

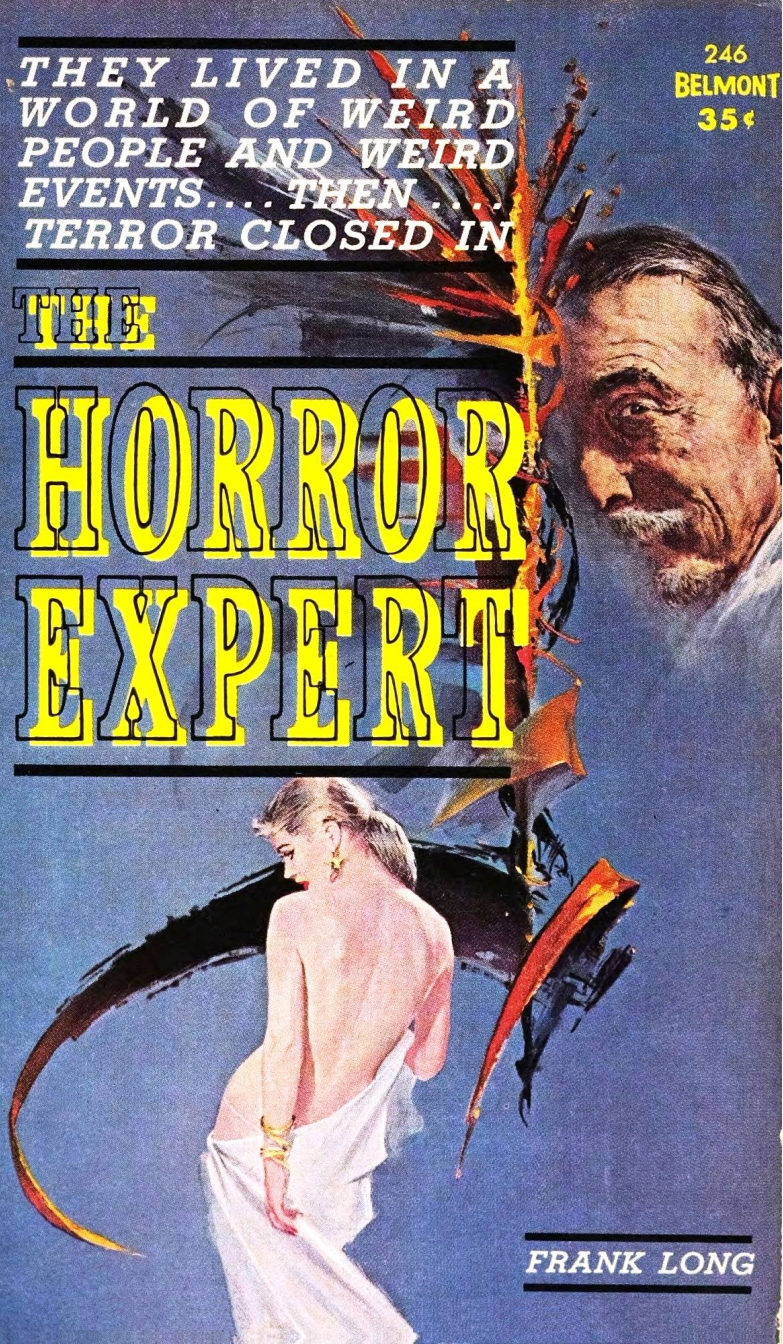
THEY LIVED IN A
WORLD OF WEIRD
PEOPLE AND WEIRD
EVENTS.... THEN
TERROR CLOSED IN

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THE

HORROR EXPERT

FRANK LONG



TWISTED

"She had a secret library of psychological case histories, featuring pathological and brutal departures from normalcy in the area of sex. She never missed a weird movie. Terror in any form excited her physically . . ."

Helen Lathrup had a curious twist in her imagination . . . a twist that needed an outlet in real life. Close friends found themselves drawn into a nightmare world of terror and guilt. Finally one violent act triggered an explosion.

THE HORROR EXPERT

A New Novel by
Frank Long

BELMONT BOOKS • NEW YORK CITY

THE HORROR EXPERT is an original full-length novel published by special arrangement with the author.

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"She's the kind of woman who can make a man hate and despise himself—and hate her even more for making him feel that way. I'm not the only one she's put a knife into. Do you hear what I'm saying, do you understand? I'm not her first victim. There were others before me, so many she's probably lost count. But she'll do it once too often. She'll insert the blade so skillfully that at first Number Fifteen or Number Twenty-two won't feel any pain at all. Just a warm gratefulness, an intoxicating sort of happiness. Then she'll slowly start twisting the blade back and forth . . . back and forth . . . until the poor devil has been tormented beyond endurance. He'll either wrap a nylon stocking around her beautiful white throat or something worse, something even uglier, will happen to her. I know exactly how her mind works, I know every one of her tricks. I keep seeing her in a strapless evening gown, with that slow, careful smile on her lips. She's very careful about how she smiles when she has the knife well-sharpened. It's a wanton smile, but much too ladylike and refined to give her the look of a bar pickup or a hip-swinging tramp. Brains and beauty, delicacy of perception, sophistication, grace. But if she were lying in a coffin just how many of those qualities do you think she'd still possess? Not many, wouldn't you say? Not even her beauty . . . if someone with a gun took careful aim and made a target of her face."

The voice did not rise above a whisper, but there was cold malice and bitterness in it, and something even more sinister that seemed to be clamoring for release. It was just one of many millions of voices, cordial or angry or completely matter-of-fact that came and went in the busy conversational life of New York City. It might have come from almost anywhere—a quickly lifted and re-cradled telephone receiver perhaps, or from a recording on tape or from the recklessly confidential lips of a man or woman seated in a crowded bus, or walking along the street in the company of a close friend.

It might even have been addressed to no one in particular—an angry outburst prompted by some mentally unbalanced person's compulsive need to bare secret, brutally uninhibited thoughts.

But whatever its precise nature and from whatever source arising, it was quickly lost and swallowed up in the vast conversational hum of a city that was no stranger to startling statements and ugly threats.

Chapter I

THE HEAT HAD BEEN oppressive all night, but now the streets were glistening, washed clean by rain, and there was a holiday freshness in the air. The rain had stopped, but the taxi moving slowly down Fifth Avenue in the wake of the storm was still wet and gleaming and had the same washed-clean look.

The woman who sat staring out of the cab window at the cluster of pedestrians waiting to cross 42nd Street had dressed at leisure, eaten a light breakfast of orange juice, toast and three-minute eggs, glanced briefly at the morning headlines, and descended in a private elevator through a tall, gray house in the East Eighties without manifesting the slightest outward strain.

But once in the taxi a fierce impatience had taken possession of her—an impatience which far exceeded that of the pedestrians who were waiting for the *Don't Walk* light to vanish at New York's most crowded intersection.

Helen Lathrup had been chain-smoking and was now on her fourth cigarette. It was burning the tips of her fingers a little but she seemed not to care about the pain. She inhaled deeply, blew a cloud of smoke from her nostrils and fanned it away with her hand, her lips tightly compressed.

The hurry and bustle of shopgirls, clerks and early morning shoppers annoyed and angered her. She had no sympathy at all with the look of keen anticipation on many of the faces, for she was not in a holiday mood.

There was no reason why she should be, she told herself with considerable bitterness. The long Fourth of July weekend had not yet begun—was, in fact, a full day away. An interminable Friday stretched out before her, with important work piling up, work neglected or improperly handled, and there was no one except herself she could depend on to see that no mistakes were made.

It wasn't just the avoidance of costly stupidities she had to concern herself with. There were a hundred minor annoyances awaiting her. A grinning fool like Macklin, with his head in the clouds, could joke about them and call them "office headaches." But she knew that they could be serious, like grains

of sand clogging the moving parts of a complex and very expensive machine.

She leaned forward and spoke sharply to the driver, gripping one nylon-sheathed knee so tightly that her knuckles showed white.

"What's holding you up? You waited too long at the last light, and now we're being stopped again."

"Sorry, lady," the driver said, without turning his head. "That's the way it is sometimes."

She leaned back, whispering under her breath: "Stupid man!"

"What did you say, lady?"

"Not a goddam thing."

Her mood did not improve as the taxi neared its destination, turning east a few blocks north of Washington Square and then west again, slowing down amidst a crosstown traffic snarl that seemed outrageous to her and entirely the fault of the police. She was lighting her sixth cigarette when the cab drew to the curb before a twenty-story office building with an impressive façade of gleaming white stone.

Ten minutes later Helen Lathrup sat alone in the most private of private offices, a sanctuary where interruptions were infrequent even when permitted, and intrusion under other circumstances absolutely forbidden.

The office was in all respects in harmony with the prestige and dignity of an editorial director of a nationally famous group of magazines. Large and paneled in oak, its main furnishings consisted of a massive oak desk, three chairs, one facing the desk, and a circular table with a glass top and nothing on it at all.

If the décor was a little on the severe side and there was something distinctly unbending about the woman who now sat facing the door upon which, in gilt lettering, her name was inscribed, a visitor entering the office for the first time would not have felt ill at ease.

Not, at any rate, if that visitor happened to be a man. Great feminine beauty, however much it may be combined with qualities intimidating to the male, is seldom intimidating at first glance. The glow, the warmth, the splendor of it is too instant and overwhelming. Even when it is allied with a harsh coldness which is quick to manifest itself, it is so very easy to believe that a miracle will occur, that secret delights are in store for any man bold enough to make light of obstacles which are certain to prove transitory . . . if just the right technique is applied.

Though it is impossible to judge beauty by any rigid set of

rules, though tastes may differ and the experts disagree, it is doubtful if one man in a hundred would have failed to be dazzled by the absolute perfection of Helen Lathrup's face and figure. She had only to cross a room, walking slowly and with no accentuation of movements which were as natural to her as breathing, to transport men into another world, where the sun was brighter, the peaks higher, and unimaginable delights awaited them.

Even in moments when she herself felt empty and drained, completely unstirred by the close presence of a man, there were few of her suitors who would not have stopped before a door marked "Danger—Enter at Your Peril," pressed a button, and walked into a room as chill and depressing as the gas chamber at San Quentin, solely for the pleasure of keeping a dinner date with her.

By whatever yardstick her friends or enemies might choose to judge her by, Helen Lathrup remained what she was—an extraordinary woman. And by the same token, extraordinary in her profession, with accomplishments which inspired admiration and respect, however grudgingly accorded.

There was another aspect of Helen Lathrup's personality which she seldom talked about and which made her unusual in a quite different way.

At times, her thoughts, would take a very morbid turn; she would fall into restless brooding and seek out a kind of diversion which most people looked upon as pleasurable only when it remained completely in the realm of entertainment. To her, it was something more.

The darkly sinister and terrifying in literature and art disturbed and fascinated her. She had long been a reader of supernatural horror stories and there were a dozen writers in that chilling branch of literature to whose work she returned again and again. Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, M. R. James and H. P. Lovecraft—all supreme masters in the art of evoking terror—occupied an entire shelf in her library, along with scholarly studies of witchcraft, medieval demonology and Satanism.

Another shelf was entirely taken up with modern psychological studies of crime in its more pathological and gruesome aspects, including those often brutal departures from normalcy in the sphere of sex that appall even the most sophisticated minds.

She never missed an outstanding screen production of a terrifying nature. Mystery films which dealt with criminal violence in a somber setting never failed to excite her. The psychopathic young killer, haunted, desperate, self-tormented

and guilt-ridden, had a strange fascination for her, whether in books or on the screen, and she experienced a pleasure she would not have cared to discuss as she watched the net closing in, the noose swinging nearer . . . and then darkness and despair and the terrible finality of death itself.

