the departing of a ghost. Lila Bonnevain was gone. All that was left was her cat.

The doctor was ushering the weeping woman and the sick canary to the door. "He'll be fine. Just fine. Give him a day or two," he was saying above the woman's sniffles. He returned to stand beside Miss Rachel's chair. "Another worrier? Your cat's doing all right."

She stood up. "It isn't just his illness that I'm interested in."

The doctor had sandy eyebrows; they climbed now on his freckled forehead. "Something you want me to do?"

"Look him over and tell me what you see."

He shook his head in mystification. "I'd better know what you want to find out."

"I can't tell you." She followed him to the counter across the room. "The cat belonged to a woman who is missing. Before she disappeared she told a friend that it wasn't really her cat, that someone had played a trick on her."

He went behind the counter, leaned on it, folded his scrubbed-looking hands, and looked at Miss Rachel patiently. "I'd have to know what the original cat was like, wouldn't I, before I could say, one way or another, which one *this* is?"

"Just examine him," she pleaded.

He went away and came back with Tom Boy, who showed a surprising degree of recovery. The cat tried to scratch the doctor, looked at Miss Rachel with hatred, spotted the door, and tried to pull loose. The doctor set him on the counter, keeping a close grip. "He's a big, strong animal."

"How old?"

The doctor probed the hissing mouth and looked at the teeth, then sent exploring hands over the muscular body. "He's getting along. I'd make a guess—seven years, anyway."

"That's middle-aged for a cat."

"Well, he's husky and he's had good care. He could be good for fifteen before he's done."

"He's much older than he should be," Miss Rachel said, studying the squirming animal. "What about his eye?"

"He has a cataract on his eye."

"As a result of injury?"

The doctor shook his head. "I doubt it. Probably he's had it all his life."

"It wouldn't be there because of being shot in the eye?"

"Being shot in the eye would have killed him, most likely." The doctor glanced at her quizzically. "You've made up your mind?"

"Yes. He's an impostor."

"What do you want me to do with him?"

"Just give him good care." Miss Rachel took a bill from her purse and laid it on the counter. "Please apply this on the account. And don't release him to anyone else. No matter who comes, or what they say."

The young doctor smiled remotely. "You make it sound very mysterious."

"You think it isn't?" She was figuring quickly: Tom Boy had been bought as a kitten during the year of Lila's marriage when she had lived in the canyon with Bax. At most, he would be four years old. This cat wasn't Tom Boy, then, even ignoring the inconsistency of what had happened to his eye.

All at once the obvious solution occurred to her. Bax Bonnevain had been hunting squirrels, all right, and he had mistakenly hit the cat. He had killed the cat, in fact. To save his wife grief—or to save himself recriminations—he had bought a substitute, a ringer.

The best match that his friends, the Sutters, could produce was a cat with a blind eye. So Bax admitted shooting the animal, only he claimed to have blinded it.

Lila Bonnevain had finally discovered the truth. It had destroyed her trust, her belief, in her husband and she'd done what Ruth Rand said she had: awakened from a dream of love to find herself married to a tramp.

There had been a terrific fight and Bax had killed her.

The Sutters would have known all about the substitute cat, and

have guessed about the argument, and— Of course. What had Jacob Sutter said, a few days before he'd died? *There's no mystery about what became of Lila Bonnevain.*

She snapped out of the reverie to discover that the doctor was holding out a receipt, that the cat had been removed, and that a girl in a white uniform was peering from the back room and beckoning. The doctor turned. "I'll be right with you." To Miss Rachel he said, "No one else will get your cat."

"Thank you."

She bought a paper at a sidewalk rack before returning to the car. On the racing page, the claims of the Hooded Groom were as optimistic as ever. The Hooded Groom had a ten-dollar special going in the sixth race. The horse was a sleeper. He had trained and prepped especially for today's effort. If you were with the Hooded Groom today, you would go home loaded. Miss Rachel smiled wryly over the wording.

She turned from the parking lot and drove north, into the rushing traffic of the Hollywood Freeway as it poured through Cahuenga Pass. The day was beginning to warm up. The exhaust fumes created a blue smog against the burnt-clay hills above the pass. Above Glendale, she swung into the dead-end street, parked finally before the Rand house.

Mr. Rand was in the front yard, watering with a hose. He had on a starched white shirt, gray trousers supported by suspenders, red patent house slippers, and was smoking an ornate cream-colored pipe. When he recognized Miss Rachel he went carefully over to the faucet and turned off the water, knocked his pipe out in the shrubbery, came forward to the car. She had stepped out. They met on the sidewalk.

He looked tired, she thought. There were pouches under his eyes, and the skin there showed liverish spots and broken veins. His white hair, though, was neatly brushed and shining as usual. "How do you do?" he said, as if they were being formally introduced for the first time.

"I'd like to talk to your daughter and to you, Mr. Rand."

He looked into the bowl of his pipe as if forgetting why it no longer held tobacco. "Ruth isn't feeling too well."

"I don't expect her to. How is her ankle?"

"Very painful. I don't believe she'll talk to you."

"Then I'll have to go to the police without discussing the matter first with her." Miss Rachel put a hand on the car door.

"Well——" A touch of anger flared in his eyes; he hated to have to back down. "Perhaps I was hasty. Will you come inside while I ask Ruth if she's up to it?"

They went into the house. The room he showed her into was bigger than the den where she had talked to Ruth two nights before. It was a formally furnished room; the carpets and drapery had been chosen with care, the scattered chairs, tables, and two couches had cost money; but over it all was a faint air of disuse, as though nobody went into the room much any more except to dust the more obvious spots.

Miss Rachel sat down on a pink plush chair by the windows. Mr. Rand excused himself and went out.

She decided that the Rands spent most of their spare time in the den. It was there that they kept the television set, the record cabinets, the games and soft-drink stores. This room was a place where they stuck people they really didn't want to see.

The tall blond woman came in limping, wearing a black satin robe. "Hello, Miss Rachel. I'm horribly banged up. I didn't sleep at all."

"I'm sorry you were so badly hurt," Miss Rachel said, meaning it. "I won't keep you long. I want to talk about the cat. How long has your father been watering the neighborhood cats to drive them off your property?"

Ruth sat down suddenly on a chair near the door. The light from the windows glowed in her face. She made a brief gesture of dismay. "You don't miss anything, do you?"

"Last night you let slip the fact that all the water around the Bonnevain house made you think of your father. I decided later that he might have a habit of sprinkling cats. You knew, didn't you, that the cat we saw in the canyon isn't really the one your niece bought as a kitten?"

"I just knew——" Ruth stopped, and rubbed her forehead with the heel of her hand. Her father was standing immobile in the doorway. "We both knew that there was something funny going on about the cat. Even before Lila disappeared—when it was first injured—Bax didn't want anyone to touch it. I think he kept hurting

it, somehow, so it would be afraid of people. So that no one could examine it closely."

"I believed the Sutters to be involved in the affair," Mr. Rand put in, in his deep voice. "I accused them of it. Or, rather, accused the surviving brother. He denied knowing anything. But he was much too frightened to be entirely innocent."

Miss Rachel could imagine the dismay of the cringing yet waspish little man. "I also think the Sutters may have supplied the substitute cat," she agreed. "There is no doubt your niece was the victim of a trick. The cat we took to the hospital last night is seven years old, according to the doctor's estimate. I don't think he could be so mistaken as almost to double the animal's age. I want you to ask Lieutenant Shaw to make a thorough investigation—he can force Jonathan Sutter to turn over his records, and thus prove or disprove whether a substitute animal was supplied."

Ruth's hands fluttered in her lap. Her father cleared his throat.

Miss Rachel stared into the eyes of the tall, distinguished-looking old man. "Perhaps you feel like explaining what you were doing at the Bonnevain house, wetting the place down with the hose. You must have been there when Sutter was murdered."

He seemed suddenly much more gray and exhausted. "No. I know nothing about Jacob Sutter's death. I'd been trying to catch the cat. It had a habit of disappearing under the house. I wet down the ground to keep it away. I had a couple of box traps set, out in the trees, and I hoped to drive it out there. As for Sutter—I know nothing at all."

"And last night?"

"I finally did catch the animal, but in trying to hold it, I'd choked it. I thought the cat was dead. I was getting ready to bury it under the bricks when I was startled by hearing someone coming. I thought it must be Bonnevain on his way home. I was confused, I forgot he'd be driving, that he'd walk up from the road. In a panic, I ran. And so . . . so Ruth was hurt."

They waited, silent, their eyes fixed on Miss Rachel as if expecting from her some indication of belief.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Miss Rachel said, "What had you intended to do with the cat when you caught him?"

The old man's back was ramrod-stiff. "Have him examined—as you did—by someone who could tell me his age and other facts."

"When did you first suspect the cat might be a substitute?"

He stepped forward to stand directly behind Ruth's chair; she put a hand back to touch his. Their pose was for the instant oddly like those of the people in the old-fashioned portraits on the mantel—heads rigid, eyes fixed, the determination to appear convincingly respectable borne out in every line. "Ruth and I had discussed the peculiarities about the cat even before Lila spoke of going East. I had a hunch that Bax had tricked her. I—well, frankly, I'm not too fond of cats. Perhaps my attitude, being objective, permitted me to see things about him that others didn't notice. Then, Bax's manner betrayed him. He was so afraid someone might get a close look at the animal. And his regret over the cat's injury was so obviously phony."

Ruth nodded. "I agree with every word."

Miss Rachel didn't doubt that Mr. Rand spoke the truth, as far as he went. But as usual, their mutual antagonism toward Bonnevain made her wary of accepting their interpretations of the facts. Everything which had occurred in Lila's life with Bax Bonnevain they turned in just one way, as evidence of Bax's skulduggery and hypocrisy. And she had learned long ago to mistrust the fanatic viewpoint.

Mr. Rand drew a deep breath and went on. "I want you to leave the matter of the cat to me. I don't need Shaw's interference. I'll force the truth from Sutter. Now, if you are to be of any use as an investigative agent, you must do as Ruth asks. You must perform the task she's paid you for. Find Lila."

Ruth was flushed with embarrassment. "Dad, I haven't yet paid——"

Miss Rachel had risen. "I'm glad that you no longer want me to convict Bonnevain."

"That will follow," he said thinly.

Miss Rachel left the house with a bad taste in her mouth.

At home, Jennifer was decorating a cake for the church social. She had littered the tile sink with little bowls of frosting in various shades. The cake was pink, square, and should show a yellow basket of lilies when it was finished. Samantha sat in the window opposite, staring at the yard in disgust. "The gadget has jammed," Jennifer cried at Miss Rachel as soon as she stepped in. Then, to prove the gadget's perversity, she shot a stream of yellow goo from it half across the floor. "You see?"

Miss Rachel picked her way across the spotted linoleum. "Take it apart."

Miss Jennifer unscrewed the cap. Inside, along with the sugar mixture, was a wad of gummy paper—instructions, as it turned out.

"Well, I'll declare!" Jennifer dropped the messy paper into the sink. "Oh yes, Rachel—you had a telephone call. That Mr. Harper with a horse." Her eyes now studied Miss Rachel's elaborate innocence with disdain. "I know. It comes under the heading of investigation."

"I'm not so sure," said Miss Rachel, licking frosting from her finger. "Maybe they just want me to go broke."

"I've said all I intend to say on the subject," Miss Jennifer pronounced, fitting the frosting decorator back together. Her tone implied that there were volumes yet to be said, but that Rachel was too bullheaded to listen. "If you're going to the track, though, I shall go with you."

"You might make some money!"

"I was a fool yesterday. I'll never bet again. Mr. Harper wants you to call him as soon as you get in."

Harper's tone was fluty with charm and she imagined him behind the desk at the Hooded Groom, twinkling into the telephone. After the greetings and preliminaries were over, he inquired: "How did you do yesterday?"