But always there was a price which had to be paid. With the ending of the picture or the closing of the book a reaction would set in, and she would sit shivering, fearful, visualizing herself, not in the role of the furtive, tormented slayer—even when that slayer was a woman—but *as the victim*.

The victim of the very violence she had welcomed and embraced, with wildly beating heart, when she had thought of it as happening to someone else.

She could not have explained this aberration even to herself, and the impulse to succumb to it, to make herself agonizingly vulnerable by seeking out a certain movie or a certain book, would come upon her only at times.

This Friday morning, however, Helen Lathrup was in an entirely different mood.

She was almost trembling now in her impatience to get on with the day's work, to make every minute count, precisely as she had determined to do on the long, frustrating ride from her home to the office.

She picked up the mail which lay before her, looked through it, and leaned toward the intercom to summon her secretary. The door of the office opened then, and someone she was not expecting to see until later in the morning, someone whose presence at that exact moment was distasteful to her, stared at her unsmilingly and closed the door again very firmly by backing up against it.

The intruder made no attempt to apologize for the outrageousness of such behavior—made no effort, in fact, to speak at all.

The gun in the intruder's hand was long-barreled, black and ugly-looking and capped by a silencer. It was pointed directly at her. The intruder's eyes were half-lidded, but when the light in the room shifted a little the lids went up, disclosing a cold rage and a firmness of purpose that told Helen Lathrup at once that she was in the deadliest kind of danger.

It was not in her nature to remain immobile when a threat confronted her. Neither was it in her nature to remain silent.

She rose slowly, keeping her eyes trained on the intruder's face, displaying no visible trace of fear. Her voice, when she spoke, was coldly contemptuous and tinged with anger.

"Why are you pointing that gun at me?" she demanded. "What do you want? I'm not afraid of you."

Still without uttering a word the intruder grimaced vindictively, took a slow step forwards, raised the gun a little and shot Helen Lathrup through the head.

The gun's recoil was violent, the report quite loud. A silenced gun is not silent. It can be heard from a considerable distance. But the intruder appeared either willing to accept that risk, or had discounted it in advance as of no great importance.

Helen Lathrup did not cry out, and the impact of the bullet did not hurl her backwards, for the bullet passed completely through her head and the weapon had been fired at no more than medium-close range.

For an instant the tip of her tongue darted along the quivering, scarlet gash of her mouth, but the rest of her face remained expressionless. Her eyes had gone completely blank. It was as if tiny, weighted curtains, iris-colored, had dropped across her pupils, obliterating their gleam, making both eyes look opaque.

For five full seconds she remained in an upright position behind the desk, her back held rigid. A barely perceptible quivering of her shoulders and a spasmodic twitching of her right hand gave her the look, if only for an instant, of a strong-willed woman shaken by a fit of ungovernable rage and still capable of commanding the intruder to depart.

Then her shoulders sagged and she shuddered convulsively and fell forward across the desk, her head striking the desktop with such force that it sent an ashtray crashing to the floor. An explosive sound came out of her mouth, and her body jerked and quivered again, but less violently, and after that she did not move.

The door opened and closed, with a barely audible click.

Chapter II

THE CLICKING OF TYPEWRITERS in two of the offices almost drowned out the sound of the shot. It was just a faint *zing*, with a released-pressure kind of vibrancy about it. A ping-pong ball striking a metal screen might have produced such a sound.

It was strange and unusual enough to make Lynn Prentiss look up from the manuscript she was reading and wrinkle her brow. If a fly had alighted on her cheek she might have paused in much the same way, startled, incredulous—asking herself if it really could be a fly. A fly in an air-conditioned office, with all of the windows shut?

The *zing* puzzled and disturbed her more than a fly would have done, because the mystery could not be instantly solved with a quick flick of her thumb.

The angry impatience, the annoyance with trifles which she had been experiencing all morning—an impatience which hours of manuscript reading had done nothing to alleviate—turned even so trivial an unsolved mystery into an infringement on her right to work undisturbed.

She blew a thin strand of red-gold hair back from her forehead, and sat for an instant drumming her fingers on the desktop. Then her woman's curiosity got the better of her. She arose quickly, piled the unread manuscripts on top of the blue-penciled ones and strode out of the office.

The clicking of the battered typewriter in the office adjacent to her own stopped abruptly and Jim Macklin, his collar loosened and his tie awry, called out to her.

"When you get through taking out commas, Monroe, there's something here you can help me with. Or maybe you should be more of the Bardot type. With that sweater you're wearing, it's hard to tell."

"What is it this time?" she demanded, pausing in the doorway, but making no attempt to smile. Then, the way he grinned, the boyish impulsiveness which made him seem out of place in a briskly efficient magazine office at ten in the morning, caused her face to soften.

It was insane, of course—that she should think of him in an almost maternal way. There was a dusting of gray at his

temples and he was almost twice her age. But he was such a big bear cub of a man, with such a lost-orphan kind of helplessness about him at times, that he ignited the maternal spark in her.

She hoped it wasn't too bright a spark and that it didn't show in her eyes. She had a feeling that he could ignite it in other women, too,—and knew it only too well and perhaps even traded on it. A man could go very far, she told herself with more cynicism than she ordinarily felt, if he could do that to a woman and be exceptionally virile looking at the same time.

"I could be wrong," Macklin said. "But I've a feeling that if you'd just bend over and breathe on this manuscript something wonderful would happen to it. Just the whiff of a *really* beautiful femme would do the trick. The guy has all kinds of complexes and plenty of painful hungers and I'm not sure the right girl is sitting beside him in chapter three."

"I bet there's a wolf pack on every page," she said. "I wouldn't be safe anywhere near a story like that."

"Nope, you're way off base, gorgeous. Just one guy. He's slightly beat, sure. But basically he's a romantic idealist. He's the kind of guy it would be hard to separate from a room in Paris overlooking the Seine. Wine bottles on the floor, tubes of half-squeezed-out paint scattered around, everything in wild disorder. Being human, with the hungers and all, he's been out on the Boulevard looking for—I blush to say it—a pickup. He's found one, but, as I say, I'm not sure she's the right girl for him. But judge for yourself. It won't take a minute."

"Very amusing, Jim. But I just haven't time right now."

"Make time. You've got all afternoon to work down to the last of your manuscripts. And this is sure to interest you. She's right there beside him, sitting on a rumpled couch. Her long blonde hair is falling down and her lips are slightly parted—"

"Well—"

"Get the picture? Not a morsel of food has touched her lips for two days, and there's a tragic hopelessness in her eyes. But pallor becomes her. She's prepared to make any sacrifice, but she hopes she won't have to. It could develop into a great love, and she's hoping he'll have the strength to be understanding and wait. All right. He may look cynical, but he'd no more think of making a pass at that girl without encouragement than I would."

"You'll get no encouragement from me, you grinning ape!"

"A man can dream, can't he?"

"He can do other things as well. I've learned that much about men just in the short time I've been reading the stories

you've passed on to me for final editing. Honest writing—stark realism. Brother! I should be the last to deny that most of it is very, very good. Brimming over with artistic integrity. Strong writing you'll never find me objecting to. But I hope you realize I couldn't read stories like that day after day and remain a naïve little girl from Ohio."

"Now who's doing the kidding," Macklin said, with mock solemnity. "There are no naïve little girls in Ohio any more—or in Indiana or Idaho. TV has taken care of that. But why should I deny your accusation? No punches drawn, baby. That's how Hemingway got his start, remember?"

Some of the levity went out of her gaze and she shrugged impatiently. "How would you expect me to remember? His first book was published twenty years before I was born."

Macklin's grin vanished and a hurt, almost accusing look came into his eyes. "I was pretty sure you'd read it anyway. That's the fourth time you've flared up at me in three days. Do you have to catch me up on everything I say? If you were like Lathrup I could understand it. She has a compulsion to cut people down to size, men especially. Three or four sizes smaller than they actually are. It's very bad. I'm not passing a moral judgment on her, understand? I'm just saying it's bad."

"What are you trying to say, Jim?"

"That you're not like Lathrup at all. You never had a terrible scare when you were eight months old—or three years old. You were never left alone in the dark, in mortal fear, crying out for food and warmth and not knowing if help would ever come to you. According to the psychologists, that's what makes people behave the way she does. A tragic accident in childhood, something parents can't always help or be held accountable for. You've never had any such scare. But the way you've been catching me up the past few days—"

Lynn tightened her lips and started to turn away, anger flaming in her eyes. Then, as if realizing that the rebuke had been merited, she swung back to face him again and said in a weary voice: "Sorry, Jim. I guess I've been driving myself too hard. Everyone feels they have to when Lathrup is in one of her moods. She's been practically standing over me with a whip for a week now. You can't do your best work when you're under that kind of pressure. If she could only realize—"

"She realizes," Macklin said. "She's cutting off her nose to spite her face, but she can't help it. She won't wreck the concern, no danger of that. She's too skillful a manipulator. What she loses in one direction, she'll make up for in another. She knows just how to prevent the really big blunders

that could prove costly. If we publish a few stories and articles that just get by under the fence, because she's kept us from exercising our best judgment, it will all even up in the wash. Gawd, how I'm mixing my metaphors."

Lynn suddenly remembered why she had emerged from her office in such haste and the mystery of the strange sound began to trouble her again. It was neurotic, of course, a hay-wire kind of curiosity that she ought not to have succumbed to. But whenever she started anything she liked to finish it.

She thought of asking Macklin to accompany her down the corridor, but almost instantly thought better of it. He'd probably laugh her concern to scorn and she'd taxed his patience enough already.

It was her baby and she'd better carry it—as far as the reception desk anyway. She'd ask Susan Weil, and if Susan hadn't heard anything she'd know she was being foolish. She'd go back and sit down and finish the pile of remaining manuscripts. She said goodbye to Macklin and went on her way.

There were three offices to pass before she reached the end of the corridor and turned into the small, reception desk alcove.

Three offices to pass . . . pigeons in the grass. It sounded like something from Gertrude Stein, or some nonsense rhyme from childhood.

She amused herself by repeating it over and over, as most people are prone to do with snatches of song or meaningless limericks when they're under tension.

"Why should that sound have disturbed me so much?" she asked herself and got no answer.

One of the offices, behind which she suspected that Fred Ellers would be sitting with his tie off, not just awry as Macklin's had been, presented to her gaze only a frosted glass exterior. The door was closed and probably locked, for Ellers had a habit of locking himself in when he was hitting the bottle.

The second office, from which the sound of another clicking typewriter issued, was occupied by Ruth Porges, trim and immaculate in the stiff, tailormade suit she customarily wore as if it were some kind of uniform.

The third door was ajar and a very distinguished-looking individual sat behind it. Allen Gerstle, white-haired and bespectacled, spent a lot of time over his exposé columns. He had a rare feeling for beautiful prose, wasted perhaps at times, but Lynn knew that a good style was an asset, even when only the café society set was prepared to take it seriously.

Lynn found herself at the reception desk almost before she realized that she had completely traversed the corridor. Susan Wiel was answering the phone, but she cupped the mouthpiece with her hand and turned from it when she saw Lynn standing at her elbow.

"Is there something—?" she asked.

"I heard a funny sound a few minutes ago," Lynn said. "It sounded like . . . like . . ."

"I know," Susan Weil said, helping her. "I heard it too."

"Where do you think it came from?"

"How should I know?" Susan asked, annoyed by a furious buzzing from the switchboard.

Then the irritation suddenly went out of her eyes and she replied cooperatively. "From either Eaton's office or Lathrup's office. I didn't pay much attention to it. It wasn't the only funny sound I've heard around here. When Lathrup—no, I guess I'd better skip it."

"Why, Susan, for Pete's sake?" Lynn asked, smiling a little. "You know I wouldn't repeat it. You've as much right as we have to say what you think. With that graduate major in anthropology you're using as an excuse to spend the summer at a switchboard when you could just as easily—oh, well."

"It's simple work and I like it," Susan replied. "I could spend the summer on Cape Cod and just about squeeze by. But why do it? I like New York in summer and I can use a little extra dough, and I don't feel like secretaring for a stuffy old professor of anthropology. That answer you? When they give out prizes for curiosity—"

"Like Alice in Wonderland, you mean? Curiouser and curiouser. Okay, I plead guilty. I just happen to be interested in people."

"It's forgotten. I forgive you. About that sound—"

"Let me find out for myself. I've gone too far to turn back now. I may as well pull out all the stops and make an absolute fool of myself."

A moment later Lynn was standing before the closed door of Helen Lathrup's private office, wondering if she should knock and announce herself before entering.

She decided not to knock. Either way, Lathrup was sure to be furious and she didn't want to be told to go away.

She took firm hold of the knob and opened the door.

The first thing she saw was the glistening red stain on the floor immediately in front of Lathrup's desk, where blood from the wound in Lathrup's right temple had trickled down over the front of the desk to the floor.

Then she saw the blonde head resting on the desk, and

the wound itself and the limp white hand dangling over the edge of the desk.

Lynn Prentiss screamed.

Frederick Ellers had locked the door of his office and was pouring twelve-year old Bourbon from a private-stock fifth into a paper cup when he heard the scream.

The glass door was thin, and he could hear the scream distinctly. But he could not identify the voice, even though it made him sit bolt upright in his chair, dead sober for a instant.

I'm not the only one, he thought. *Someone else has stumbled on agony.*

Then the mist came swirling back and his thoughts became chaotic again.

Fire me. Just like that . . . snap of her fingers. You'd better stay away from me. That's what I told her. When I go out of here I'm through. Told her that too. Just because she was so damn mean . . . so cold rotten mean.

Feelings? You'd search a long while . . . never find . . . woman so goddam . . . Told her I was sorry. How about that? What'd she expect? Go down on my knees? Listen, wait a minute. Before I'd do that—

Fifty-seven years old. Look at me, I said. Fifty-eight after the next fifty drinks. Fifty-eight and a fraction. Old, old, old.

Fire me. Didn't get the facts straight. Little straight facts in a big important article. Facts . . . facts. What are a few frigging facts anyway? I can still write well, can't I? *Can't I?* Good strong . . . strongstraightforward writing.

Drink too much. Drink all the time. Always polluted. Who am I to deny it? I'll tell you who I am. Graduate Columbia School of Journalism. Twelve years on the *New York Times*, seven *Herald Tribune*, five . . .

Sish to all that. Switch to magazines. Big mistake. Big mistake ever to switch. Newspaper man. First, foremost and always. Should never have switched.

That guy down in Florida. Miami? No, hell no. Somewhere in Florida. Palm Beach? No, no, no. Where then? What's it matter?

Important writer, wonderful guy, Pulitzer Prize winner. Think of it—Pulitzer Prize winner. Older 'n I am. Sixty-five, maybe seventy by now. Couldn't keep away from the stuff. Drank, drank, drank—always polluted. Now he's asking for handouts. Sitting by yacht basin. Watching the big ones—half-million-dollar yachts. Never own a flat-bottomed skiff. Neither will I . . .

Ellers got swayingly to his feet, pushing the chair in which

he'd been sitting back so violently that it toppled over with a crash that caused him to shudder and cry out, as if a leather thong had bitten cruelly into his flesh.

He grasped the desk edge with one hand and with the other made circling motions in the air.

All her fault! Vicious inhuman . . . "Don't! Don't come near me, you bitch. Don't touch me!"

He continued to sway and gesture, his voice rising shrilly. "Bitch, bitch, *bitch!*"

Ruth Porges heard the scream and stopped typing. She sat very still, her hands tightening into fists. After a moment she swayed a little, but she made no attempt to rise. The old fear of facing anything even possibly harsh kept her glued to her chair.

It was a fact, a hard fact, that most men found Ruth Porges difficult and cold and thought of her as unemotional. But she wasn't that way now and hadn't ever been and never could be that way.

It was a lie, a falsification which she had never quite known how to refute. She had seen Lathrup refute it for herself when she was not in one of her moods, when she wanted a man to grab hold of her and bring his lips down hard on hers.

How often Ruth Porges wanted that too—and more. How often she'd wished herself dead, not having that, being forced to pretend that it wasn't important, to lie to herself about it and go on, day after day, living a lie. To go on knowing how men felt about her, and how horrible it was that they should feel that way, and how deeply, sincerely, terribly she wanted them not to look upon her as a reluctant virgin with ice in her veins.

She wasn't, she wasn't, she didn't want to be. Why couldn't they see that and understand? Why couldn't they see that she was a woman with a great wealth of understanding to offer a man, a woman with the blood warm in her veins, a woman who could free herself to . . .

A wave of bitterness, or returning rage almost impossible to control, searing, destructive, hardly to be endured, swept over her and she buried her face in her hands.

If only Lathrup hadn't—

Roger Bendiner. The only man who'd refused to be angered by her shyness, by her panic when the moment actually came and she knew that there was no escape and she'd have to—

Let him undress her. Yes . . . yes. She could let herself remember it now, she could begin to bring it out into the open, with no fear of being laughed at and misunderstood.

His rough hands on her shoulders and that look in his eyes . . .

It was like a night of lightning and thunder and you fled into the dark woods and you fled and were overtaken and stuck down.

But it was what she had always wanted, always longed for, a bursting wonder and you didn't care about the cruel, dark shafts of pain.

But with Roger alone. Because Roger wasn't just any man. He respected her and loved her and was not afraid to frighten her because he knew that there was nothing for her to fear.

Oh, why was she lying to herself, even now? She would never see him again. Even if he came back to her, and begged her forgiveness for what he had done, even if he swore that Helen Lathrup meant nothing to him, she could never forgive him. It was too late, too late now, too late for—

The desk shook with her sobbing.

He stood by the *down* elevator with a bulging briefcase under his arm, a pale, hatless young man with unruly dark hair and deepset, feverishly bright eyes. His features were gaunt, the cheekbone region looking almost cavernous beneath the heavy overhang of his brow. A strange face, a remarkable face, not unappealing, but different somehow—a young-old face with bony contours, strange ridges, and depressions, a shadowy ruggedness of aspect which some women might have greatly liked and others looked upon with disfavor.

He was staring now at the double glass door with its gilt lettering—hateful to him now. EATON-LATHRUP PUBLICATIONS. He had come out of that door for the last time, he told himself, with a sudden trembling which he was powerless to control. He was free of her at last and he'd never go back again.

If a man is born with just one kidney or a right-sided heart how can he hope to operate on himself and make himself resemble the general run of people?

She'd encouraged him, hadn't she? Given him the feeling that she did understand, did sympathize. She'd acted at first like another Thomas Wolfe had walked into the office.

Could he help it if he was one of the few, one of the chosen, a really great writer? It was tragic and terrible perhaps and people hated him for it, but could he help it?

If she felt that he had no talent why had she built him up at first? It didn't make sense. Why had she built him up and then tried to tear him down? Why had she attacked him

with pages of criticism, carping, unreasonable, tearing the guts out of his manuscripts?

She'd made him feel like a high school boy flunking an exam in English composition. And what had happened once between them didn't mean anything. How could it have meant anything when she'd turned on him like that?

He closed his eyes again, remembering, and the torment within him increased. He could see her eyes again, level with his own, and feel the softness of her body pressed so close that it seemed to mold itself into his own flesh, and he could smell again the perfume she'd worn, and taste the sweetness of her lips . . .

The elevator door swung open, startling him. He moved quickly past the operator and stood behind the one other passenger—a stoutish woman with a briefcase very similar to his own—and waited for the door to close again with a sudden look of panic in his eyes.

At any moment now his nerves would start shrieking again. He had to get back to the street and into the subway before his heart began to pound and his temples swelled to bursting, had to bury himself in the anonymity of a crowd that knew nothing about him and—because they didn't know—couldn't turn on him and bare their claws as she had done.

He had to get away before the inward screaming began again.

Chapter III

THERE WAS A SCREAMING inside of her and she couldn't seem to breathe. She was being followed. Someone had stepped out of a warehouse doorway and was following her, matching his pace with hers, keeping close on her heels.

She dared not look back, because he was being very careful not to let the distance between them lengthen, even for an instant, and she was afraid of what she might see in his eyes.

Ordinarily she would have become indignant, turned abruptly and faced him, threatened to call a policeman. Then—if he had attempted to grab her, if he had turned ugly—she would have screamed for help.

But now she only wanted to escape as quickly as possible from the terrible ordeal that had made her almost physically ill—twice before leaving her office she had been on the verge of fainting and she'd had to clutch a policeman's arm for support. But the mere thought of facing another policeman, of meeting his cool, arrogant gaze—yes, they were arrogant when they asked you question after question, even though they knew and you knew that not the slightest shadow of suspicion rested upon you—now just the thought of coming face to face with a policeman again was intolerable to her.

Pretending to be sympathetic, understanding, big-brotherly but always the cool, arrogant persistence lurking in the depths of their eyes. She remembered: "I know it's been mighty nerve-shattering for you, Miss Prentiss. A terrible shock. Just to walk into her office, and see her lying there—"

The big, slow-talking one especially, with the beat-up face—a detective lieutenant, he'd said he was. All afternoon until she couldn't endure another moment of it . . . the office filled with policemen and photographers and Lathrup not even mercifully covered with a sheet, her dead eyes staring. Not that she'd gone in again to look or would have been permitted inside after the medical examiner had arrived and they'd started dusting the office for fingerprints. But she could picture it, she knew exactly how it was, because Macklin had gone in for a brief moment to discuss something very important with them, and had told her how it was, not

sparing her any of the details. (Not his fault! She'd nodded and let him talk on.)

The body stretched out on the floor, with chalk marks on the desk to indicate just how it had been resting when—resting! How mocking, how horrible the image that one word conjured up!

They'd let her go at last, advising her to take a taxi home but to go to a restaurant first and eat something—a sandwich, at least—with two or three cups of black coffee.

Out on the street she'd begun to breathe more freely, had felt the horror receding a little, the strength returning to her limbs. Then, suddenly, terribly, unexpectedly—this!

The footsteps seemed louder than they should have been, even though he was very close behind her and was making no effort to cushion his tread. Each step seemed to strike the pavement with a hollow sound, making her feel for an instant as if she'd become entrapped in a stone vault, and he was walking, not behind, but above her, sending hollow echoes reverberating through—

Her tomb? Dear God, no! She must not allow such thoughts to creep into her mind. Quite possibly she was completely mistaken about him, and he wasn't deliberately following her at all.

It happened often enough. Two people hurrying to catch a train or bus, or headed for the same destination, walking along a street where office buildings had been replaced by warehouses and empty stores, with no other pedestrians in sight and dusk just starting to gather. It was so easy to imagine that you were the victim of calculated pursuit.

She must keep fear at arm's length, Lynn told herself, despite the wild fluttering of her heart, must not give way to panic or hysteria. Otherwise her wrought-up state would warp her judgment and make her do something she'd regret.

The sensible thing to do would be to slow her pace slightly, turn and glance casually back at him, as any woman might do at dusk on a deserted street. It would not indicate that she actually thought that he was following her deliberately or with criminal intent. It would just imply slight bewilderment, a curiosity easy to understand. He wouldn't take offense and it would put an end to all doubt.

But somehow she couldn't even do that! What if she turned and saw that his eyes were fastened upon her as she feared they might be? What if she saw that they were not just the eyes of an annoyer of women, some tormented sex-starved wretch who couldn't resist making an ugly nuisance of himself—what if they were the eyes of a murderer?