"Not well at all."

"I know, the horse Bax gave you was our special of the day. Now today we're carrying a load of free clients. You see when our special doesn't come in, we supply one the next day for free. So I thought —" He let the idea dangle.

"I hadn't made up my mind whether to try again or not."

"I think you'd be making a mistake to give up now," he said slowly. "Of course, I never urge anybody to bet. But today—Well, this animal is ready and willing. The stable has kept him under wraps. Only a few know the inside facts." He sounded like one of his advertisements.

"I suppose I could stop by and pay the fee on the way to the track." She put a lot of doubt in her voice to let him know she might not. Most probably might not.

"Since we're old friends," he decided, bearing down on the good will, "we can forget the fee. Buy me a drink if the horse wins. Tell you what, I'll meet you on the mezzanine floor at about three. That okay?"

"Fine."

"This little mare is going to pay a hatful," he promised. "Don't be late."

"Three o'clock."

"Missed you yesterday," he purred.

"Funny. I was there."

"You were?" He seemed brightened by the news. "Well . . . see you!"

She put the phone in its cradle and went back to Jennifer in the kitchen. "Maybe I've misjudged Mr. Harper. I thought him a rascal, but perhaps he's something more."

"Isn't that enough?"

"His horse changed sex in the middle of our conversation."

Miss Jennifer's mouth turned prim. "I think it has little to do with an animal's speed. Remember Rosebud? She was the nicest stepper Father ever drove." Jennifer was working quickly with the cake as she spoke, the icing flowed smoothly from the little aluminum press, and under her skillful touch appeared the outline of a basket, a fill-in of crisscross lines, a handle arching above, and then the green leaves of the lilies. She began to mix a white paste for the blooms. "I'll be done in a minute and get my hat on."

"We're not going," said Miss Rachel. "I want you to stay here to see who comes. I'm driving up to the canyon."

Jennifer took on a somewhat battle-axe expression. "Are you trying to ditch me—as you'd put it?"

"No, I'm not."

Miss Rachel wouldn't argue over it, though Jennifer remained

suspicious. She went upstairs and changed her clothes. In place of the smart dark suit she put on an old nondescript dress of mottled-green pattern. The bright hat she switched for a close fitting bonnet of gray. When she came back downstairs, Jennifer's eyes bugged.

"Are you going up there to clean somebody's attic?"

"No one up there has an attic. I wish someone did," Miss Rachel complained. "Anyhow, since Mr. Harper was so careless about the horse, I think he's a bit too sure of me. And so I want to see what's going on elsewhere."

"He doesn't know you," Jennifer said dryly.

"Perhaps for the best, all things considered."

She munched a hasty sandwich and downed a glass of milk, listened to Jennifer's opinion of eavesdroppers, then went out to the car, got into it, and drove west. The hot light of just-past-noon lay on the brown flanks of the hills; windows gleamed in the glare. Traffic was fretful. She turned into the canyon and began to climb the winding road. Under the trees it was cooler. Someone had watered his portion of hillside and left a wet smell on the air and she could almost imagine a running stream in the depths of the dry gulch. But when she turned from the Laurel Canyon Drive into the cuplike hollow near the ridge, the freshness vanished in a smothering fog of smoke.

She parked well free of the tangle of lantana and eucalyptus, in case the smoke indicated a creeping brush fire. She picked her way downhill with care, turned off into the trees to circle the Bonnevain house toward the left. Above a thicket she found a stout wooden box, propped on one end with a figure-four device made out of sticks; she thought it must be one of Mr. Rand's traps, still un sprung. She tripped the lever. The box fell. The ground was uneven, though. She decided that the box wouldn't have held a determined cat for very long. She carried the box along as an impromptu seat, put it in the shade of a tree at a spot where she had a good view, through shrubbery, of the house and patio below.

She saw at once where the smoke was coming from. Someone had raked up the dried vines on the slope below the house and had set them afire.

A figure in blue jeans and a red shirt came into view around the corner of the house. It was Carol Callahan. She was carrying the end of the hose in one hand, a rake in the other. She propped the

rake against the house, coiled the hose by the faucet, and went into the patio. The shadows of the trellis flickered over her as she moved about. Miss Rachel noted that the hole had been filled, the bricks replaced, where Ruth had fallen the night before. She could see no signs of the mess of bandages; it occurred to her that they were most likely among the burning stuff on the slope.

Carol moved to the edge of the shelter and took down one of the wooden containers from its hook. She stepped out upon open ground, knocked the contents out, went back for the rake, and with it separated the dead foliage from the rest and then broke the earth ball into dust.

She followed the same procedure with the five remaining baskets, then stacked them together at the edge of the paving beyond the kitchen door.

There was neatness and purpose in her behavior. She was like a good housekeeper who tidies up a littered room. When she had attended to the hanging containers, she started on the larger ones which sat on the floor. From these she evicted dead camellias. When all of the dead, potted stuff had been cleared away and thrown on the fire to burn, she washed the patio floor with the hose, and splashed out the redwood baskets.

When she had finished she went into the house. Miss Rachel could hear faintly the slam of the refrigerator door. Carol came back with a bottle of beer and sat down on the rustic seat where Ruth had crouched with her injured leg. She was still sitting there when Lieutenant Shaw appeared at the other side of the patio.

There was an instant of hesitation on Carol's part; then she smiled wryly. She spoke a greeting, apparently. Shaw came forward with his hat in his hand. They talked for several minutes, Shaw standing, Carol looking up at him from her seat; and Miss Rachel fumed and tapped a toe because she was out of earshot. Whatever the subject of their talk, their manner to each other was amiable. Perhaps the lieutenant liked young, full-bodied ladies in tight jeans and open-necked red shirts. Leaning forward, Carol was giving him the best view possible.

"The minx!" Miss Rachel said between her teeth, and then realized with a start how much she had sounded like Jennifer.

Shaw went around the house and inspected the hose connection on the opposite side. He was curious, as she had been, about the

watering which had been done just previous to Sutter's murder. The ground on that side of the house was dry now, the clinging ivy geraniums dragged down to add to the burning heap. Shaw went next to the smoldering fire and regarded it for a long moment, standing perfectly still. Miss Rachel sensed his suspicion. It was quite natural for a policeman to resent a wholesale bonfire at the scene of a crime. She expected him to return to Carol and for his manner to express reproof; but nothing of the sort happened. He looked in at the front of the patio enclosure briefly, touching his hat, and Carol nodded a cool good-by.

When Shaw's official car had disappeared from the road below, Carol finished the beer and stood up. For a brief while her gaze seemed fixed on the thin screen of shrubbery where Miss Rachel sat. In expectation of immediate discovery, Miss Rachel got her feet under her, prepared to rise. But quickly then Carol turned back into the house. Presently there was a clatter of crockery; she was either doing dishes or preparing some dish for Bax Bonnevain's dinner. Miss Rachel waited.

Carol didn't return to the patio. After a considerable time, she appeared at the front of the house, where she inspected the fire, kicked some stray bits into the smoking center with the toe of her shoe, and then walked away toward her own home.

Miss Rachel put the box away into a thicker clump of bushes and went down to the Bonnevain house. There was a smell of cookery from the kitchen, so Miss Rachel decided that Carol had put in a casserole dinner for Mr. Bonnevain. Steak and onions, she decided. The patio looked quite different with all of the potted, dead things removed. It now looked as if someone cared about it. Beside the kitchen step was something Miss Rachel hadn't seen from her spot on the slope above. A two-compartmented dish, of the sort sold in pet stores, sat on the paving. In one side was clean water, in the other what looked like a portion of canned fish. Miss Rachel lifted the dish carefully toward her nose. The fish was fresh and almost odorless and must have just been opened and put out.

Miss Rachel next examined the floor for any sign of last night's digging, or of Ruth's accident; but there was nothing. The hole had been filled and the bricks close-set above it, the cracks between them now dark with water; all crumbs of dirt washed away, the

stains of Ruth's blood with them; and over the whole thing somehow lay an air of change and of optimistic revival.

Miss Rachel was not sure how much Carol could see from home. She was cautious about appearing at the front of the house; but a few steps within the shelter of the patio displayed the slope of the lower yard, now raked neat and bare, and a further detail—the sign which had stood among the dead growth was now gone.

Perhaps it had been temporarily removed during the tidying-up process. Or perhaps Mr. Bonnevain had changed his mind about selling. She decided that Shaw's questions may have included the point and she wondered what Carol had told him.

She went back up the hill and circled west along a rutted track high above the cuplike valley. She went past Carol's house, came down through the trees on its other side. She could hear a piano being played with more impetuosity than talent. Below, on a level with the road, the garage doors stood open. Miss Rachel gained the paving behind a screen of shrubs, walked closer until she could see the inside of the structure. A small sport car of foreign make stood in the garage. There were a few boxes on a shelf against the rear wall, some stacks of what looked like sheet music; but the interior of the garage was exceptionally neat and uncluttered.

Listening to the unchanged happy tinkling of the piano in the house above, Miss Rachel decided that Carol was engrossed at the piano and that she might return to the Bonnevain house by the road without much chance of being seen.

A few minutes she waited briefly in the patio to rest and then went on to the spot where she had left the car.

There was a look of later afternoon in the valley now. The golden light had turned somber, birds had begun to quiet, and under the thickest shrubbery were the blue smudges of twilight. By now Mr. Harper had looked for her at the track and had missed her. She wondered how Jennifer had fared.

At home, Jennifer had answered the rear-door buzzer and was at this moment staring into the face of a freckled, red-haired youth of about eighteen. "I'm collecting funds for a pet society."

"Which society?" demanded Miss Jennifer, who was a member of most of those associations devoted to the humane treatment of animals.

"Well . . . cats," he stammered.

"I think you're a fraud," she decided.

He flung caution aside. "Look, ma'am, do you have a sister?"

She pursed her mouth. "Yes. And so?"

"Is she sort of like you, only . . . uh . . . prettier, you might say?"

"You might, and I won't deny it." Poor Jennifer had given up on this point away back in her teens. Rachel had always been the attractive one, and not all of the appeal could be laid to powder, curling irons, and the surreptitious biting of lips. "And so, go on."

"There's something I thought she might want to know."

Miss Jennifer sized him up correctly. "You're selling this information, I take it?"

"I think she'd pay me something." He met Jennifer's stare with brassy confidence.

She went for her purse. When she returned, they haggled. Jennifer had a 1939 attitude toward a dollar; in the end his nervousness overcame him and he started away. "I thought she was looking for Mrs. Bonnevain," he threw back at her.

Miss Jennifer fought a brief battle with curiosity. "Wait a minute."

He came back and the transaction was completed.

"Tell your sister that I heard Mr. Sutter phoning for a van to come after a piano."

"What?" She snatched at the money.

"Mrs. Bonnevain was a piano teacher," he explained patiently. "I know neither of the Sutters could tell one tune from another."

He was waiting at a bus stop on Parchly Heights Boulevard when Miss Rachel drove past and spotted him. She circled the block to pick him up. Since the information had already been paid for, he volunteered the story of Mr. Sutter's phone call.

Even more, he gave her the address of the Sutter duplex apartment.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was rewarding to see the terrible start which shook Mr. Sutter when he opened his door to find her waiting on the steps. His mule-

like features contorted in a grimace of shock, he tucked his neck like a retreating turtle, and tried to shut the door on her. When he glanced down, thinking perhaps to dislodge a shoe, he found a can of cat food in the opening. This seemed to frighten him more than ever.

"I think we should have a short conversation," said Miss Rachel in a chiding tone. "After all, you needn't be afraid of me. It's Jennifer who swats people when they are rude."

"Go away," he cried hoarsely.

"If I do I shall stop at a telephone and call the police."

"No. . . ." He moved back into the narrow, cluttered room and seemed to cast about for means of defense. "Please leave me alone. I'm in a state of nervous shock. I can't endure any more bullying."