What if they were the eyes of a man who had killed once

and would not hesitate to kill again—a man with the murder weapon still in his possession, a man who would feel no qualms about putting a bullet in her heart if he suspected that she knew more than she did about Helen Lathrup's murder?

What if he'd found out in some way that she'd been the first to discover what he had done, and that she had been talking to the police, answering their shrewd and persistent questions all afternoon? What if he thought he'd left some damning clue, some tell-tale piece of evidence in Lathrup's office—something which had slipped Lynn's mind completely, but which might come back to her later?

She was quite sure she'd told the police everything. But how could he be expected to know that? Could he afford to let her go on living long enough for some damning memory to come back to her?

He might even be a homicidal maniac. She wasn't a child. She'd read a great many books that dealt with such horrors in a clinical, completely realistic way. One murder was just the beginning; just the igniting spark. They had to kill again and again. The first slaying made them even more dangerous, more insensately brutal and enraged. They weren't satisfied until they had vented their rage on many victims, had waded through a sea of blood.

The mental hospitals were filled with them but you never knew where you'd meet one—on the street, in a bus, sitting next to you in a crowded subway train.

"Lady, I just don't like you. All my life you've been getting in my hair. I've never set eyes on you before, but this time I'm going to wring your neck."

She saw the lighted window of a restaurant out of the corner of her eye and breathed a sigh of relief. She was almost abreast of it, but not quite—there was an empty store she'd have to pass first, as dark as a funeral parlor when the embalmer has turned out all of the lights and gone home for the night. And the footsteps seemed suddenly even closer, as if in another moment she'd be feeling his hot breath on the back of her neck.

She quickened her own steps, almost breaking into a run. She heard him draw in his breath sharply, but she forced herself not to think, to keep her eyes fastened on the lighted pane until she was at the door of the restaurant and pressing against the heavy plate glass with all her strength. The door opened inward—slowly, too slowly—and then she was inside, safe for the moment, with light streaming down and two rough-looking men at the counter and a waitress writing out a check and a big, heavysset man with steel-hard eyes at the

cashier's desk who glanced at her quickly and then seemed to lose interest in her.

She wasn't disappointed or irritated or even slightly piqued by his lack of interest—not at all. She wanted to throw her arms around him and say: "Thank you. Thank you for just being here."

She went quickly to a table and sat down, not trusting herself to sit at the counter, unable to control the trembling of her hands. Not just her hands—her shoulders were shaking too, and she would have been embarrassed and ashamed if one of the two men at the counter had turned to her and asked, "What's wrong, lady?" and looked at her the way such men usually do when they see a chance to ingratiate themselves with a young and attractive woman in distress—thinking perhaps that she'd had a little too much to drink and they might stand a chance with her if they went about it in just the right way.

She couldn't parry that sort of thing now—even though it was comparatively harmless if you knew how to look after yourself and there was often a real solicitude mixed up with the amorous, slightly smirking part of it.

She saw him then—saw him for the first time. A tall, very thin young man, not more than twenty-four at the most, hatless and a bit unkempt-looking with burning dark eyes that seemed to dissolve the glass barrier between them as he stared in at her through the window.

Only for an instant—and then he was gone. He moved quickly back from the window and his form became vague, half-swallowed up in the twilight outside. Whether he'd crossed the street or continued on down the street she had no way of knowing. He was simply not there any more.

A sudden tightness gripped her throat and a chill blew up her spine. How completely not there? Would he be waiting for her when she left the restaurant, standing perhaps in the doorway of another building, and falling into step behind her again the instant she passed?

She refused to let herself think about that. There was no real need for her to think about it, for she could phone for a cab from the restaurant—there was a phone booth near the door—and when it came she could dash across the pavement, climb in and tell the driver that she was late for an appointment uptown and would he please . . . *please* . . . not waste a second getting started.

But what if he actually *was* the murderer and still had the gun he'd killed Lathrup with? Why, he could have shot her through the window, could have whipped out the weapon and shot her right through the glass. Or come into the restau-

rant after her. The cashier, despite his strength and his hardness, would have been powerless to interfere, to protect her in any way. If he even started to come to her aid, he'd be dead himself.

Nothing could save her—if he actually was the murderer and was determined to take her life.

But he hadn't tried to kill her. Not even when he'd had a good chance, outside on the street. Would he be likely to change his mind and try to kill her now?

She stopped trembling abruptly, buoyed up by the thought, as if a great white wave of hope and reassurance had burst all about her, carrying away every vestige of her fear.

A psychopathic killer wouldn't have held back that way. The presence of others would have added fuel to the flames. He'd have realized at once that there were other victims right at hand and would have killed and killed again, in an uncontrollable frenzy, his guilt feelings, his secret desire to be caught and punished, making him welcome the added danger and risk.

And if he was the other kind, the completely sane kind—were murderers every completely sane?—concerned about saving his own skin, wouldn't he have shot her on the street, the instant he saw that she was heading for the restaurant? Wouldn't he have shot her in front of the darkened store, the store she'd darted past with her heart in her mouth, and not even waited for her to fall to the pavement? Just turning and fleeing, knowing it would take the police minutes to arrive, time enough to put him beyond reach of the law for a few days, perhaps forever. The risk he'd taken in Lathrup's office had been ten times as great.

She was feeling relaxed now, and a little light-headed. Almost all of the fear had left her. It was almost as if the two rough-looking men at the counter had been right about her, as if she'd taken three or four drinks of straight whiskey, the kind that burned your throat—she'd never in her life taken more than two cocktails—and was feeling the effects of it.

He came into the restaurant so quietly, gently pushing the door open and advancing so slowly toward her that for an instant he seemed remote, unreal, like a mist-enveloped figure in a very tenuous, not in the least frightening dream.

Then stark terror whipped through her again. Her hand went to her throat and all of the blood drained from her face.

He was carrying something under his left arm—a black, square something, much flatter than a briefcase, with no handle. But she wasn't looking at what he carried. She was

looking at the bulge in his right coat pocket and at the half-inch of white wrist protruding above the pocket, the even whiter shirt-cuff pushed back, the hand itself completely invisible, buried in the pocket, as if the fingers were tightly clasped around whatever it was that made the pocket bulge.

She wanted to scream but couldn't, and when she tried to rise a great heaviness seemed to grow up inside of her, to spread and spread until it enveloped her entire body and turned her into a leaden woman sitting there.

Was the gun that caused the bulge—how could she doubt that it was a gun?—about to go off, or did he merely mean to frighten her?

Surely, she told herself, that was not a sane question. What possible good would it do him to frighten her if he didn't mean to kill her? If the bulge was made by his hand alone did he think that fear alone would bind her to silence? Could he possibly be counting on that?

No, no—it was too wild a hope, too slim a threat to cling to. No man who had killed once would ever show that much restraint, would bother to resort to such trickery. It was not the way of a killer. He would make sure. He could never be certain of her silence otherwise.

She suddenly realized that he was no longer standing. He had sat down opposite her and was speaking to her. His lips moved, but for a moment the words themselves seem to blur and run together.

Then she heard him distinctly. "Miss Prentiss, I don't know just how to say this—how to begin even. I'm afraid you'll think me an impulsive young fool with more nerve than talent . . ."

He paused an instant to moisten his lips and then went on almost breathlessly, the words coming in a torrent. "You're listed as an associate editor in the two Eaton-Lathrup magazines which use the most interior art work—as a rule, anyway—and the girl at the desk told me you can recommend art work sometimes, even though you don't do any actual buying. I know even assistant editors can do that—put in a strong plug for a drawing. What I'm really trying to say is—you look at most of the work when it first comes in, and when you need a particular kind of illustration for a story you've been editing your recommendation almost always means that the drawing will be bought. It's the same as if you'd made the final decision."

He smiled suddenly—a boyish, not unattractive smile, "I've tried my best to get in to see Miss Lathrup, but they keep telling me she's out for lunch, or in conference or taken the afternoon off or gone away for the weekend. I suppose

if I'd been very persistent and made a nuisance of myself she might have consented to see me for a minute or two. But what good would that have done me? What good, really? I could never have persuaded her to spend a half hour looking at my drawings—or even fifteen or twenty minutes. It would have been better than not seeing her at all, but I wasn't counting on it to do me much good."

The smile widened a little. "So I suddenly asked myself—why not? Why not wait until you were through for the day and introduce myself and have a talk with someone with just a little more time, and trust to luck that you wouldn't be offended and that if I showed you some of my work and you liked it you might become interested enough to give me a chance to do at least one illustration on speculation."

Lynn Prentiss sat rigid, her mouth dry, staring at him with such an appalled look in her eyes that he suddenly fell silent, his boyish grin vanishing.

She could not yet fully grasp what he said, could only wait, shocked, paralyzed, for something to happen that would widen her understanding quickly enough for all of the terror to be dispelled. For an awful moment the youth who sat facing her remained what he had been—a sinister and dangerous killer who had no intention of permitting her to leave the restaurant alive. The gun . . .

She saw his right hand then, the hand she'd imagined firmly clasping a gun, one finger on the trigger . . . the gun that would explode in his pocket with a terrible roar, ripping the cloth to shreds and killing her.

He'd removed the hand from his pocket and it was resting on the table now, the stubby fingers still contracted into a fist. A fist . . . nothing more! A fist which had been thrust deeply into the coat pocket of a boy keyed up, embarrassed, uncertain of himself—a hard-knuckled fist making, quite naturally, a weapon-like bulge.

She had a sudden, almost uncontrollable impulse to laugh hysterically, to let herself go, not caring what anyone in the restaurant might think, least of all this crazy kid with his sheaf of drawings. It was a portfolio he'd been carrying, she could see that now. The square, black object was a portfolio and it rested on the table; there was nothing but drawings in it, good, bad or indifferent. She had been given back her life and had nothing at all to fear.

"I guess . . . I took too much for granted," he stammered. A deep flush had crept up over his cheekbones and he seemed almost on the verge of tears. "You do crazy things at times when you feel that you really can draw, and that

just a brief talk with an editor in a position to recommend—”

He gulped and tried again. “I’d never submit a drawing I didn’t believe in myself. It took me a long time to learn, and I still turn out bad work at times—some very bad things. But there are a few drawings I’m proud of and not ashamed to show to editors. All I ask is a chance to show one of the really big groups what I can do if the incentive is there, the opportunity . . . if I’m given half a chance.

“I suppose that isn’t the way an artist should talk . . . or even think. He should do his best without giving a thought to the rewards—to commercial success or artistic recognition on a more important level, like getting a picture hung in the Museum of Modern Art. I almost did last year. But even if that happened I could still starve to death.”

The impulse to laugh hysterically was gone now, or she found herself able to control it. She wouldn’t have been laughing at him, she was sure of that. There was something appealing about him, something honest and forthright—even if brash and almost incredibly naïve—which was beginning to affect her in a strange way. And that was to his credit also, for she was just recovering from the worst scare she’d ever had, the most ghastly fifteen minutes she’d ever lived through.

It was difficult for her to think clearly, to listen with complete sympathy to what he was saying, as she would have done had he talked with her at the office before—

All of the horror came back for an instant and she shut her eyes, seeing the police again, her eyes blinded by the exploding flash bulbs, hearing Macklin’s voice, calm, unruffled, but filled with understanding and deep concern.

“I wish you wouldn’t be quite so stubborn, Lynn. They’ll let you go out right now and get a sandwich and some coffee if you simply remind them that you’ve had no lunch and it’s too great a strain to answer any more questions. I’m having some coffee sent up, but it may not get here for another fifteen or twenty minutes. Just say the word and I’ll tell them off and make them like it. That detective lieutenant isn’t a bad guy. Naturally he wants to get the nearest thing they have to an eye-witness account down on paper while it’s still fresh in your mind. Later, you might forget some important detail. But if you feel bad, it makes sense to say so. You can go out and come back again.”