Miss Rachel, now inside, examined the room in a quick glance. It was furnished with a lot of old-fashioned junk, needing dusting, and smelled of mold. She put the can of cat food on a small table; it was, after all, Mr. Sutter's, having been supplied by his young clerk on her inspiration. "Where is the piano?"

"In the back room." He took refuge half behind the couch, fingering a stubby vase on a crammed bookcase as if seeking a weapon. "I'm entirely innocent in all of this affair concerning the Bonnevais. Old man Rand has harried me as if I were a murderer. I've lost my brother and the stupid police can't figure out who killed him. It's time I stood up for myself." He looked entirely incapable of doing the latter.

"Relax." She walked through, picking her way between little tables, couches with sprung seats, and old chairs. She wondered what dump the Sutters had been in the habit of raiding. Investigating the hall, she opened doors off it and found a kitchen, a bath, a bedroom, and finally at the end an enclosed porch. Bamboo blinds had been tacked up against the glass and the light was shadowy. But the shape of the big piano under its wrappings of old bed-clothes was unmistakable.

Against the wall was a stack of paintings of various sizes. She tipped them out against her palm one at a time. The style seemed innocuous, the subjects flowery—until she came to a portrait of Bax Bonnevain. It had, she decided, been a labor of love. If this was the way Lila had seen him, there was no wonder she had loved him.

The scars were gone. His face had taken on a kindly and humorous benevolence. Rather fatherly.

She turned to find Jonathan Sutter cringing and whimpering in the doorway.

"I'm innocent . . . innocent!" he cried. "What right have you and the old man to harry me?"

"I am not familiar with his motives," she said. "For my own—I want to know what happened to Lila Bonnevain. You have here the piano and the paintings which must have been hers."

"She stored them with my brother Jacob before she went East!"

"She didn't go East."

He was blinking, his eyes filling with tears—real or crocodile. "She put the things here for us to take care of—and then disappeared. She must have gone with Bax!"

"I don't think you're telling the whole truth," Miss Rachel interrupted. "Weren't these things left as a pledge?"

He gave another start. His bones seemed to shake in their sockets.

"You tried to force Bonnevain to assume a share of a bookmaking loss, but he pleaded lack of cash. You knew that Lila Bonnevain had a large bank account. You had even taken a snapshot of her coming out of the bank, to confront him with it. But for some reason she refused to pay you out of this amount. She left the things she had cherished, her piano and her paintings, as a pledge of good faith."

Color came and went under his high skinny cheekbones. "Is there a crime on our part in any of that?"

"Only in the bookmaking, and I doubt if such a charge would be prosecuted after all this time."

He hesitated, quivering with worry. "You think not?"

She saw that Bonnevain had told the truth about this fellow. "Still, you shouldn't have made a secret of having her things. When her family tried to find her, you should have told the truth."

"No one asked us what happened to Lila!"

"I'm asking. What became of her?"

"My brother Jacob decided that she had had her fill of Bax and had left him."

Miss Rachel shook her head. She took the portrait from the stack of paintings and propped it at the front. "I think not."

He seemed mesmerized by the picture, uncomfortable in front of it. He tiptoed a couple of steps into the room and then, as if receiving some sign of displeasure from the subject of the picture, retreated hastily to the hall. "He doesn't really look like that. It's—flattering." He nibbled his lips as if afraid to criticize the painting further.

"It shows what she thought of him. Who told you to get rid of Lila Bonnevain's belongings?"

"No one. I decided today that I should return them to Bonnevain."

"You intended to take them to his house in the canyon?"

"Yes. But who told you?" A confused suspicion flickered in his face.

"You are being watched," she said primly, and noted the fright which leaped into his eyes. "By others than I, too. I judge."

"The police?"

From his sudden tremors, Miss Rachel suspected that something along this line had scared him. "Hadn't you noticed?"

He gulped audibly. "Yes. I have a feeling of being . . . stalked."

She stepped over to the piano and laid back the old quilts which covered it. It was a magnificent grand, done in gleaming mahogany. She pushed the coverings completely back from the keyboard, touched a few keys, and listened to the rich notes which followed. Then her eye caught something else and she bared the entire top of the piano. In the dark, satiny wood was a cruel scar, a deep scratch which angled erratically across the lid and down one side, ending near a leg.

"What's this?"

"We never did find out," he stammered quickly. "My brother accused the piano movers of doing it, but they said no; they said the scratch had been on it when they took it from Bonnevain's place."

Miss Rachel regarded him thoughtfully. "At what precise time did Lila Bonnevain turn her possessions over to you?"

"She sent them down by van on the day—the afternoon of the day, it was—on which she was supposed to go East."

"You saw her afterward?"

"No. Jacob phoned to say that the things had arrived."

"He talked to her?"

"Briefly. He said she seemed hurried and indifferent."

"Do you remember the name of the company whose van it was?" He nodded jerkily. "A big outfit. Merkins'."

She turned to restudy the scar which marked the wood. Was it possible that in the rush of packing some crate or box had been put carelessly on the piano, then dragged across it, leaving the ugly gash? It hardly seemed likely: the piano showed evidence of remarkable care.

"I should like to call Miss Ruth Rand and have her look at this."

He quivered and she judged that his blood pressure jumped several notches. "Very well. This is what I am going to do. I am turning the piano and the paintings over to you, Miss Murdock. You shall dispose of them for me. I don't care whether you give them to the Rands or to Bax Bonnevain. I do ask—no, I demand—that you have these articles out of here by tonight and that you and the Rands leave me alone henceforward."

She pitied him in that moment. "I don't think you can expect any peace until your brother's murder is solved and until we find out what happened to Lila Bonnevain. But I will co-operate in every way possible to respect your privacy."

He stalked off, to reappear in a hat and shiny gabardine coat. "The phone is in the kitchen. Help yourself." He went out through the front door; it slammed behind him.

Ruth Rand arrived in a short while after Miss Rachel called her. According to Miss Rachel's request, she came alone. She walked into the Sutters' living room and took a deep breath. "Lord, it's airless! What do they keep in here? Mice?"

"Probably." Miss Rachel wouldn't have been surprised to see rats as big as cats emerge from the tattered upholstery. "The piano is back this way." She led Ruth down the hall. Ruth carried a cane to brace herself, and limped badly on the injured ankle.

When Ruth caught sight of the piano, uncovered now of its wrappings, she gave a hoarse cry and hobbled forward. She stood before the keyboard, weaving, bracing herself with the cane; and after a few moments of silence she began to cry. Miss Rachel turned away, fussed with the stack of pictures, to give the big woman time to gain control.

"How did you——" Ruth's voice failed her; she started over. "How did you guess Lila's things would be here?"

"Mr. Sutter's young clerk overheard his call for a moving van, and his explanation that it was a piano he was thinking of moving."

Ruth took a minute to digest this. "Sutter's clerk told you?"

"I had to pay him. Or rather, Jennifer had to."

"Oh."

"He's a very sharp young man." Miss Rachel's tone was dry; she thought of the young brigand with the freckles and cowlick and smiled to herself. "Besides, he liked your niece. She perceived his gift in handling animals."

"What is Sutter's story?"

"Oh, he and Bonnevain had an old debt between them. He was keeping the piano and the pictures as a pledge."

Ruth's glance had strayed about the room and had come to rest on the portrait of Bax Bonnevain. With a yell of rage not unlike a tiger's—or what Miss Rachel thought a tiger's would be—she sprang on the portrait as on a living man. Her fist went into the canvas, ripping the painting and its backing from the plain pickled-pine frame; she yanked the painting free and tried to tear it; and when the stiff canvas resisted her efforts she wadded and crushed it and then flung it away. It bounced off a wall and hit the floor. You could still recognize Bonnevain, Miss Rachel noted, but the painted features now wore the broken, scarred look of the original.

Ruth leaned panting against the piano. "Oh, how I hate him!"

"And why are you so afraid of him?" Miss Rachel said slowly.

"I'm not!" Ruth protested. And then added: "Well . . . of course he's killed Lila in some foul way, and buried her God knows where. These three years——" She brushed fiercely at her eyes.

"Do you want to take the piano to your home?"

"I—guess so."

Miss Rachel had waited to see if Ruth noticed the scar on the shining mahogany. Now Ruth had hobbled around to the side of the piano and was tracing the ugly mark with a finger. "What's this?"

"I thought perhaps you could tell me."

"Lila wouldn't have permitted any such treatment of her piano. These little wretched men have misused her things."

"Jonathan Sutter says the piano was scarred when it was brought here, and that the movers disclaimed any responsibility."

"He's pretending that *Lila*——" All at once Ruth's face grew still

and her eyes coldly attentive. "Have you tried to contact the people who brought it here?"

"Not yet. I know the firm. It will probably take some time to check records and to find who actually handled the piano that long ago."

"It must be done. If what Sutter says is true . . . oh, you wouldn't understand the importance of it. Lila was a fanatic about her piano. If the house had been falling down, I think she would have interposed her body between the roof and it!"

"This might be evidence that something quite extraordinary occurred?"

Ruth put a shaking hand behind her to cover a part of the scratch, as if to reassure herself of it, or to keep it there, irrefutable proof of what she suspected. "Don't you remember what I've told you all along? That there was a terrible fight between them? That she had awakened at last and meant to cast him off, and that in fury he must have murdered her? This"—she traced the angled mark with a jerky motion—"this is what we needed. This is the proof I've searched for three years!"

The mark on the piano seemed completely to infuriate the big woman. To get her mind off it, and out of its single track, Miss Rachel re-covered the piano with the worn quilts, then coaxed Ruth into the living room and into a chair.

Ruth wept and raged there over her own lack of shrewdness in not suspecting the Sutters of concealing Lila's belongings; and in not pressing a search for her niece years ago. When she had somewhat run out of self-accusations, Miss Rachel talked to her.

"The only thing which corroborates your idea that your niece meant to leave Bonnevain is the note he claims to have found in the refrigerator. Up until that moment all seems to have gone splendidly. There is no evidence of preliminary ill-feeling between them."

"There's that mark on the piano!" Ruth yelled, pounding the chair arm.

Miss Rachel ignored the interruption. "We do have a clue which points in another direction. According to Mrs. Elvore, your niece was quite angry and upset about another matter, the substitution of another animal for her pet."

Ruth fairly rose from the chair in fury. "Don't you see—it's all

part of the same? *Bax* killed the cat. *Bax* got scared, afterward, and bought the cat with the blind eye to take Tom Boy's place! It was *Bax* that *Lila* accused. All that story about her leaving . . . it was an act to fool *Harper*, to give *Bax* a kind of alibi."

"You're saying that while the three of them were in the canyon that evening, running in and out of the house, finishing packing, that *Bax Bonnevain* somehow killed your niece and concealed her body without *Harper's* knowing?"

Ruth nodded grimly. "That—or else *Harper* was in on it."

"*Mr. Harper* has something on his mind," *Miss Rachel* agreed. "In spite of the fact that he is, without doubt, a rascal, I can scarcely see him concealing a murder."

"Perhaps *Bax* involved him somehow." *Ruth* sat forward in the chair, her face flushed, eyes glittering. "He made *Harper* think that he was a party to her killing, that he'd be questioned, perhaps accused. It would have been his word against *Bax's* as to who had done the actual crime."

Miss Rachel saw that there was no way to get *Ruth Rand* off that single track to a point where she could look objectively at the disappearance of *Lila Bonnevain*. In spite of *Ruth's* promises to keep an open mind, to permit *Miss Rachel* to search for the truth, every last scrap which she uncovered went towards a predestined end—the conviction of *Bonnevain*.

"We had better check with the movers who brought the piano here," she said finally. "At least we can attempt to prove or disprove *Sutter's* story."

"I'd like to wring his neck," said *Ruth*. She stood up.

At that moment there were scurrying steps at the door, and then *Sutter* burst into the room. His clothes were awry. He seemed to have run a good distance, to judge by the way he staggered through the room, clutching his side and gasping for breath.

"Don't let him catch me . . . !" He choked out these words as he darted into a closet and slammed the door.

A moment later there were other steps on the porch, these slow and cautious; and then *Bax Bonnevain* stood in the doorway. The shadowy room, in contrast to the late brightness outdoors, must have blinded him temporarily. He failed to see *Miss Rachel* and *Ruth Rand*. "*Sutter?*" he called in through the screen. Then he added: "I know you're in there."

The remark had the effect of flushing Sutter from cover. He flung back the door of the closet, jumped out, looked briefly at the rear of the place as if considering whether he might outrun Bonnevain if he sprinted in that direction. Then he did the most amazing thing which had yet occurred in this bizarre affair.

He ran to Ruth Rand and knelt before her, gripped her knees as a child might who begs forgiveness and protection.

"Don't let him kill me! Please—make him go away! I swear"—the frightened little man lifted a hand in a grotesque gesture of taking an oath—"I swear to you, Miss Rand, that I never did tell a soul *who really killed Lila Bonnevain's cat!*"

Bonnevain's shadow lay on the floor; Sutter looked over his shoulder at it and made a sort of squeak.

As for Ruth Rand, she gave no sign that she understood what the terrified man had just said to her. She bent forward and pushed him away. On her features was an expression of weary loathing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

There was a space of silence, electric with tension. The small man on his knees seemed frozen in his attitude of pleading; Ruth Rand remained haughty and displeased. Bax Bonnevain's shadow was motionless.

Then with another muffled cry, Sutter sprang up and fled through the house and left a banging door behind him as he took off from the kitchen entry. At the same moment Bonnevain's shadow vanished from the opening on the porch. Ruth Rand passed a hand over her eyes. "Now—what was that?"

It was so precisely what Miss Rachel had expected her to say that it seemed rehearsed, false. "It was Mr. Sutter," she said tartly. "Didn't you notice?"

"I mean . . . well, something occurred which I can't understand."

"He wanted you to protect him from Bonnevain. I don't know why. He was a witness to your encounter in front of his shop; he must have seen how Bonnevain outwitted and disabled you then."

Quick color stung the blonde's fair skin. "How ridiculous. Bax wasn't here."

"You must have seen his shadow." Miss Rachel pointed to the bright, empty patch before the open door.

Ruth shook her head. Was she really as unbelieving, as puzzled, as she seemed?

"Sutter also swore to you, quite desperately it seemed to me, that he had never told a soul who really killed the original Tom Boy."

"That's . . . insane. If he means I know——" Ruth stood up, dismissing the subject. "We'll go to the office of this moving firm, we'll find out something about that mark on Lila's piano."

"Don't you find any significance in Sutter's behavior?"

"None at all." There seemed a sudden haggard tiredness, almost desperation, in the woman's face; but whether this was an effect of the fading light or not, Miss Rachel couldn't say. "I told you the truth when I said I was through with tricks. Now I just want to know what happened to Lila." Her tone implied that she had discarded some secret and hateful motive.

"Before we go to the office for information, we'd better phone and make sure someone there can help us."

She turned on the light in the kitchen. The telephone sat on a small shelf over the drainboard.

At once they ran into a snag. A clerk in the Merkins' office told them that all records of more than a year ago were kept in a vault and could only be seen by permission of the manager, who was home sick for a few days. And that, besides, the police were interested in some of the old accounts and had put a seal on them to keep meddlers out.

Miss Rachel hung up. She was forced to smile ruefully to herself. Of course Lieutenant Shaw had worked quickly, tracing anything moved by van from the house at the supposed time of the Bonnevain's departure. He'd be highly interested in any boxes, trunks, or oversized packing cases—with grim ideas in mind, no doubt. But by now he knew all about the piano.

"I think you might as well arrange to move her belongings," Miss Rachel advised.

"But Shaw doesn't tell me anything!" Ruth cried.

"He has to work in his own way." She switched off the globe in the ceiling and they stood in the twilight.

"Does Shaw know about that scratch?"

"Oh, without a doubt. The men on the van would have made a note of it on the order form. For their own protection."

"What will he make of it?"

"I don't know. To me, the gash in the fine piano had something cruel and ferocious about it, and I thought of a scene of violence."

Ruth stood with head bent, one hand lying on the edge of the drainboard, the other hanging at her side dangling her purse. "Isn't it what I told you? She struggled there under his blows." Traffic noises sifted in through the open window above the sink and a smell of stale grease rose from the unwashed pots in the sink. "You'll see. I've been right all along."

"You'd better try to locate a moving firm nearby—someone who could come for these things right away."

Ruth roused herself. "Yes, I'll do that, then wait for them. What are you going to be doing?"

"I'm late," Miss Rachel explained, "for a very important date."

The office of the Hooded Groom had lights behind its blinds, but when Miss Rachel opened the door she found one of Mr. Harper's assistants putting things to rights before leaving. He explained that Mr. Harper had not returned to the office after spending the afternoon at the track. Their ten-dollar special had come in. If she wanted tomorrow's horse, she had best come back in the morning.

She chatted with him while he locked up the books. Mr. Harper's records must be important; he kept them in a cannon-ball safe. It looked quite impregnable.

Back in her car, Miss Rachel headed for the canyon. She had driven up this winding road so much lately that the route had become familiar, and the sharp turns and steep grade no longer took her entire attention. She had thought that she might find Harper at the Bonnevain house; but it was dark, almost invisible against the trees that rimmed the hill. She drove on. A car like Mr. Harper's sat in the road below Carol Callahan's bungalow.

Miss Rachel parked and took to the high ground, and came out at a spot where she could look down into Carol's big rear window. She found the scene fascinating. A single lamp burned across the room; but the spot before the window sparkled with candlelight.

A table had been set up in the alcove by the glass, and facing each other across it were Carol and Mr. Harper. They were sharing dinner. As Miss Rachel watched, Carol lifted a wineglass in what seemed to be a toast.

"What a pair," Miss Rachel said to herself. She could see from here Mr. Harper's ingratiating smiles and Carol's coquettish glances.

The air was distinctly festive. After the wine was gone, Carol helped Mr. Harper and herself from a casserole dish; and Miss Rachel decided that Bax Bonnevain hadn't come home to his steak-and-onion pie and that Carol was seeing that it didn't go to waste. Mr. Harper seemed wriggly with gratitude. Having no scruples whatever about trying to overhear their conversation, Miss Rachel tried to find cover nearer the house. She never was able to get close enough to hear a word from Mr. Harper. The single bit she scrounged was when Carol stepped out into the kitchen for something needed at the table; and said, within hearing, that she had had a wonderful, restful afternoon.

When Miss Rachel got home, scratchy with dust and stiff from crouching under Carol's kitchen windows, she discovered that Jennifer expected her to assist at the church bazaar.

"You're a mess. Get cleaned up," Jennifer commanded. "While we're driving to the bazaar, you can tell me some big lie about how you fell over a bank while picking daisies, or something."

"I was simply trying to hear what Miss Callahan had to say to Mr. Harper."

Jennifer followed her upstairs. "I didn't know that they were supposed to be acquainted."

"Of course they must be." Miss Rachel shucked herself of her dusty clothes and went into the bathroom. "Harper is an old side-kick of Bonnevain's and Carol lived near him all through the year he spent with Lila. It follows that they must have known each other through him."

"And now they're . . . uh . . . courting?"

"No. Not precisely. I had the feeling that they were trying their wiles on each other. Miss Callahan is theatric, and Mr. Harper has been a shyster so long that the wheedling manner is ingrained. I wish I didn't have to go to the church bazaar."

"You do, though. Mrs. Beemish called and said they were depending on you to sell petticoats."

“At a church baz——”

“They’re miniatures,” Jennifer added hastily, “and you hang them up among your clothes and they give forth satchet.” She stomped off to get her hat and purse.

Making change a half hour later in a booth in the church hall, Miss Rachel found herself wondering. Why had Bonnevain been chasing Mr. Sutter? To kill him? It seemed a method more public than necessary.

Sutter had sworn to Ruth Rand that he had never peeped of the truth as to who had killed Lila’s cat.

Well, who had, then? Bonnevain?

Someone had killed the original Tom Boy and had substituted another. It must have been Bonnevain, since he had made up the yarn about injuring the cat with a shot into its eye.

She regretted the instant of surprise which had robbed her of the chance to question Bonnevain as he had stood at Sutter’s door.

She looked up to find a large fortyish woman in a gray fuzzy hat telling her she wanted a half dozen miniature petticoats in lilac flavor. “I always wear lilac,” the plump woman dimpled, handing over a bill. “My friends associate it with me. They tell me they can tell when I’ve passed through a room.”

“A pleasant thought,” Miss Rachel agreed.

Then she stood staring at the bill until the woman asked impatiently for her change.

She had just been struck with the most ghoulish idea of her life.

It was past noon of the following day before she found the house she wanted.

She had started at just after eight, ringing doorbells at the scattered homes in Laurel Canyon. This involved a lot of walking and climbing; and the day was warm. She saved herself some trouble by avoiding the new places. When she did ring a bell she asked at once of whoever answered whether the people in the house had lived there for more than three years. This took care of the majority. The canyon seemed plagued with the most temporary population.

If the answer was right as to length of residence, she inquired if there were children present who took piano lessons. And for some hours that seemed to dispose of everybody else.

But at last a thin mouse of a woman said that though she had no

children who were musical, a neighbor of hers on the street behind did have. The neighbor had a very gifted child who had studied for seven years and was just about ready to debut in Hollywood Bowl. She couldn't remember the names of all the teachers; there had been so many.

It was in this way that Miss Rachel located the only pupil of Lila who still seemed to be around. In a small house, painted pink, tucked against the flank of the hill like a fly attacking a pie, lived the girl and her mother. The girl was about fourteen. She had solemn great eyes and a thin neck which made Miss Rachel think of a flower stalk. Her mother was short and stout, combed her thinning red hair straight back into a little bun, and wore a sort of tone-deaf expression, as if the years of listening for errors in the girl's playing had robbed her of part of her hearing.

Now Miss Rachel had found that which was necessary. She had found people who had known Lila Bonnevain well, and who had no emotional involvement in her life or her disappearance. It was like having a fresh view of the world.

To start with, once they were seated in the front room on wicker furniture, Mrs. Goss explained how well she had liked Lila and how much she appreciated what Lila had contributed to the girl's education.

"She was the most patient teacher Giselle ever had. We just loved her. But now . . . well, I've heard rumors that she didn't go East after all. And the newspapers have played up the murder which took place in her house."

"Mrs. Bonnevain apparently disappeared three years before. There was a misunderstanding between her husband and her family. Each supposed her to be with others."

A dreamy look spread over Mrs. Goss's face. "You know, I've never pretended to be psychic. Nothing like it. I'm down to earth, really hardheaded, and practical. You take Giselle's music now—I'm not one bit arty about it. To me, it's just common sense, the kid has a gift which can lead to a nice easy life, meeting famous people, traveling, all that—I gave her lessons and worked and scrimped just from a real, down-to-earth, value-received viewpoint." She took a deep breath and her stocky bosom rose under the blue cotton blouse. "What I mean, I've got my feet on the ground. And yet I used to have an odd feeling about Lila Bonnevain."

Miss Rachel confessed that she found all such odd feelings highly interesting.