There was a whirling in her mind now, a dizziness that kept her eyelids glued shut for a second or two longer. Why had she been so stubborn, preferring to think of herself as trapped, forced to answer questions while a fierce

rebelliouness tugged at her, when she could so easily have followed Macklin's advice and gained at least an hour's respite? With a respite at two, she could have gone on talking until six and perhaps avoided this encounter with another kind of horror—a horror of the dusk that had almost destroyed what remained of her control.

It was gone now, completely. The sinister Jack-the-Ripper figure, cloaked and hugging the shadows, darkly gleaming dagger in hand, had become a blue-eyed, completely harmless young man, as innocent of homicidal malice as a friendly postal clerk or a smiling conductor on a train.

But it was only when she felt convinced that her self-mastery would not falter, that her behavior would be normal and controlled, that she dared to meet the young man's gaze squarely. Even then she found herself trembling slightly and could think of nothing to say.

He had fallen silent, and was staring at her with a kind of pleading desperation in his eyes, as if just a few crumbs of interest had become of almost life-and-death importance to him.

He had to have at least a few crumbs; she could see that. She could sense a stiffening in him already, a refusal to let his pride suffer further indignity. Another moment of silence on her part, and she was quite sure that he'd get to his feet and dash from the restaurant, hurt badly, wounded where he was most vulnerable and not caring what kind of a fool she thought him—except that he would care, later on, and feel bitter about it and think her a supercilious, male-deflating little witch. And she wasn't, she wasn't at all.

She made a supreme effort. "I'm afraid you gave me quite a start just now," she said. "I thought you were following me with the deliberate intention of—well, trying at least to pick me up. Some fairly decent men have been known to do that. But why pretend? What I feared most was that you were the other kind, the sidewalk wolf who makes a habit of annoying women, and won't be put off by a lack of encouragement or harsh words or even a threat to call the police. The ugly kind, the really dangerous kind. And when you looked in at me through the window, when you just stood there for a minute looking in, I got so scared I thought of asking the cashier for protection."

The young man blinked, but said nothing. She frowned and went on quickly: "Why didn't you just walk right up and tell me you had some drawings you wanted me to look at? I wouldn't have been offended in the least. If you'd asked to see me at the office I'd have come out and talked with you. On some of the big magazine groups, editors are hard to see,

I'll admit. But that isn't true of all groups and it happens to be our policy to treat writers and artists like visiting royalty. We believe it builds up good will, and we don't worry about whether we'll be wasting advice or guidance on someone who is just learning to draw and hasn't a credit to his name. We're not that conceited or foolish."

She was forcing herself to smile now, doing her best to break down the barrier which her fright had erected between them. "You never know when real talent—great talent, even—will leap right out at you. You didn't get in to see Miss Lathrup simply because—well, she actually is tied up three-fourths of the time. She'd refuse to see the President of the United States if he called at the wrong time."

It was difficult for her to speak of Lathrup as if the slain woman were still sitting before her desk in an interview-considering frame of mind. It was hard to keep the ghastly memory from coming back and overwhelming her again—the terrible look of fear on the sightlessly staring face, the slumped shoulders, the red stain on the floor by the desk. But apparently he knew nothing and breaking the news to him abruptly would have been no help at all in putting him at his ease.

The waitress had snapped her order pad open, and was just starting toward the table to find out why Lynn had failed to catch her eye or indicate with an impatient gesture that she was waiting to be served. Lynn shook her head, and the girl took the cue, scowling slightly and returning to the counter with her eyes trained in curiosity on the table's other occupant.

Having seen him enter the restaurant and sit down uninvited opposite Lynn, she could hardly have failed to think him a pickup artist with a bold way of going after what he wanted, even to taking the risk of being thrown out on his ear.

But it wasn't her problem and she seemed content to watch his progress with mild interest and wait for Lynn to rise from the table in anger and appeal to the cashier for aid. When that didn't happen and the young man straightened his shoulders and a look of elation came into his eyes the waitress' frown was replaced by a knowing smirk and a glance which said as plain as words: "Brother, you sure are a fast-working stud! Funny—I'd never have taken her for a roundheels."

Lynn stared down at the white table-top, picked up a salt shaker and set it down again. She let her gaze stray to the black portfolio and said in an even tone: "We could have discussed your work at the office, and I wouldn't have been

in the least bit hasty. You can't just glance briefly at drawings and hope to form a considered artistic judgment. Sometimes you can't even—well, never mind. What I'm trying to say is I think I understand why you preferred to wait until I was through for the day. Office-pressures do interfere—they're a kind of strait jacket. For some people, anyway. I've done things just as—well, impulsive as you just did. Not once, but a dozen times."

He leaned toward her eagerly, all of the uncertainty gone from his gaze. "I sure behaved goofy," he said. "But I'm a shy sort of guy. I try my best to hide it but maybe it would be wiser to just accept it, go along with it. I've been told I'm giving it an importance it doesn't deserve."

"Of course you are," she said. "Some women like shy men. Perhaps sixty percent of them do, when the shyness has something very genuine behind it. Shyness has nothing to do with courage—or lack of it. It's often a blending of humility and strength. And humility is a very fine quality."

"That's the charitable way of looking at it, I guess," he said. "But I'm a great deal harder on myself at times. I started off shy—was that way when I was five—but I could have conquered it if I'd tried hard enough."

The boyish grin was back on his face again. "Sometimes I feel that way, and then again—I don't at all. I ask myself if it isn't a mistake to try to change people too much. There has to be a wide variety of human behavior, doesn't there? That's what makes the world go round. I've always liked something that André Gide once said: 'We are what we are, and we do what we do.' But perhaps you don't agree."

"One doesn't have to be fatalist to agree with that," she said.

His face sobered suddenly. "You should be burned up," he said. "Angry enough to give me a cold stare and refuse to talk to me. About the only thing I can say in my own defense is—I had no idea I'd seriously scared you. I guess that's because no woman has ever before mistaken me for a wolf on the prowl."

"I knew you were walking right behind me and I was afraid to look back," she said. "It was downright silly of me—a surrender to panic that doesn't make sense. I've only myself to blame."

"But why?" he asked, puzzled. "If you'd turned I'd have spoken to you, and introduced myself. I'd have explained that I just wanted to show you a few of my drawings, and if you had the evening free..."

There was a slight curve to his lips again. "I'd have probably gone all the way out on a limb, and asked you to have

dinner with me. I was building up to it, just giving myself a second or two more of grace. But then you became frightened and almost broke into a run—"

Should she tell him why, she asked herself? Exactly why she'd been afraid to turn and face his gaze? She decided not to. He'd be sure to think her silence strange, very strange, when he saw tomorrow morning's headlines; but to talk about it now, to watch shock and horror grow in his eyes, was a little more than she could take. Better to let him think that Lathrup was still alive, that she, Lynn, had emerged into the street from a perfectly normal, smoothly functioning magazine office.

Better, safer, wiser to let him suspect nothing. If she ever saw him again—and she had a feeling she would—she could explain why she hadn't come right out and told him about the tragedy. She could count on his complete sympathy and understanding. She was sure of that.

It seemed incredible to her that he hadn't noticed the police activity outside the building, but then she remembered how much that activity had thinned out just in the past hour. On leaving the building she'd seen only two police cars, and one had been parked half way down the block. News of a murder usually gets around by word-of-mouth and spreads fast, especially in the immediate neighborhood. But apparently he hadn't heard about it, and that was good. It pleased her very much.

Actually, when she thought about it some more, it wasn't in the least surprising. The police tyranny had eased and she'd emerged from the building at five-fifteen, practically her usual hour. In all likelihood he hadn't been waiting for her outside for more than ten minutes, too short a time to become aware of the electric tension in the air, or the morbidly curious stares directed at the building. She was quite sure that only in Macbeth did the very stones cry murder.

She felt a sudden seriousness, a strange kind of heightened tension flowing between them, as if in some way he'd sensed that she was keeping something from him that she didn't want to talk about. To dispel it quickly, for she did not want him to start asking questions she would be compelled to answer evasively, she reached over and picked up the portfolio of drawings.

"Are these the drawings you wanted to show me?" she asked.

"Yes . . . please look at them," he said. He seemed unable to restrain his eagerness. It showed in his eyes, which were bright with confidence, and the way he tapped with two fingers on the table-top, with a kind of anticipatory vehemence.

mence. It was easy to see that he didn't care how impulsively over-optimistic she thought him, if only she would study each drawing carefully and be completely just.

She opened the portfolio with fingers that trembled a little. Why, *why* couldn't she keep the hateful memory from unnerving her so when all danger was past, and she would soon be sitting in a taxi, completely safe, completely secure, moving through the crowded streets . . . moving up Broadway with its great fountains of colored lights. People everywhere, thousands of people, as alive as she was alive, protected, guarded, shielded from danger by the massive strength of the city, with its law-enforcing agencies constantly on the alert.

She forced herself to examine each drawing with the utmost care, with an eye to color and line and originality of subject matter, putting aside for the moment, and as far as she was able, all of her previous experience in the judging of art work. She tried to think of herself as just an average person roaming at random through an art gallery, stopping here and there to admire a painting with some special quality about it that merited further study and set it a little apart from the paintings on both sides of it.

Then she considered the special qualities in a slightly different way, with a sharpening of critical judgment, summoning to her aid the knowledge and discernment she had acquired as a fiction editor on a magazine group which was always on the lookout for exceptional illustrations and preferred not to leave the discovery and selection of such material to the art department alone.

There were twelve drawings in the portfolio and she spent two or three minutes studying each of them and when she had completed her scrutiny she went back, and made a reappraisal without saying a word. She was aware of his eyes upon her and an anxiety emanating from him that a word or two might have eased. But somehow she could not meet his gaze or bring herself to gloss over the truth or distort it in any way out of sympathy for him, or simply to spare him pain. He wasn't the kind of young man she could lie to without seriously impairing her own integrity and self-respect. Had she attempted to lie, she was quite sure that he would not have been deceived.

What could she say to him, how soften the blow without cutting him to the quick? Would it do any good at all to tell him the simple truth . . . that these drawings had about them a quality of pure enchantment, of greatness, undoubtedly, a delicacy of perception that made her want to weep?

How could she tell him that they were the kind of drawings

which no magazine could possibly accept? It wasn't just a question of their being too good. The line between the best commercial art and the canvasses of a Van Gogh wasn't quite that hard and fast. It could be broken down, dissolved away, if a drawing was powerful enough.

But these drawings were too tenuous in a fanciful way, too remote from—well, even the kind of reality that surrealism specialized in—the fragmentary, broken up, subconscious dream imagery that managed to remain sharply delineated, with many bold and contrasting scenic effects . . . broken columns against a blood-red sky, an ancient castle crumbling into ruins, a giant's hand clasping an egg. These drawings suggested more a Midsummer Night's Dream seen through the spray of a Watteau fountain in an Alice-in-Wonderland kind of topsy-turvydom.

There were no bold contrasts at all, no clearly-defined human figures, no dramatic, story-telling content. Everything seemed to float and quiver, to be suspended in the air, or to recede into rainbow-hued distances. It was a blue world of enchantment and wonder, bathed in the light that never was on sea or land. But it was not a real world that dealt with the human condition on any level. A sensitive hand had worked with the pigments and hues of Merlin's realm of magic, avoiding the abstract and the symbolical but producing something just as provocatively illusive on an entirely different plane.

She tried to visualize just one of them—the least tenuous, the only one that held the faintest ray of hope—on the cover of a magazine.

No . . . no . . . absolutley not. The reproduction process alone would destroy whatever vitality the two foreground figures possessed. Didn't he know what the reproduction process could do at times to drawings so sharply delineated that the human figures seemed three-dimensional, right in the room with you?