"Well . . . what started me was that husband of Mrs. Bonnevain's. She just loved him to pieces. You could see that. And yet she seemed to expect other people to criticize him, or something." Mrs. Goss wrinkled her brows in an effort to find the precise words she needed. "I used to want to tell her, it wasn't any of my business, I wasn't thinking mean things about him; but I never did. Actually, I did have an opinion. I thought she was wasting her time with that man. He didn't look like a real solid fellow. She had musical talent, and she'd acted on the stage in New York, and she painted—nice pictures, too. But that wasn't it, precisely. I had a feeling that she and he—that their life wasn't going to turn out well, if you know what I mean."

"She was very defensive?"

"About him, yes. That's the word."

"Well, I think that her aunt and grandfather—her surviving family—disapproved of Mr. Bonnevain."

Mrs. Goss nodded. "Well, that may have started her wondering if everybody felt as they did."

"You never suspected that she changed her attitude toward her husband?"

"Oh no, never."

"How soon before her supposed departure did you see her?"

"A day or so."

"You didn't see her on the day she was supposed to leave?"

Mrs. Goss thought about it, then wrinkled her brows in another frown. "No, I'm sure not. I remember that she said she had a few things to clear up before she left, and she had already recommended another teacher, and Giselle was due to take a lesson with the new teacher right away."

"Did you ever see Lila Bonnevain's pet cat?"

The slight change in the direction of the conversation caused a flicker in Mrs. Goss's calm glance. "I knew she had one." A slight uneasiness grew behind her eyes. "You are a friend of hers, I take it."

"Her aunt has asked me to try to find her."

This seemed to allay the beginning of distrust. "Of course I'll help in any way I can. Even slight. Perhaps you shouldn't repeat

what I just said about Mr. Bonnevain, though. Some might think it malicious."

"Any remark you care to make is safe with me," Miss Rachel explained carefully. Then she got down to the meat of the matter. What perfume had Lila Bonnevain worn?

Mrs. Goss and Miss Goss could remember no definite scent.

"I think what I used to smell about her was her shampoo," Miss Goss explained shyly. "It was just—clean. You know. Nice, fragrant, soapy clean."

"If she had passed through a room"—Miss Rachel was snatching for straws—"would you have known she'd been there?"

The gaze they bent on her, mother and daughter, was blank but kind.

"I don't think I would have," said Mrs. Goss finally.

"Of course——" The young girl hesitated. Then: "You just want *smells*?"

"No. No. Anything. What do you remember her by?"

"The bracelet."

The child looked at the mother; Mrs. Goss nodded. "It has bells."

"She gave it to me on the last day I saw her," said Giselle all in a rush. "She said I was the best pupil she'd ever had and that someday I would be famous and then, when I made my first television appearance, she wanted me to wear the little bracelet to show that I remembered her. And I promised. I wouldn't give it up for anything." She rubbed her wrist uneasily. The wrist was bare.

Miss Rachel tried to catch the tail of the narrative. "Mrs. Bonnevain had a bracelet——"

"With bells," supplied Mrs. Goss.

"And she gave it to me," nodded Giselle, her head bending like a flower which seeks the dew.

Miss Rachel suddenly sat straighter. "She wore it all the time?"

"Practically," said Mrs. Goss.

"Except when she played," explained Giselle. "Even then . . . well, once I coaxed her to leave it on, to hear how it might sound you know, and she played something Chinese and it all sounded like temple bells and gongs. It was lovely!" Giselle clapped her hands in rapture.

"You have what I want, then." But how, Miss Rachel asked in her thoughts, am I going to get it away from you?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was after all not as difficult as she had thought. When she had fully explained why she wanted the bracelet and what she meant to do with it, Giselle brought it and laid it carefully in her palm.

The bracelet was not Oriental—as she had somehow supposed because of Giselle's story—but of Indian work. The wire links and tiny bells were silver, pounded fine, and decorated with nubs of unpolished turquoise. Made in Arizona in some pueblo, Miss Rachel guessed, and had a brief but vivid image of a brown profile bent above a tiny forge.

"It was a gift of her grandfather's when she was a child," said Mrs. Goss out of memory. "She told Giselle that only a child should wear it. And then she made Giselle promise to wear it at her debut."

"I'm not giving it to keep," said Giselle, almost in a whisper.

"I'll see that you get it back safely."

Mrs. Goss, seeing her intention to go, rose from her chair. "You don't think that Mrs. Bonnevain—that she'll be coming back?"

Under their anxious eyes she was tempted to lie. But these were people who deserved an honest answer. "No. I'm afraid that you will never see her again."

Mrs. Goss plucked at a button on the plain blue blouse. Giselle's hand brushed away a tear. Their blank look of loss was a greater compliment to Lila Bonnevain than any yet paid in her presence.

She went back to her car and turned for home. She found Miss Jennifer in the garden preparing to set a gopher trap. "He's been eating the glad bulbs again. It wasn't thrips, all along."

"Be careful or you'll catch your fingers first."

Jennifer inspected the inside of the boxlike contrivance. "He's supposed to push in here and—snap!" She frowned in disgust. "It doesn't always work. Sometimes he merely pushes dirt against the trigger. I wish there was a way to bait it."

"Bait it with a ghost," Miss Rachel suggested, passing on into the house.

She was thoughtful over lunch. Jennifer had served a raw carrot

salad—*eyes*, you know—and skim milk—*bones*—and ate the un-nourishing fare with an attitude of virtue. But by and by she hinted: “I suppose that veiled remark you made is some clue to your future course of action.”

Miss Rachel took the little bracelet from her skirt pocket and laid it on the table. “It belonged to Lila Bonnevain.”

Jennifer picked it up. “Tinkly, isn’t it?”

“Apparently she gave it away to a former pupil just before she vanished. She’s supposed to have worn it almost constantly. Except when she played the piano. You see, last night at the bazaar a plump woman in a fuzzy hat let fall a remark which stayed with me. She bought a lilac-scented petticoat. She said that when she passed through a room—pretty strong, I gather—that her friends knew she’d been there.”

Jennifer put down the bracelet. “Oh, I see what you’re going to do, Rachel. But it’s farfetched. Surely everyone in the case is positive that Mrs. Bonnevain is dead.”

“Only one person is positive,” Miss Rachel corrected. “Another one is pretty sure, judging by behavior.”

“Perhaps they’re the same person.”

“Might be.”

“Which one is pretty sure?” Jennifer asked, unable to control the question.

“Carol Callahan.”

Miss Jennifer stirred the raw-carrot mess thoughtfully. “Somehow I had never thought *she’d* be it.”

“She was always high on my list of suspects.”

Jennifer worried a piece of carrot between her teeth. “Because of her interest in Bax Bonnevain?”

“No.”

Jennifer sampled the skim milk, made a face, and then went out into the kitchen to put on water for tea. Apparently bones and eyes had had enough. She came back with a plate of cake bought at the bazaar. “It’s applesauce. Too dry and too much spice. Mrs. Beemish brought it, but I’m sure that her sister—the cross-eyed one—made it. Forty-five if she’s a day, and can’t boil water.” She sat down and took her time picking at a bit of the cake. “Why, then?”

Miss Rachel had not been led aside by the verbal excursion. “Lila Bonnevain was killed over some money. Some twenty-five thousand

or so. It wasn't hers, though she kept it under her name in a savings account. She drew it out at about the time she was supposed to go East with her husband. No trace of it has turned up, which indicates—to my mind—that its owner reclaimed it. Now, at the same time, during this brief period before departure, Lila Bonnevain was extremely angry about another matter."

"The substitute cat."

"Yes. She had discovered the trick, and something about the motive behind it—which I haven't been able to fathom. Somehow I've acquired a hunch that the money and the motive behind substituting the cat have points in common. Though I can't see them as yet."

"You make it all sound highly involved."

"When we find the truth," Miss Rachel decided, "it will be simple."

"But inclusive enough to explain the murder of Mr. Sutter?"

"Oh, indeed. Mr. Sutter had gone to spill the beans, as they say."

"As you would say," Jennifer corrected. She walked back to the kitchen to make the tea, came back with the pot on a tray with sugar, cream, and cups. "About what? And to whom?"

"We can only suppose, because of his line of business, that he meant to tell the truth about the cat. As to whom——"

"He was apparently waiting in Bonnevain's house."

Miss Rachel tried the cake. It was dry, as Jennifer had said, and someone had been far too liberal with nutmeg and cinnamon. "The obvious conclusion would be that he had gone to warn Bonnevain that he could no longer conceal the truth. Because of conscience, or other matters. This is taking at face value the tale that Bonnevain wounded the animal while hunting, that the animal died and had to be replaced."

"Are there other choices?"

"One intrigues me. Suppose Bonnevain, too, was the victim of a trick? Let's try to imagine that he hadn't killed the pet, but that someone else had made him think he had."

"Oh, Rachel, now you're getting it complicated."

"Not too much so."

"You promised it would be simple."

Miss Rachel shook her head. "I said the end of it would be simple. Or at least it's what I meant to say."

“Well, what triggered Mr. Sutter into such action—again using a phrase of your own?”

“Could it have been Ruth Rand’s crashing dive through the shop window? Somehow I think it may have been. There was a terrific argument between the Sutter brothers immediately following the incident. Some course of action was being debated.”

“Perhaps they were trying to decide if honesty had ever been proved the best policy,” said Miss Jennifer slyly. She put some of the cake down on the floor for Samantha; and the spoiled old cat licked at the frosting, holding her whiskers back from the stickiness. “Well, keeping it simple, mind you—why should Carol have murdered Mr. Sutter?”

“She had fooled Bax Bonnevain about the cat,” Miss Rachel surmised.

“You’re guessing. You don’t even know that she was in the house that night before she went over there with us.”

“Oh, she had been there,” Miss Rachel put in quickly. “She’d taken a sack of cat food for Tom Boy. Or rather, Tom Boy’s stand-in. You remember, she stressed that she had been caring for the cat; and I took it to mean, as she no doubt meant me to, that she’d been feeding the animal at her place. But the truth was, she always had fed him at the Bonnevain back steps. You recall, I described to you the bare state of Mr. Bonnevain’s cupboards. The sack of canned cat food was replenishment. It never got put away upon the shelves because something happened to sidetrack Miss Callahan.”

“Like killing Mr. Sutter with a kitchen knife?”

“Quite possibly.”

Jennifer sipped her tea. “Well, let us not be sidetracked with her. You’re implying that she hid in the bushes above the Rand place and bopped Ruth Rand with a can when Ruth came out to practice screaming.”

“Correct. I’d bet my neck on it.”

Jennifer clattered her spoon in disapproval. “Ruth Rand was positive her attacker was Bax Bonnevain.”

“She sees Bonnevain in every shadow.”

Miss Jennifer finished her tea, rose, and began to clear the table. “You have something hatching. I can see it under that pose of innocence you try so hard to hold.”

“It’s not a pose. I am innocent—in the unshrewd sense of the

word—or I would have seen through these people from the beginning. Carol Callahan isn't in love with Mr. Bonnevain, for instance. She's in love with herself and adding Bonnevain and Harper to her string is merely a matter of ego. She wouldn't have either one of them, permanently, on a bet. I'll wager she gets a nice piece of alimony out of her ex-husband and has no intention of giving it up."

"You make her sound a vicious woman," said Miss Jennifer, scraping the plates. The cat yawned and walked away from the scrap of cake on the floor, then sat down to scrub her whiskers.

"Oh no, not vicious. She's a kind of girl that the novelists of our youth would have labeled predatory. And have shown lying on a tiger pelt. But actually she's just playing a game many men have fun at."

"She's pretty sure that Lila Bonnevain is dead?"

"Oh yes. She's made up her mind."

Jennifer clucked against her teeth. "And shows no shock over it?"

"If she killed Lila, the emotional effects of the act have had a long time to wear off. By the way, the course of action for the afternoon—which you inquired about—includes a visit to Miss Callahan. But earlier, in fact immediately, we must make tracks for Hollywood Park. I want to find Mr. Harper."

There were about forty-seven thousand people at Hollywood Park that afternoon, but finding Mr. Harper was not as difficult as Jennifer had thought it must be. She waited by a pillar on the mezzanine floor of the grandstand, and before five minutes had passed her sister came back to say that Harper was not far off. And at a bar.

A bugle blew a fanfare in the distance and a voice on the loudspeakers informed the customers that the horses were on the track for the running of the third race. A sudden hot frenzy pounded through Miss Jennifer's nervous system. She gasped, clutched at her purse. This was some sort of disease which got into you; and she would resist it!

Then, as if someone inside her (Satan, she decided fleetingly) were pulling wires which controlled her movements, she shoved the purse under one arm and fumblingly opened her program. She had had no intention of betting. Why had she bought this thing?

"You're not listening!" Miss Rachel said impatiently.

"I am too!" What was this newspaper clipping doing tucked in her glove? Had she snipped it from the paper before leaving home? Apparently she had. The names of the entries for the third race seemed to bulge off the paper at her. There was a thumping panic where her heart ordinarily lay in righteous peace.

Here was something called Sea Down. A three-year-old colt. Overdue, according to the consensus.

"Well, I'll wait until you buy a ticket," Miss Rachel decided. "Then we'll go to work on Mr. Harper."

Miss Jennifer found herself in front of a wicket, through which a drab-eyed man in a straw hat looked back at her. "N-number six." Two whole dollars parted company with her fingers; a ticket pounced up from a slot. She stumbled away. Miss Rachel still waited by the pillar. There was a twinkle when she looked at her sister, quickly concealed. Jennifer was goggling at the ticket as if she had no idea where it had come from.

"I like Sea Down, too," said Miss Rachel. "I'll place him and we'll go halves. Okay?"

"Okay." This which Miss Jennifer considered a vulgarism did not ordinarily pass her lips; so something had shaken her to her core.

Miss Rachel returned, tucking her purchase into her handbag. "All set. Mr. Harper is in his usual spot, a bar he favors. He's at the stage of feeling a mild glow, I believe. Not sober enough to be expecting a trick. Nor too drunk to miss it. I'll go and engage him in conversation. He doesn't know you. You can come right up behind him and order something."

"At a bar?" said Jennifer, getting back to normal.

"They serve ginger ale."

Mr. Harper's rotund figure was neatly clad in charcoal flannel, with a green shirt and tie, and panama hat. He had a drink in his hand and his expression was one of benign foxiness. When he saw Miss Rachel he beamed, put down the drink, lifted the hat from his bald head briefly. "Well, little lady! Nice seeing you! How did you come out on the first two?"

She measured his concern. "I need a good winner."

"Let me pick something for you. Compliments of the house." With an air of expansive good nature he took his program from his pocket and turned its pages. "Ah. Care-A-Trifle is a good stretch runner.

He's a favorite, though." Mr. Harper peered at the board at the end of the long corridor in which they stood. "Three to two."

"I don't want a hot-dog horse. I need a fifty-dollar winner."

He smiled, showing his good white teeth. "Now, now. Mustn't get greedy. Can't have a nag like It's Pouring, every day."

Jennifer had come to stand with her back to his. She lifted the bracelet and gave it a little shake.

Miss Rachel was facing Mr. Harper, watching him closely. The small sound of the silver bells seemed to make no impression. She coughed rather loudly. The bells tinkled again in the space of silence that followed.

Of course it had been three years, presumably, since he had had any contact with Lila Bonnevain. He, and the others who had known her, must have long ago lost that expectation of seeing her which keeps little memories alive. She decided that the sound of Lila's tinkling bracelet was going to cause no effect whatever, when she suddenly found his eyes fixed hard on hers. "Funny," he said in a hoarse tone. "You know, just then I had the *da*—the *doggonedest* feeling. My skin crawled." His gaze jerked off hers; he stared past her.

"Yes?"

He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Haunted," he decided. "That the kind of thing it was. Do you have any idea of what I mean?"

She pretended to misunderstand. "Do you have a headache?"

"No, no. Do you know that sensation, that prickly feeling, when you say, 'Someone walked over my grave?'"

She grew solemn. "You thought of somebody who's dead?"

"No," he said positively. "My God, I thought of Lila. I had the feeling I could put my hand out and touch her." He laughed shrilly.

"A haunted feeling? You don't believe she's coming back?"

"I shouldn't say it." He turned to his drink, tossed it down. "Join me in one? Let's see—you liked screwdrivers, didn't you?"

Miss Rachel wondered how much Jennifer caught of this. "Not just now, thank you."

But he bought her one anyway, plus a double Scotch for himself. She decided that the tinkle of the bracelet had stirred him somehow, that he was trying to conceal the depth of his dismay.

He handed her the drink, touched her elbow. "Let's move along to

the railing. There's something I've kept to myself for a long time. I've thought, well, it wasn't any of my business. And like I told you—I never knew Bax and Lila to exchange an uncivil word. So this item doesn't fit and I'd rather forget it."

She waited, sensing his uncertainty. If she probed, he'd clam up.

They paused at a spot overlooking the crowd and the track, and out of the way of hurrying bettors. He leaned on the metal railing and stared worriedly into his drink. "I went up to see Lila and Bax on the night they were supposed to pull out for the East—as I told you. What I haven't mentioned is that I was there earlier. Much earlier. It was just past dawn, the light was thin, the trees dripping. I knew that Bax was in a bind with the Sutters and I intended to offer to talk to them for him—and get them off his back so he could quit worrying about them. That's all I could do for the moment. I'd had a few poor days just then, myself."

The horses began the parade to the post. Some distance away, Miss Jennifer was craning above the crowd, trying to see some indication of fitness on the part of her choice.

Harper went on slowly. "There was a whale of a row going on inside the house. I could hear Lila shouting. I'll tell you, that rooted me in my tracks. She was an easygoing, gentle kind of girl."

"Yes, so I've understood."

"All at once there was another racket, a pounding or banging on the piano, and I decided that if things were getting that rough I'd better leave. And I did. When I came back in the evening, they'd smoothed things over. Nice as pie to each other. But—well, that was quite a fight for that early in the day. And then when I found out Lila'd been gone . . . not with Bax——" He took a gulp from his glass.

"You're sure that she was fighting with her husband?"

"Who else?" he said huskily.

"And Bax never spoke of the argument to you?"

"Too embarrassed, I guess." He shook his head. "Funny. I keep hearing them little bells of hers."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"It *is* the kind of thing you keep under your hat," he said defensively.

"But now it worries you?"

"I can't imagine what they were quarreling about. Of course, the thing most people remarked about them was the fact that Bax didn't make much money and that Lila apparently kept up the home on her income as a music teacher. But I can't see it as a cause of a battle like that one. It was always something that seemed taken for granted between them."

"Could they have been quarreling over Miss Callahan?"

He widened his eyes, made a sour mouth. "Don't you believe it! Carol's a sweet, friendly kid. She treated Bax the way she treated everyone else." His tone implied, though, that this was a hope of his.

Miss Rachel nodded at him above the drink in her hand. "She's been nice to you, too. Of course you've been doing her a favor, getting me to the track every day so she can have easy and peaceful afternoons."

He had the grace to flush. "Well . . . uh." Then he suddenly giggled. "Pretty cute. How did you figure that out?"

She was demure but vague. "I know Miss Callahan thinks me a dragon. It couldn't be a guilty conscience——"

"Of course not!"

"—so I suppose she's merely eager to tidy up Mr. Bonnevain's house and remove all signs of Lila's occupancy once and for all."

His face went blank, so she judged that he knew nothing of Carol's labors in the yard and patio. He remained so silent and thoughtful that when the race started with a great clanging of bells and shouting from the crowd, he didn't even glance toward the track. When Sea Down came tearing down the stretch and crossed the wire a half length ahead of his nearest competitor, there was such a din of yelling from long-shot bettors that Miss Rachel put her hands over her ears. But Mr. Harper still was lost in thought. Then came the most startling interruption of all.

Miss Jennifer burst from a knot of people, screeching with frenzy,

shouting into their faces that she had a ticket on the winner. Mr. Harper awoke and recoiled. Miss Rachel made shushing motions, which were ignored. She thought that Mr. Harper was simply struck by the figure Jennifer made, which was bad enough—hat awry, hair tousled, dress pumped up by the wind created in her passing. But then she noticed that in Jennifer's hand, the hand which held the winning ticket aloft, Lila Bonnevain's bracelet still swung and tinkled with its cluster of bells.

A strange look crossed Mr. Harper's plump features. The next moment he had vanished in the crowd.

She dragged an expostulating Jennifer along with her as she made for the gate.

"I haven't cashed my winnings!"

"You can do that tomorrow."

Miss Jennifer tried to cling to a post at the paddock entry. "I insist—and how do I know I won't have an even more profitable winner in the next race?"

"Chances are you wouldn't," said Miss Rachel, trying to cut cruelly across Jennifer's wild exuberance. "And anyway, in case Mr. Harper has ideas about getting up to Creek Canyon to warn his friends, we have to hurry."

"Now?"

"At once." Miss Rachel felt sorry for Jennifer. Jennifer had tasted a heady wine and wanted to linger to broach a new barrel. After so many years of rectitude, the excitement acted on her as fire to a brush heap. She wobbled and staggered as Miss Rachel dragged her on. She made futile protests. She waved the ticket and remembered finally to remind Miss Rachel that they were supposed to share the winnings.

At the entry gate, under the cool eyes of the uniformed attendant, she put up a last stouthearted battle. And won.

"I guess I really don't need you, then," Miss Rachel decided. It might be best, she thought, to let Jennifer have her head, as they said about a horse, and let her go her way where she would. "Take a cab when you decide you've had enough."

Miss Jennifer dropped the tinkling bracelet into Miss Rachel's hand and took off, galloping back up the ramp and on to join the mob under the grandstand.

Thirty-six minutes later Miss Rachel was turning off Laurel Can-

yon Boulevard into the small road that wound between clumps of lantana and eucalyptus. She parked the car and walked swiftly down hill on the path Ruth had taken on that first visit. She paused behind some shrubbery to examine the scene below. She could hear someone whistling. She moved a few steps, to a spot where she could see into the patio; and there was Carol Callahan, her ripe figure well revealed in a thin plaid cotton shirt and brown denim pants. Carol had all of Lila's hanging baskets lined up. On one side of her as she knelt on the bricks was a big box of potting mixture—earth and peat moss and sand, probably—and on the other was a flat of young plants. She was refilling the redwood baskets with new material.

Miss Rachel had to wait until Carol changed position, then darted forward to a closer spot. She crouched low, wondering if Carol would be able to see her through the branches.

When Carol finished filling one of the pots and leaned back on her heels, took a pack of cigarettes from her pants pocket to indulge in a smoke, Miss Rachel lifted the little bracelet and set it swinging.

Carol was much more alert, or perhaps more nervous, than Mr. Harper. She jerked, dropping the cigarette, and then remained stiffly bent forward in the act of picking it up, her face turned toward the hill. Miss Rachel let a few notes tinkle forth. Carol was close enough so that she could read her expression plainly; and it was one of stunned surprise.

After a moment, Carol rose from her kneeling position. She looked down at the preparations for refilling Lila's containers; and then wiped her hands guiltily against the thighs of her tight pants—exactly as a child might who wishes to hide the fact that he has been stealing jam.

Then she dropped quickly to her knees and rapidly undid what she had accomplished. The young plants went hurriedly back into the wooden flat, the potting mixture into the box. With an air of intense nervous haste, she stacked the empty baskets against the rear trellis of the patio. She took the box of potting mixture under one arm, balanced the flat under the other, and ran—not walked—to the opposite opening in the enclosing framework. The bricks clattered under her hurrying feet. She rushed down the steps to the road, and off down the road toward home. When she had gone there was nothing but silence.

The silence endured for a second or so; and then Bax Bonnevain's

voice at Miss Rachel's elbow asked: "Where did you get Lila's jewelry?"