Five minutes later Lynn Prentiss sat alone in the restaurant, glad that she had told him the complete truth, but unable to forget the look on his face when he'd gotten up and left her. It hadn't been an angry or reproachful look. He had kept a tight grip on his emotions, had even managed to smile and thank her, reaching out and giving her hand a firm squeeze, quite startling under the circumstances and totally unexpected.

He had thanked her for her candor and left, very quietly and with dignity. But behind the smile there had been a look of despair, almost of hopelessness, a shrinking together of his

entire being. She could sense it: it was something that couldn't be hidden, that was beyond his power to conceal.

The waitress was staring at her again, her gaze completely mystified now, the cynical smirk erased, as if someone had passed a wet sponge dipped in a muscle-relaxing solvent across her lips. One of the rough-looking men had paid his bill and left, a little ahead of the young man with his sheaf of drawings that would never see publication anywhere unless—

Well, if he got them hung in an important midtown gallery—and it was not beyond the bounds of possibility—one of the art magazines might spend a small fortune to bring them out in just the right way, with the costliest of full-color techniques. The three in color were the best, the cloud formations extraordinary, and she was quite sure that someday the serious critics would sit up and take notice. But recognition might not come to him until he was too old to dream, and meanwhile—he desperately needed to sell a few drawings to bolster up his morale.

He hadn't come right out and told her that he was poor, but she knew he was. He would not have approached her outside the office in such a naive, reckless way if he had been in any way loaded—she'd always disliked that word, but it came unbidden into her mind. With plenty of money to throw around he'd have acquired more self-confidence, even if serious artistic recognition was something money couldn't always buy. Not immediately anyway, not overnight. But with money *and* genius—

Was it genius—or merely a very great talent? She couldn't be sure. She didn't know too much about art, but she did know how she felt when she saw a drawing or painting that took her breath away. And the way she felt was important, because she was very sensitive, imaginative and deep in her feelings; she had as much right as anyone to recognize, dwell upon, understand and praise the qualities which made a work of art outstanding.

She had at least praised his drawings; had been unstinting in her praise. And if her absolute candor had seemed almost brutal to him it had been actually something quite different. The truth was never brutal. It only hurt for a moment, hurt terribly, and then there was recovery and healing—you were much better off than you would have been if you'd gone on deceiving yourself. Only deception was bad . . . It was the deceivers of the world who were the closest allies of the sadistic ones, pretending to be kind and tactful while inflicting grievous wounds. Not the only criminals by any means—

open brutality without any excuse at all was worse—but the kind deceivers were the opposite of admirable.

Or was she deceiving herself a little? Was there something obstinate in her nature which put too great a stress on absolute truth-telling? Well, perhaps. But it was too late for penitence and regrets now. She hadn't slammed a door in his face. She'd told him, quite frankly, to try again. Anyone who could draw that well—could turn out saleable work. She was sure of it. He'd simply have to come down a little more to earth, and put some flesh-and-blood people into his drawings. Heightened drama, direct conflict. Not all the great paintings of the world had that element, but it sure helped when you wanted to sell an illustration to a magazine. Keep things sharp and clear and forget about the beautiful gossamer webbing for awhile. Time enough for that when you're famous and standing with a cocktail glass in your hand on the opening day of your own show.

She found herself visualizing it, sitting very straight and still, aware that the cashier was watching her and not caring at all. Anything . . . to keep the memory of the slumped body, the ashen face, the out-thrust arm and . . . the blood . . . from coming too precipitously back into her mind.

He'd be standing surrounded by his paintings, wonderful elfland vistas, white nymphs in the clasp of satyrs, hairy and dwarfish, with cloven hoofs, and still pools in the deep woods would mirror the background orgies. The women surrounding him would be remarkable too, with plunging necklines, ogling eyes, purple-tinted eyelids, incredible gowns, with Cadillacs parked outside, and a guest book bearing the signatures of a hundred celebrities of the art and literary worlds.

His shyness would be gone, but he'd be a little ungainly looking still, a very thin, pale youth with darkly burning eyes.

"So nice . . . so glad . . . so pleased. Do you really think so? Isn't it strange that we both should know John Tremain? And Hodgkins. Yes . . . I was very pleased by what he said about me in the New York Times. That's right. Some of my early things did appear in the Eaton-Lathrup publications. But I had to ruin them first. Couldn't be helped, though. I take a cynical, detached attitude—"

Suddenly . . . fear began to grow in her again, and an icy wind blew up her spine. What if . . . he hadn't been quite the naive, awkward, appealing youth that he had seemed? A few of the drawings . . .

Morbid? Well, yes . . . distinctly on the morbid or suggestively erotic side, with the female forms—creatures of

light and air—assuming strange postures as they dwindled and faded into blue distances as if borne on invisible winds. There was nothing repulsive about the figures, they were beautiful with no hint of ugliness or the deliberately perverse about them. But there was a suggestion of amorous abandonment and a strange, smouldering kind of half-virginal, half-wanton sensuality in their attitudes. It was as if the mind which had depicted them could have gone much further in giving them an illicit, orgiastic aspect and had been strongly tempted to do so. What if, in other drawings which had perhaps been shown to no one, all restraint had been thrust aside, and scenes portrayed that would have brought a quick flush to her cheeks—forced her to avert her eyes. She was no prude, but when the erotic aspects of a drawing verged on the pathological, when a completely pagan glorification of sex orgies and unrestraint was accepted as a matter of course it never failed to embarrass her and give her a slight feeling of uneasiness which she was powerless to overcome. Revulsion even, when the candor was too great, and her Puritan heritage too violently assailed.

All her life she had been in revolt against the hypocritical and straight-laced and her Puritan heritage was two generations removed. But there were limits—

It did no good at all for her to tell herself that she was being very foolish and unjust. An impetuous young painter today, determined to be completely true to his inner vision, had every right to be completely candid. There was a wide gulf between powerful and genuine art, executed with complete sincerity and the luridly cheap and sensational which had no artistic merit at all. But it was a feeling she could not entirely overcome.

Always in the back of her mind was the thought: Is he really like his drawings; is that the kind of person he is?

She knew that if such a yardstick were to be rigorously applied two-thirds of the world's great artists and great writers would stand condemned. The erotic was an important aspect of all life—to deny it honest expression was to emasculate art, to do violence to reality in all of its gustier aspects—the kind of reality you found in Swift and Cervantes, Chaucer and Defoe, Goya and Gauguin and Cezanne.

But knowing all that, never doubting it for a moment, why was she trembling again now? Why had something about his drawings, the faint aura of morbidity that seemed to hover over them, made her fearful and suspicious again?

Was it because she had at the beginning imagined that a mad killer might be following her; that morbidity and madness were often closely allied? Was it because she had sud-

denly begun to realize that deception, too, could be a fine art—if a man were a killer at heart?

He might be everything that he claimed to be, a young, unhappy and frustrated artist, desperately seeking commercial success, and still be a youth with a gun who had allowed his morbidity to drive him over the borderline. A youth with an imagined grievance against Lathrup, compulsively driven to seek redress for that grievance through an act of brutal violence.

When had he called at the office, seeking an interview which had been denied him? Yesterday . . . two or three days ago? She had failed to ask him. Not that morning, surely, not before—

But how could she be entirely sure that he *hadn't* called at the office in the morning, that he *hadn't* stealthily found his way to Lathrup's office after pretending to leave, and . . .

She arose suddenly, determined to remain calm, to keep such thoughts from mushrooming out and growing to monstrous proportions in her mind.

Just nerves, she told herself firmly. No reason at all to think him a crafty dissembler, when his every word and gesture had borne the stamp of absolute sincerity. No one could be that perfect an actor. She had liked him . . . she still liked him . . . and she hoped that he would call at the office again, when the horror had become just a dim, receding memory—could it ever be quite that, she wondered—and he would ask her to lunch and she would look at his new drawings and all fear, all suspicion would be banished from her mind.

She crossed to the heavy plate-glass door, pulled inward and emerged into the street without a backward glance. She had a momentary qualm about not having ordered anything, even a cup of coffee. But she shrugged it off, telling herself that if the waitress and cashier were unhappy about it they could . . . yes, go to hell.

Chapter IV

RALPH GILMORE COULD NOT escape from the nightmare. There was no escape anywhere, for his world had become star-crossed with dark patterns of betrayal and outrage that hid the light of the sun and turned the still wet, slippery pavement beneath his feet into a quagmire. He experienced a sinking sensation, a hollowness at the pit of his stomach which forced him to take refuge in his room and even there he could find no peace.

It was impossible to avoid remembering, impossible to keep the tormenting events of the past two weeks from screeching, roaring, clattering back into his mind like an onrushing subway train, its red lights ablaze. A jostling on the platform, a violent shove and he was lying directly in the path of the train, glued to the rails by blind terror. Only—the rush of returning memories was worse than that, much worse. If it had been merely physical, if it had been merely something that could crush and destroy him he might have welcomed it. But there was no escape from a horror of the mind, unless drink or drugs could be used as an anodyne and something deep in his nature prevented him from taking that dangerous road to forgetfulness.

Sleep was out of the question. When he threw himself down and shut his eyes the torment had become worse, the memory pictures more unendurable.

Unendurable, torturing now—like salt on raw wounds—but there had been moments when some of them had seemed very precious, worth dying for, worth . . . say it, bring it out into the open . . . worth killing for. But wasn't that an insane way of looking at it? The scales never came down completely, or balanced completely on one side or the other. There had to be some joy in the most agonizing of memories. Otherwise a man would never go on, would never wade deeper into a dark morass of guilt and self-torment. Knowing himself to be betrayed, but still going on, putting himself beyond the pale. There had to be a glittering prize shining in the darkness, beckoning, offering moments of respite—offering far more than that. Wild joy, forbidden pleasures,

the mind-beguiling beauty of Medusa before her snake-wreathed face turned her victims to stone.

It was a nightmare now, engulfing him, making him want to die. But it hadn't been that way at the start. It had started glowingly, a new way of life opening up, a bright prospect of fulfillment stretching out before him with nothing at all to mar it.

There was nothing depressing or unwelcome about the acclaim of the really important critics, the substantial literary recognition he'd only pretended to despise in moments of immature cynicism. And it was not tormenting even now to go back and dwell on all the financial rewards which were showered on brilliant young novelists who were both serious and widely popular writers—rewards which had been almost within his grasp.

Success had not been a prospect reserved for the future alone—a prospect veiled in uncertainty that might not materialize for months or years, or turn out, in the end, to have been completely illusory. Success had swept so close that it had taken on an aspect of immediacy. He had felt its invisible pulse-beats all about him, had glimpsed the bright fluttering of its wings. And with it had come an undreamed of happiness, something he'd hardly dared to hope for.

A woman he could worship, and adore and build a shrine around. A woman at the center of his life—not just at the periphery. A woman who did not think him awkward and self-conscious and ridiculously helpless in a practical way. A woman who knew what artists, writers, musicians—all creative people—were really like. A woman who didn't want to mother him, because she knew he had no real need to be mothered, that he had great inner strength and needed only to be understood and accepted for the kind of person he was.

He could not avoid asking himself, even now, just how much finding out the truth about her had changed him. Was he still the same person, thinking the same thoughts, capable of acting toward others in the same way? Or was he a different person entirely, thirty years older than the twenty-five years which made him, in the eyes of the world, still little more than a boy by actual year-count.

He felt incredibly old and drained—a man of seventy couldn't have felt any older. But no man of seventy could have been torn as he was by emotions so deeply rooted in despair. Both explosive violence and its tormenting aftermath of black despair could only be experienced in their full intensity by the young. In old age such emotions could

still be destructive to body and mind, but never in quite so terrible a way.