She jumped; the next moment she was angry at herself for having been so engrossed in Carol's maneuvers that she had let him creep up on her. She glanced back at him, trying not to show the upset he had caused her. "Hello, Mr. Bonnevain." She stuck the bracelet out of sight into her pocket. "Did you catch up with Mr. Sutter after all?"

"I asked my question first."

"Your wife gave the bracelet to a pupil of hers before she disappeared. And I happened to have borrowed it."

"May I have it?" He put out a hand.

"I'm sorry. I promised to return it safely to the little girl who loaned it to me."

"I won't hurt it."

She gave him the bracelet. He opened the clasp and let the links swing between his hands; the small bells tinkled and their silvery surface caught the light. "Who has been keeping it?"

"Giselle Goss."

He nodded as if she had answered some expectation on his part. "Lila liked Giselle. She said the kid had real talent and would be famous some day. Rich and famous." His dry eyes looked at the twinkling bells and Miss Rachel wondered what his thoughts were. Was he remembering the days of his own glory as a successful jockey? Perhaps. "I wish you wouldn't do what you were doing just now. Scare Carol with it."

"I'm finished with Carol. What about Mr. Sutter?"

"I wanted to ask him a simple question about Lila's cat. He gabbled something to me about didn't I dare threaten him, he'd demand protection from the police. He must be nuts."

"And what did you want to know about the cat?"

"The truth. For a long time I've supposed I knew the truth. But I'm beginning to doubt." His gaze drifted over her. "Do you want to hear about it?"

"Yes, I do."

"Come down to the house where we can talk. I'll make some coffee." Again his eyes examined her. "Or maybe you'd rather have tea."

"A bottle of beer, if you have some cold."

He didn't show any surprise. They walked down together to the patio, around to the front of the small house, where he opened the

door. He had Lila's bracelet in his hand; and when he took out the keys to let them in, he gave the bracelet back to Miss Rachel.

She sat down in the living room. The place looked much neater than it had on her first visit; and she decided that Carol had been tidying up a good deal. There were fresh flowers in a bowl and a display of new magazines on a low table. The cheerfulness dispelled any lingering memory of Mr. Sutter's gruesome end here.

Bax Bonnevain came from the kitchen with two bottles of beer in one hand, two tall glasses in the other. He poured Miss Rachel a tall drink, then settled on a chair across the room. He sipped at his beer before he spoke again. "We moved up here about a month after our marriage. Lila liked it. It's quiet and she could practice without disturbing anyone, or without much interruption from salesmen and other visitors. She bought the kitten at the pet shop a few days after we came."

"She loved animals?"

"Yes. She made pets of everything, even the squirrels that were digging up the yard as fast as she could plant it. I asked her to let me put out poison grain for the pests, but she wouldn't do it. She said I could scare them by popping away with my twenty-two—not to kill any of the little devils, you understand, just to drive them off. I'll admit to you, I didn't always miss. If Lila wasn't around, I'd get rid of some of them."

"I understand."

"Well, one day several months later I went out as usual and took a few pot shots up the hill—and that was the day Tom Boy didn't come home. Lila was very worried; and I sensed after a day or two that she suspected I might have had something to do with the cat's disappearance. I couldn't prove it, but I think Ruth Rand gave her the idea."

Remembering Ruth's dislike for the man, Miss Rachel decided that his conclusions were probably correct.

"Suddenly the cat showed up again. He was wild and acted half sick, and one eye was filmed over. Lila believed I had accidentally hit him while I was shooting at the squirrels. I didn't argue with her over it because, actually, it was possible I had got him with a ricochet and hadn't known it."

"And what do you believe now?"

"I don't know what really happened to the cat," he said slowly,

“but I have a hunch that behind the whole thing was a plan to make Lila think I’d hurt the animal on purpose. If so, that part of the plot failed. Lila knew I wouldn’t hurt a pet of hers deliberately.”

Into Miss Rachel’s memory popped the words Mrs. Goss had said—that Lila was very defensive about her husband. “What makes you think so?”

Bax was frowning at the couch where Mr. Sutter had sprawled with a knife in his heart. “Well—you may think me crazy—but it’s the thing that happened here to Jake.”

“You think he was murdered because of this trick about the cat?”

Bax Bonnevain suddenly stood up, frowned, walked a few steps to the door and stood there staring out at the hill below. “When you put it that way, it—it just won’t add up. Nobody would kill a man to keep him from telling the truth about a stunt like that. There wasn’t enough at stake. Do you see what I mean?”

“There wasn’t much at stake as long as everyone presumed your wife to be alive.”

He looked around at her and in his haggard, broken features she read his acceptance of Lila’s death. At the same instant, Miss Rachel lost her last shred of suspicion of this man. Ruth Rand was wrong. Totally wrong. Their marriage, their life together in this little house, may not have satisfied Ruth’s conception of what was due her niece; but Bax and Lila Bonnevain had been happy together.

And he hadn’t killed her.

“You’ve been puzzling over Jacob Sutter’s visit, wondering why he came and why he had to die.”

Bax Bonnevain nodded. He came over to Miss Rachel’s chair, reached for the bottle, refilled her glass, then stood there with the bottle held loosely in his fingers. “That’s right. Jake was a friend of mine. He trusted me, I believe. I know I could always depend on him to tell the truth.”

“Then you don’t think Jacob Sutter was in on the trick concerning the cat?”

Bonnevain turned away. “No. That sounds more like Jonathan. And then, perhaps Jacob found out something at the end—and tried to tell me.”

“Who took the snapshot of your wife coming out of the bank?”

His glance jerked back at her. “Jonathan.”

"Why not ask Carol Callahan what she knows of Jacob Sutter's visit? She must have been here at about the time he was. She left a sack of canned cat food."

The fact of Carol's presence was no surprise to Bonnevain; but a touch of embarrassment entered his manner. Miss Rachel sensed that he hesitated to demand the truth from the girl who had been such a good friend.

Perhaps Carol, cleaning and baking, bringing in flowers and magazines, had banked on just such feeling on his part.

"Why not ask me?" said a poisonously sweet voice from the open doorway. There was Carol with the afternoon sunlight behind her. "Meddlers often get answers they don't expect. So I'll give you one that ought to jar you. I was sitting in this room when Jacob Sutter was murdered." She had stepped in. The open throat of the plaid shirt showed her smooth white skin. She'd combed her hair and put on fresh lipstick.

Bonnevain set down the empty bottle which he had held. He seemed utterly unprepared for Carol's sudden appearance, unable to grasp what she had just said. His mouth tightened, his eyes studied her beauty with a look of unfamiliarity. "What do you mean?"

She swaggered over to him, her hands on her hips. Her manner was amused and disdainful. "I was here all right. I'd come over with a load of chow for Tom Boy—as Bright Eyes here just told you—and found Sutter waiting. We sat and stared at each other for a while. I never did have much in common with the die-hard, hot-shot type. Too sporty for my blood. . . ." She put back her head and giggled shrilly.

Bax moved away from her as if her antics disturbed him.

"I was saying"—she lifted her hand to brush at her hair—"Sutter got restless and went out into the kitchen for a drink of water. He met somebody there. I don't know who. I heard him say something in a low voice and then there was a sort of scuffle. Next Sutter came staggering back with the knife in his chest, and flopped where he died. I yanked up that bag of cat food—having some weird idea I had to take it along—and when it broke I scrambled. Yes, man!" She sprang over to Bax and lifted her hands, and put a palm against either side of his face. "I ran, honey. Later I came back with Bright Eyes and put on an act so no one would think I'd been here. I wasn't

guilty; but I wanted to make sure you wouldn't think I could be." She pulled Bax Bonnevain's head down and gave him a long, long kiss. Miss Rachel inspected the foam on her beer.

Bax pulled away from the girl's encircling arms. "Carol . . . I don't like this——"

"It's good-by, darling." She chucked his chin with affectionate fingers. "I've tried to be a pal. I even spied for you, a little, thinking we might locate that money of Lila's and perhaps spend what was left of it—if any. I got caught at it, I had to bop Lila's ever-loving Aunt Ruth. But it was really all for you, Bax."

He was flushing, twisting away, trying to avoid her embraces.

"So long," she said in a pouting half whisper, as if not wishing Miss Rachel to hear. "You know something? This is farewell, because Lila's coming home."

She turned and went out swiftly. Bax Bonnevain sat down heavily in his chair, moved an arm aimlessly, almost knocked the glass of beer to the floor. As he caught it, bent forward from the chair, his eyes came up to meet Miss Rachel's. "What's wrong?"

She was rising, smoothing her skirt, tucking her purse under her arm. "One last question. Where were you early on the morning before you meant to leave?"

He inched back upon the cushions, turning it over in his mind. "I went out to the track before dawn. I owed a few dollars to the exercise boys and a groom or two for tips they'd given me. It was my last chance to settle up. You know, they start working the horses at daybreak."

She moved across to the door. "I have one more call to make. I'll expect you at my house in about an hour."

He stood, too, but made no move to usher her out. "I'd almost rather not know."

She paused with her hand on the screen. "So would I."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Miss Rachel tested the front door. It moved inward when she pushed it. She saw that the lock had been shot but had not found its

socket because the door had still been slightly ajar. She pushed it to behind her, careful to avoid a click. To her right was the room where she had waited yesterday, formal and unused. A vase of roses sat on a stand before a mirror, and as she glanced in one of the blossoms fell, showering petals on the stand and on the floor. It would be a while, she thought, before Ruth would notice. The room was seldom entered.

The hall led straight through the house to the big den at the rear. She walked quickly and quietly along the carpeted floor. Almost at once she heard voices. She stopped to listen. Ruth was reading something, she decided, giving it a highly dramatic flavor. Suddenly Ruth broke off to say loudly and with heat, "Shaking your head again—I've never known you to be so critical. What's wrong? What am I doing now?"

"I don't quite pin it down," said her father. "You just aren't getting the character, that's all. You're projecting something that's false. The woman is a widow with three kids. You make her sound like Mrs. Astorbilt."

"I do not," Ruth cried angrily. "And after all, women with three kids aren't necessarily work-worn drudges. They have automatic washers and they don't beat rugs over clotheslines any more, and some of them ever have part-time help. Yes, even someone like this character. You're out of date, Dad!"

"I wish sometimes you had married," said Mr. Rand reflectively. "There's a whole section of your life undeveloped, withered. You have not the faintest idea of the life of a mother. No, no conception."

Ruth was silent as if he had wounded her in some indefensible manner. Finally she said quietly, "You can be cruel. Yes, very cruel."

In the moment before Mr. Rand could answer, Miss Rachel slipped the bracelet from her pocket and shook it sharply.

There was a space of silence in the big room beyond. The door was open perhaps six inches, shutting off her view of them, and theirs of her. They should have heard the tinkling of the little bells quite plainly. Miss Rachel waited.

It was Ruth who finally spoke again. "Dad—did you hear something just then? A sort of——" She broke off; she made a wordless exclamation.

Mr. Rand said something which Miss Rachel was unable to catch.

She let the bracelet dangle; the sound of the little bells was faint, even to her, the tiny clappers barely brushing the silver shells.

Mr. Rand shouted in the den.

Ruth said shrilly: "What's the matter with you?"

"Stop it!"

"*I'm not doing anything!*"

"Make her stop it!"

"Who?" There was movement beyond the slightly opened door, the creaking of furniture as if someone writhed in a chair, Ruth's hurrying footsteps. "What can I do?"

"Send her away." Mr. Rand's voice was high-pitched, forced past some closing in his throat, all expression except fear drained out of it. "Send Lila's ghost away. Ask her to forgive me and to leave me alone. . . ." He began to weep in great gulping sobs.

Ruth murmured comfort to him. Apparently she thought he was having a spell of some kind. "It's all right. Lean on me, Dad."

There was a terrific crash of breaking wood and glass. Miss Rachel stepped where she could look into the room. Ruth Rand lay in the shards of a glass-topped coffee table, her injured ankle twisting under her, her arm unsteady as she tried to push herself up. There was blood on her face and on the collar of her blouse. Her eyes were fixed on her father.

For an instant time ticked back and Miss Rachel remembered Ruth as she had first met her, in the ruins of the big window of the pet shop.

Mr. Rand rose shakily from his chair to stand over his daughter. "I had to shove you off. You're stupid and you won't obey. Lila's ghost is in the hall and you won't go see to it. I've been expecting her, and now she's come. But this you have to understand—it was with her as it was with you just now. I lost my temper. In a way, you might say, it was an accident——"

"What are you saying?" Ruth screamed. She had crawled to her knees. She plucked a splinter of glass from her palm, digging it out with the nails of the other hand, then getting to her feet to back away from the dazed old man. "You've lost your mind! Bax . . . we know *Bax did it!*"

"Miss Rand."

Ruth turned her head.

"When was the big patch put in your cement driveway?"

The words fell into the silence; their echo seemed to run through the empty air of the big room and then die slowly. Miss Rachel let the bracelet tinkle, a last forlorn whisper of silver notes. Mr. Rand turned his head toward her. Hate flamed in his eyes and if he could, she sensed, he would have torn her to pieces like a tiger.

"I lost my temper," he said huskily. Life suddenly rushed out of him; he shuddered, put up a hand as if to brace himself against an invisible wall. "She wanted part of the money for Bax. She was stupid about that man." He looked at Miss Rachel again with the flaming promise of violence, but strength was gone, eaten away by the corroding guilt.

His hand faltered against his chest, the fingers digging into his shirt. He drew a long hoarse breath, twitched his head forward, and fell full length into the center of the floor.

Ruth whimpered. "What shall we do? Can we get a doctor?"

Miss Rachel knelt beside her crouching figure. "When was the patch put in?"

"About the time Lila went East. I mean—when I thought she'd gone East. Do you think——" She forgot the question in her anxiety for the old man. "He's so still. Can we save him?"

Miss Rachel lifted a slack wrist, felt for the pulse.

Ruth's eyes were round, fearful. "Dad patched the drive. He said the ground was sinking. I never could see what he meant, but I wanted to humor him. Are we going to let him die? Should we?" The terrible question brought pallor washing across her face.

Miss Rachel felt sorrier for Ruth Rand in that moment than she ever had for anyone. To know that your father has killed the niece both of you loved—— But fortunately, one question could be settled forever. "We won't call a doctor. No one could save him. He's gone."

Ruth bent her head to weep. "He had such an awful temper."

It was a fitting epitaph.

The living room was shadowy with twilight. Miss Jennifer sat in a corner, still wearing a hat and coat, and with a bottle of smelling salts in her hand. She opened the bottle frequently for a reviving sniff. The cat at her feet twitched her tail at the unfamiliar odor.

Bax Bonnevain sat on a couch. He had an uneasy manner, kept rolling his hat between his hands, and watched the door nervously.

He wished that the other little old lady would come home. Miss Jennifer had answered his ring and had led him in here, but not said a word since; just once in a while, though, she groaned feebly. He had no idea what was wrong with her. Apparently she had been out somewhere and had gotten sick. What did go wrong with little old ladies? Asthma? Arthritis? Or whatever it was his Aunt Fibby had called the vapors?

He thought of his Aunt Fibby then, in contrast to this rather battle-ax type who sat across the room with her smelling salts. Aunt Fibby had owned a racing stable—all trotters. She hadn't been a bit averse to giving the horses a workout herself. She had smoked a pipe. A real character. He grinned over the memory. Aunt Fibby had always ridiculed the fainting type with their vapors.

This one across the room didn't seem the fainting type either, somehow. No, probably not even when she was young. She'd had a bad turn. That was it.

Steps sounded in the hall and Miss Rachel came in, taking off her hat. She said to Bax, "I'm sorry I was late. I stayed with Ruth until they took her father's body away. Mr. Rand is dead." She sat down. Bax noted with approval that she was businesslike and calm. You'd think she'd be needing the smelling salts instead of the other one.

She looked briefly at Jennifer, then returned to Bax. "Miss Rand doesn't agree with me—I might say, as usual—but I believe you should know the truth. Your wife was killed by her grandfather in a fit of temper."

The words sank down through his consciousness; it was hard to assimilate them, to believe. To Bax the old man had been a hateful character, but not that bad.

Miss Rachel saw his urge to dismiss the truth. "Your wife was keeping quite a sum of money for her grandfather. Apparently he didn't want Ruth to know of it, since she would have expected him to pay off debts with it and otherwise bear more of the burden of keeping their household."

Bax was motionless, his face showing the shock her words had given him. In her corner, Jennifer was sitting a little straighter, the smelling salts forgotten.

The cat decided to settle herself in Miss Rachel's lap; and was much put out to find Miss Rachel not in the mood.

"As far as Ruth and I could figure it out, he won the money at the

rages during the last six months Lila lived with you in Creek Canyon. He must have plunged, really risked large amounts, and had a streak of almost incredible good luck. Sometimes, of course, it goes like that; but usually the ordinary bettor doesn't get it up to forty thousand or so, which was the amount Mrs. Elvore mentioned. Later, his luck apparently changed, and sensing this, he stopped betting large sums and tried to hang on to the twenty-six thousand or so still left in the account."

"She must have arranged to pay him before we left," Bax said stumbingly.

"Undoubtedly she intended to. But at about that time, too, she learned somehow that her grandfather—not you—had killed the original Tom Boy, and had let you assume the guilt. We may also presume that the death of the cat was not an accident, as she had supposed. Mr. Rand hates cats. I think that Jacob Sutter must have dropped a hint during the last conversation she had with him—perhaps an unknowing hint, for Jonathan Sutter was the guilty party who helped Mr. Rand fool his niece. At any rate, your wife loved you very much and it hurt her cruelly to know that she had believed a lie about you. She had enough of the old man's temper, under the surface, to be thoroughly angry about it."

Bax said nothing. His eyes expressed his bitter thoughts.

"We can only surmise, now, the course of events on the night of your wife's death. One thing in retrospect is revealing—your wife's act in putting the cat into the refrigerator. As I see it, she must have gone into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door, when her grandfather somehow attracted her attention and beckoned to her from out-of-doors. She simply thrust the cat in to get it out of harm's way—remembering, as she did, what had happened to the other pet."

"He got her outside and killed her . . . just like that?"

"The quarrel between them wasn't new; and it was most bitter. He had been at your house very early that day, obviously to claim the money while you weren't around. There was a terrific fight between him and Lila. Mr. Harper overheard it and thought that the two of you were battling. The piano was damaged at this time, so we may judge how far the argument went."

Bax's glance was turned inward upon his memories. "The piano? She kept it wrapped all that day. Until the van came for it."

"She hated you to know the truth about the old man. She must have tried to force him to make a generous gesture of repayment . . . some of the money to atone for the wrong he'd done you. Mostly likely, to settle your account with the Sutters."

He nodded grimly. "Yes, she was optimistic on that score, I remember."

"The old man's rage had been bottled up in him all that day—and we know that his ordinary reaction to anger and frustration was what Carol Callahan called 'foaming fits.' So he murdered Lila. Perhaps we will know the means when the police excavate the grave under the Rand driveway. Or perhaps not. If he stabbed her as he did Sutter, the knife was no doubt long ago disposed of."

His hands clenched on the hat. "You said . . . the driveway——"

"Mr. Rand took his granddaughter's body home and buried it there with a story to Ruth that the driveway needed repair."

"And the note left in the refrigerator?"

"Obviously Mr. Rand typed it and put it there. You and Harper were out of the house, searching for Lila. Mr. Rand sneaked back, typed the note quickly, put it where you'd find it eventually. With a sly, bitter touch—leaving the cat there, thinking it might freeze before you opened the door again."

Bax's voice rushed on, as though he found the narrative unendurable and must hear its finish as soon as possible.

"What of Sutter's murder?"

"I telephoned Jonathan Sutter while Ruth and I waited for the police a short while ago. He is too frightened now to conceal the truth. He sold Mr. Rand the substitute cat; and Rand had him make a false entry, giving you as the buyer. He and Rand also cooked up a plan lately—Mr. Rand was to storm and harass him, in pretense, and keep the puzzle going until they could pin the thing on you. This part of it backfired—Jacob Sutter grew suspicious and decided to talk things over with you. Jonathan told Rand about it. When Jacob went to your house in the canyon, Rand followed and murdered him . . . as Carol described. This put Jonathan on a terrible spot. He was pretty sure that Rand had killed his brother; but the thought that he might be next really set him spinning. He was in terror lest you force the truth from him—hence his flight, and his begging protection of Ruth, whom he supposed to be in on the secret about the cat."

"And all of it was over the money—the money Lila had kept for her grandfather?"

"Yes. It was a cheap price for two lives, wasn't it?"

He rose. His face worked with rage. "I wish the old man were alive that I could beat him to death for what he did to Lila!"

She put out a cautioning hand. "Mr. Rand could not have been completely a monster. He must have suffered agonies of guilt, remorse, and fear. Killing Jacob Sutter was a last desperate resource, a way to keep Ruth from learning the truth. He must have faced the loss of his daughter's love over and over in his mind." She rose quickly then, seeing that Bonnevain intended to go. "You'll want to take Lila's cat home again. He's at a veterinary hospital. Let me give you the address." She reached for her handbag to extract a card. "Mr. Rand made a final attempt on the old cat's life. It was the act of a man almost past reason."

Rand must have thought the animal an indestructible demon. But no. A ghost, more likely. Lila's ghost. Woman into cat. . . .

"He's at rest now. Try to forgive."

Bax Bonnevain went out without answering, a small man with a thin figure and a broken face. She wondered what would become of him now. Probably he would sell the house in the canyon and drift on, following the horses from track to track.

When she returned, Miss Rachel switched on the lamps. She was aware of a great weariness. She had finished the search for Lila Bonnevain, but there was no victory in it. Nor profit. How could you ask a woman to pay you for proving her father a murderer? She sat down heavily beside Jennifer, touched Jennifer's stiff, chilly fingers. "Are you all right? You haven't said a word all this time. And why the smelling salts?"

Miss Jennifer batted her eyes; her throat worked. "You know . . . after you left me——" The shadowy memory of a terrifying experience seemed to cross her face. "I can't explain what came over me. I just can't."

There was a smell of disaster about her. Well, the money was gone then. Poor Jennifer!

"It's all right. Everyone has to be a little foolish, once in a while."

"I've betrayed the memory of Father!" Miss Jennifer's fingers strayed across her big, fat, old-fashioned cowhide purse. "I've un-

done everything he ever taught us about—about honesty, and thrift, and——”

“No, no, it’s not worth crying over!” Miss Rachel put an arm across Jennifer’s shaking shoulders. “We’ll have dinner, and talk of something cheerful for a change. We’ll feed Samantha some fresh liver. We’ll have tea, afterward, in front of the television.”

Comfort her with little things. Get her mind off the unbearable stresses of the afternoon at the races, where—obviously—she had lost her small winnings.

The purse popped open just then under Jennifer’s nervous touch. It took Miss Rachel a moment to grasp what it was that spilled in a green cascade over Jennifer’s knees to the floor.

Money. Tens and twenties. A roll that—yes, the phrase was apt, she thought—a roll that would choke a horse.

“Father would never forgive me! Winning money at a race track! Gambling with the stuff he spent his life managing sensibly! Oh, Rachel!”

Miss Rachel was on her knees, stacking bills together, counting under her breath. She wondered what Mr. Harper would say.

It’s Pouring. . . .

It really was!

THE END