He had a sudden, almost uncontrollable impulse to pick up the typewriter which had helped to betray him and hurl it with violence to the floor. But instead he stood rigid, unmoving, before the room's one small window, with its bleak, brick-wall outlook until time became fluid, backward-sweeping, and the present less real than a certain morning, almost three weeks before, when she had returned the manuscript he'd sent her with words of glowing praise, and a suggestion that he make a few minor changes which did not distress him at all.

"One of those big, brown envelopes, Ralph. Looks like another one of your stories came back. Ralph, you awake? Want me to open it and tell you—like you asked me to do the last time? You said it might bring you luck. It sure sounded silly to me. You can't change what's in a letter after it's been mailed, silly. But I'll open it if you want me to."

The knocking which had preceded the voice had been loud, insistent. It had continued for ten full seconds, but curiously enough, it was the voice itself which awakened him, even though he could not distinguish the words and their significance was completely lost on him.

He sighed and rolled over on his side, drawing the sheets up more tightly about his naked shoulders. Then, abruptly and almost instantly, he cursed under his breath and threw the sheets back, reviling himself for his lack of self-discipline in succumbing to drowsiness at ten in the morning.

He'd overslept again, which was unusual for him. He was at his best right after breakfast, when the typewriter keys seemed to come to life under his fingers and the beautiful words rushed pell-mell across a virgin sheet of white bond stationery—so fast that the keys sometimes interlocked, and caused an infuriating delay which he could do nothing about.

Orange juice, scrambled eggs and buttered toast, followed by three cups of strong black coffee, could work wonders right after breakfast. By noon he often found himself slowing down just a little. But he increased his writing tempo again right after lunch and continued on briskly, as a rule, until he called it a day at four in the afternoon. He had never been a burner of the midnight oil—the phrase had an old-fashioned but Parisian ring which he somehow liked—not even in college when he'd had to cram a hell of a lot to bluff his way through sessions of trig and calculus which he violently disliked. A writer could be independent, at least, completely himself, choose his own hours of work—

The knocking came again, louder this time, putting an abrupt end to his thoughts.

"Wait a minute!" he called out. "I just got up. For Pete's sake, you little dope, give me a chance to put something on."

"How did you know it was me, Ralph?"

"No one else would make such a racket!" he called back.

"I'm sorry, lover boy. I just thought—"

"Stop it, will you? What kind of a reputation are you trying to pin on me? Please, Nora, show some sense. I've got a busy day ahead of me."

He crossed the room, whipped a pair of gray doeskin slacks from the back of a chair, gathered up his socks from under the bed, kicked off his slippers and sat down on the edge of the bed, pulling on socks and trousers with awkward twistings-about.

When he went to the open door he was also wearing a shirt.

It never ceased to amaze him how closely life paralleled fiction—even the most realistic, hard-boiled kind of fiction, the Hemingway sort of thing. A struggling young writer and the landlady's daughter—brother, it sure could be made to fit. Anywhere, any place, any time, which meant, of course, that the hard-boiled writers were basically incurable romantics who took their cue from the way life always has of duplicating romantic patterns all over the place—every hour of every day and night. Especially every night.

Not that he'd slept with her or wanted to particularly. She was a forlorn, pathetic, over-effusive, well-meaning girl of nineteen, who could not speak grammatically for more than three sentences at a stretch, but whose syntax was colorful enough at times to arouse the interest of most protective males. A man with a Pygmalion complex would have been instantly drawn to her, would have seen tremendous possibilities in her.

"Darling, I'll make you over completely. You don't realize what tenderness, affection, understanding can do. You're a rare and unusual woman, but you've never had a chance to develop."

Perhaps he should have felt that way himself. But somehow he couldn't. She just wasn't physically attractive enough. Not bad looking, exactly, and a beauty parlor could have done wonders for her. But he had other things on his mind—at least for the moment.

She stood facing him in the doorway, looking more forlorn than usual, as if she regretted the slightly mocking way she'd called out to him through the door, calling him "silly" and all that—he had been too drowsy to take in the words, but he

had an obscure feeling that she'd said something she was now regretting and her first words made him sure of it.

"I guess this story just wasn't liked by one of those stupid editors you're always saying don't know their—it's a word I don't like to use—from a hole in the ground. Do you want me to open it for you?"

"No, I'll open it," he said. He took the large, bulky envelope from her, and started to close the door, half-blocking the aperture with his body, but she squeezed past him into the room.

She crossed the room with a slow, self-conscious undulation of her hips and sat down on the edge of his bed. He felt a sudden stab of compassion for her. She was doing her pathetic best to entice him and he was in no mood to be enticed.

The bulky envelope had given him a jolt. It wasn't the worst jolt he'd ever experienced—he'd sold fifteen stories to the small-circulation quality magazines and two to the slicks, and you had to expect rejections now and then—but he had counted heavily on this particular story going over big.

It was an unusual story, a powerful story. He'd put virtually everything he had into it. And now—it had been slammed, thrown back in his face, with probably a miserable, printed rejection slip. Editors just didn't give a damn how much they hurt you—or insulted you. Quite famous authors occasionally got printed rejection slips. He knew that, but it didn't make the outrage even slightly more palatable or easy to accept.

He looked at the neat, printed address—Ralph Gilmore, 559 West 38th Street, New York City—and an angry flush mounted to his cheekbones. Not typewritten—*printed*—as if some incredible new machine had been used to add insult to injury.

He tore the envelope open and hesitated for an instant before removing its contents. What if he had been jumping to an unjust conclusion? He had no absolute assurance that the envelope contained a rejection slip. Quite possibly the editor had written him a long and sympathetic letter, expressing sincere regrets.

No . . . that would have been worse. A hundred times worse. The manuscript had been returned to him, so obviously it had been rejected. What the hell did he care about how sorry the editor might feel about it?

Nora was staring at him with a look of bewildered concern on her face, as if she didn't quite know what it was all about, but could tell from the way he was glaring at the envelope that he had no intention of tossing it on the type-

writer table, crossing to the bed and putting an arm about her waist. Not immediately, anyway, and she'd hoped it might happen this time, that he might turn to her for comfort at least. Three bulky envelopes in a week, and she knew how much rejections upset him. Writers were different from other people and probably most of them were a little crazy.

She'd dreamed about it and hoped for it, but how could she make it happen when he was so strange, so different, from anyone she'd ever known. The men she'd known had made it plain just what they'd expected from her in return for taking her out, making her feel important, a somebody. If she hadn't liked them she wouldn't have given them anything in return—she could be a real little bitch at times, why deny it—but she *had* liked them, she had, she had! All except that Duncan worm she could have killed and that piece of—

She didn't say the word, even to herself. He didn't like that kind of coarseness, got upset whenever she came right out and said what she knew to be true. Not in a woman anyway. He could use worse language himself, could go way beyond anything you'd hear in a bar unless you were standing close to someone who mistook you for a hustler and was too drunk to tell the difference even when you moved quickly away from him.

She wanted to please him—God help her, she did want to. She couldn't explain it, because there was nothing so wonderful about him, even if he was a writer. But if he really wanted her, if he did or said something to make her sure, she'd go all the way with him. She'd have to be sure, because she had to like a man terribly, to worry about him and think about him and want to buy him things—a new scarf, a necktie, no matter how many neckties he had or how much money he spent on her—and be jealous of him and swear she'd kill any other woman who looked at him twice . . . she had to love him that much and that terribly to go to bed with him.

All right, he wasn't the first one. There had been . . . four others. But she'd never . . . cared for . . . anyone quite so much and if he was too blind to see it, or thought the stories he was always writing and getting returned were more important than a woman in bed with him, a woman who knew how to make him forget everything but the warm, clinging sweetness of . . .

All right, those were his words. Words from one of his crazy manuscripts. She'd copied them down and read them more than once, because they'd excited her. But that didn't mean she didn't feel that way herself. She couldn't use fancy words, maybe, but she knew what it meant to a man to hold a woman close, and pass his hands up and down over the

smooth flesh of her shoulders and fondle her breasts . . . And she knew what it meant to a woman.

Poetry too. He wrote poetry. "There's nothing in it," he'd said. "A great poet can starve to death, even quicker than an important novelist can. I won't be victimized to that extent. Read these if you want to—I don't give a damn about them. I probably won't write another poem in the next twenty years."

It didn't make much sense to her. If he was so worried about starving to death why couldn't he go out and get a job in a bakery?

She watched him closely as he tore open the envelope, quite sure that he would go into a rage when he read the letter attached to his story. It had happened ten or twelve times before, when she'd brought him his mail—either a letter or a printed slip which he'd tossed at her as if he expected her to become angry too.

What was there to be angry about? If he couldn't write well enough to get his stories taken by the magazines, what was to prevent him from going out and getting a paying job?

She had expected him to be angry, and felt a little let down, disappointed even, when she saw that he was reading the letter with only a slight frown on his face.

The frown vanished before he stopped reading. It changed to a smile and then, quite suddenly, he was laughing, yelling, waltzing around the room like a real gone beat. She got up, a little frightened, and stood staring at him, unable to believe her eyes.

"It's accepted," he shouted. "Believe it or not, it's accepted and it's going to be published. A female editor who knows strong writing when she sees it—who isn't scared off by the kind of candor that goes a little beyond Faulkner but is too genuine to ignore. And to think that I used to say unkind things about female editors!"

"You mean—the story's sold and you're going to get paid for it?" she asked, a stunned incredulity in her eyes.

"Of course it will be paid for," he said. "It's one of the biggest magazine groups in the country. Their check is as good as a signed order from the Secretary of the Treasury, for sixteen hundred dollars from the United States mint."

"Gee—that's wonderful."

"Wonderful isn't the word for it. I don't give a damn about the dough. What's the matter with you anyway . . . haven't I tried to explain? Oh, sure, the dough means a little something to me. I wouldn't be human if it didn't. But the important thing is the story is going to be published. It's the best thing I've ever done—tremendous writing, really tre-

mendous writing. I'm not being egoistical, I have very high standards. I know precisely what literary distinction is and when I've achieved it—quite by accident perhaps, once in a blue moon—but I've written enough and torn up enough manuscripts and suffered enough to know. This is a great story. It will knock the critics' eyes out."

"I guess I don't—"

"Don't apologize, don't say a word. It's a little too much for me at the moment, too. Did I ever tell you that you're beautiful?"

"No," she said. "You've never told me that. And I don't think I am."

"But you are. How would you like to have dinner with me tonight? We'll celebrate. We'll really kick over the traces."

"Ralph, I don't know. You've never asked me before. How come you've never asked me before?"

The "how come" grated on him, but he did his best not to look aggrieved.

"It's because I've been too busy—and too worried," he said. "You don't know what a writer goes through—eight, ten, twelve hours a day. The creative agony does something to you—makes you feel either detached, way off in the clouds somewhere or so nervously keyed up that you can't take down-to-earth realities in your stride. You forget things, make a fool of yourself, miss priceless opportunities. Like . . . telling you how beautiful you are and how much it would mean to me if you'd say yes . . . yes . . . yes. You will have dinner with me."

Her surrender was complete, because it had already been decided upon. But it was the kind of surrender he hadn't expected, hadn't really wanted at all. It was physical and immediate and it appalled him, brought with it a commitment he hadn't planned on, an involvement he might have welcomed in a moment of desperation, when the sex hunger was a gnawing ache in him and loneliness was a gnawing ache, and a woman—any woman—would have been better than the gross mental images no sex-starved man can avoid conjuring up at times. But he wasn't desperate now, he'd been thrown a lifeline, and all the east was gold, bathed in the bright rays of an unexpected sunrise.

"Say what you just said again," she said. "Tell me I'm beautiful, even if we both know it's a lie. Say anything you want . . . so long as you really need me, and we're not kidding each other about that part of it. Tell me I'm just a crazy kid, bitten by some kind of bug and I won't mind at all. Say I'm well-stacked even if I'm not beautiful, as if you were talking to someone about a girl you didn't respect

too much. I won't care if you really need me, and do respect me, deep down . . ."

She was in his arms before he could say a word in reply, was straining against him, running her fingers through his hair, opening her lips and almost forcing him to kiss her with the kind of ardor it would have been impossible for him to wholly avoid. He suddenly realized that all she was wearing was a skirt and blouse, that both garments were so thin he could feel the texture of her skin through the cloth.

He could feel more than just the texture of her skin. Every movement of her body, every impassioned ripple of her flesh, increased the intimacy of her embrace and made him lose his head completely.

It was over almost before it had begun and although it had been sudden and maddening, tempting them both to abandon all restraint, he had found the strength to gently but firmly grasp her by the wrists and prevent her complete surrender. He felt cheated, tortured for an instant and then a wave of relief swept over him, because what had almost happened would have been a very serious commitment and he was not the kind of man who could take complete physical intimacy lightly.

Casual love-making was impossible for him. It never failed to stir him to the depths, to awaken impulses of loyalty and devotion, to place him under an obligation. He was perhaps different from the general run of males, but if he had gone out on the street and picked up some pathetic little prostitute and gone home with her the relationship would not have been entirely sordid and physical.

He sat now on the edge of the bed as if turned to stone, watching her get up with shining eyes and a deep flush on her face, cross the room to the door and go out, closing the door very softly behind her. He'd known what she was thinking. Next time it will be completely wonderful and he won't feel awkward and embarrassed afterwards and not know what to say.

She'd be thinking that, but it wouldn't be the truth. He had no intention of letting it happen again, of going even as far as he had before he'd found the strength to save himself from absolute disaster.

A moment or two before, with the returned manuscript still unopened in his hand, he'd had a momentary impulse to let himself go and accept the consequences, even if they would have been as binding in his scale of values as a marriage ceremony. He could never have walked out and left her—unless love died and they both agreed that the relationship had deteriorated and ceased to be important.

But all that was changed now. He'd opened the envelope and the letter had changed the world for him and if she hadn't thrown her arms around him and kissed him so passionately when he'd merely asked her for a dinner date in a moment of unreasoning exaltation . . .

It had been a physical response solely, the kind of response which any normal male with the blood warm in his veins would have been unable to exercise complete and instant control over, no matter how great his strength of will. It had been instinctive, the touching off of sex's trigger-mechanism in his brain, the automatic arousal which yielding softness, sweetness, femininity in all of its rapturous abandonment made inevitable in the male.

There was no reason for him to reproach himself or feel guilty about it. If for a moment he'd abandoned all restraint, carried her to the bed, and seared her lips with kisses which she had welcomed, demanded, insisted upon—had not the tightening of her arms, the almost convulsive straining of her body against him proved that she had been equally aroused?—if for a moment he'd become almost savagely primitive in his love-making, was that something which called for sackcloth and ashes and the covering of his head, as if he were a grieving widow instead of the completely normal, robustly endowed man he knew himself to be?

Hardly. Since she had been so completely eager and willing the cynical and unjust could brand his restraint as amusing if they wished and regard him as something of a fool. But he had his own standards and preferred to maintain them. An old maxim came almost unbidden into his mind. "They say what they say—let them say."

For a moment the exaltation he'd felt on reading the letter had been scattered to the winds, like dust particles in a rising gale or dust in a city apartment blown in all directions by a draft from an open window, or swept under the bed by an untidy housekeeper. And it had been the most precious kind of dust—a fine sprinkling of gold, each particle brightly shining.

There was no one with a broom who could sweep it into view again, but it was coming back now by itself, creeping slowly back, and he could feel the splendor of it beginning to suffuse him. In a moment, if he just remained quietly seated on the edge of the bed, he could gather up all of the shining particles, and go out and put through a phone call from the drugstore on the corner.

She'd suggested he phone her as soon as he received the letter. Returning a manuscript for minor revisions when it was practically bought and paid for was unusual. But he

had a feeling that he had sent the story to a very unusual editor. A woman who did things in her own, independent way, ignoring what was customary and established and rule-of-thumb, but with no sacrifice of efficiency.

Most editors would have kept the manuscript in the office, written him a letter of acceptance, and asked him to call and discuss the changes which would have to be made in it. But she'd sent it right back, assuming, no doubt, that the acceptance would so gratify and stimulate him that he'd sit down immediately and make the most important change while he was keyed up and at his best creatively.

It had probably seemed to her a gamble worth taking. All it had cost the firm was a dollar in postage and there could be no substitute for that kind of emotional stimulation, especially when there were a few pages that the author had perhaps grown cold on, or lost interest in.

It was a strong indication that she understood writers, knew precisely how their minds worked. Most writers, anyway. It wasn't her fault that she had gone slightly astray in his case. Every writer was unique—no two individuals in any creative field were ever exactly alike. For a moment he *had* been stimulated enough to sit down, and make the most important change without even going out to buy a fresh pack of cigarettes and take a brisk, six-minute walk around the block.

It was just that—he felt too damned good right at the moment to sit down and concentrate. All of the golden dust had been gathered up now and it set up a shining—both inside his mind and outside—so that the whole room seemed filled with a glow that outshone the noonday sun.

Fifteen minutes later he stood in a drugstore phone booth so oppressively over-heated that it would have bothered him, if he had been about to phone a friend who never knew when to hang up. But now he was scarcely aware of the heat and it gave him no concern. Few editors had time to waste in inconsequential talk, and he had no intention of making a bad impression on her by baring the innermost secrets of his life.

That would come later . . . if at all. He had a feeling that it would come eventually, because a woman who understood writers as she seemed to do would be unlikely to find that kind of conversation boring.

Everything was happening so fast it took his breath away. The miracle had increased in brightness and now he was sitting in a taxi on his way to Cafe Seventy in the East Sixties.

His phone call had been switched to her office very quickly and her voice had been decisive and a little sharp on the wire. But the instant he'd told her who he was no woman's voice could have taken on more graciousness and charm.

Informal, too. Delightfully . . . no, *intimate* wasn't too presumptuous a word. There had been an unmistakable undercurrent of intimacy in her voice, as if she'd known him for a long time and they shared a secret . . . a very precious kind of secret she preferred not to talk about within the four walls of a cold, briskly efficient magazine office.

It had meant, of course, that she was suggesting that they have lunch together, but before he could think of just the right words she herself had done the inviting. She had picked the cafe and the time— "About two . . . I'm afraid it has to be a little late . . ."—and now, in about five more minutes, he would be there.

It was a very warm day and the air felt almost solid enough to cut with a knife. But the high humidity didn't bother him, because a breeze fragrant with springtime scents was blowing through the cab, even though the driver and no one on the streets—no one anywhere except himself—seemed to be aware of it.

When the cab drew into the curb in front of the cafe he added a tip to the fare that dispelled most of the driver's gloom. He got out, walked into the cafe as if he'd just decided while taking a stroll that the place looked all right, and so why should he stop to examine the three-dollar-minimum luncheon menu pasted to the window? He had an almost irrepressible impulse to tip the uniformed doorman too, just for the hell of it.

He saw and recognized her quickly enough, because she'd told him what kind of hat she'd be wearing and there was only one woman in the place that went with the kind of voice he'd heard on the phone.

It came as a distinct shock to him to discover that she wasn't alone. There was a man seated opposite her at the small table she'd chosen—or he had chosen for her—in a softly-lit recess on the left side of the cafe, about half-way to the back.

He disliked the man straight off, without precisely knowing why. He was about forty-five, with slightly graying hair cut rather short, a bland, almost mild-mannered way of smiling and nodding as he talked, and features which were distinctly on the handsome side. He was wearing a tropical worsted suit of expensive weave—the kind of suit you couldn't purchase readymade anywhere for less than a hun-

dred dollars and you knew it was custom-tailored. Three hundred dollars would probably have been a more likely estimate of what the suit had set the man back. He wore a small red carnation in his buttonhole which the July heat had not yet succeeded in wilting.

Ralph became aware suddenly that she had raised her eyes and recognized him. But before he could respond with a nod and smile and draw closer to the table all of the blandness went out of her companion's face. His face hardened and an angry glint came into his eyes. He arose from the table, so angrily and abruptly that he overturned the chair he'd been sitting in.

What he did then was totally outrageous, unheard of. He leaned across the table and slapped Helen Lathrup on the right cheek, putting such force into the blow that the *smack* was audible to everyone in the cafe.

There was complete silence for an instant; no one moved or spoke. Helen Lathrup sat rigid, an ugly redness suffusing the right side of her face from temple to throat.

Then a woman gasped and a man muttered: "Why doesn't somebody kill the bastard?"

It was exactly what Ralph felt like doing and he made no attempt to control the impulse.

Helen Lathrup's escort had straightened on delivering the blow and was just starting to swing about when Ralph reached him, caught hold of his right arm, making the turn complete, and sent his fist crashing into the man's face.

It was a nose-breaking kind of blow, aimed directly at the bastard's—he was certainly that!—nose and mouth and not at his jaw. Ralph didn't just want to drop him to the floor. He wanted to send him to the hospital.

He thought he heard a cartilage crunch and splinter, but he couldn't be sure.

The man made no attempt to fight back, to defend himself in any way. However much he may have wanted to do so, he was clearly incapable of it.

The blow had stunned him. He swayed for the barest instant, back and forth like a marionette on a wire that had gone suddenly slack, and then his knees gave way, and he crashed to the floor and rolled over on his face.

Ralph stood very still for an instant staring down at him, almost equally stunned but feeling a hot surge of triumph pulsing upward through his chest, rising to his brain, half-intoxicating him.

He was kneeling on the floor at the bastard's side, turning him over, looking with satisfaction at the thin trickle of

blood that was running from his mouth, when he felt the tugging.

Helen Lathrup was bending over also, close to Ralph, her breath hot on his face, her fingers biting into his arm, as if she knew that only pain could bring him quickly to his senses.

"We must leave," she breathed. "We *must*. Do you hear what I'm saying? I'm known here—they won't try to stop us. And he won't lodge a complaint. I'm sure of that. *John Darby wouldn't dare—*"

He raised his eyes and saw that she was deathly pale, that even the redness, where the vicious ugly bastard had slapped her, was starting to recede. He could see that it had left a slight welt, and all of his fury returned again for an instant, so that he could scarcely breathe.

She was trembling now and there was a pleading urgency in her eyes. "Hurry, before they feel they'd better send for the police, if only to protect themselves. We don't know how badly he's been hurt and it will take them a minute to find out. They won't try to stop us, I tell you, if we go right now."

In one way, it was like a nightmare that had come upon him in broad daylight, been thrust upon him unexpectedly when he had thought himself fully awake. And in another way, it was an intoxicating kind of trance, filled with sound and fury, but a trance from which he had no desire to escape.

Sitting in a cab at her side, with the sound and the fury behind him, it seemed suddenly that he was in another dimension of time and space, where nothing but miracles could take place. The fact that she was trembling still, her very agitation, seemed to make her more desirable, for it awoke in him protective instincts along with a feeling of adoration.

He had never thought that any woman could be quite so beautiful. He had never dared to hope that he would find himself so intimately involved with a famous editor who was also the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

For he *had* become intimately involved with her. He had fought another man in a very primitive way as her champion and defender, and it was impossible not to think of that as intimacy. It had brought him as close to her, if only for a moment, as a lover's embrace would have done.

Was not that kind of violence one pathway to intimacy? A murderer was intimate with his victim in a quite terrible way, even when physical love-making was completely absent. This was not that kind of intimacy. But in defending her and trying his best in a moment of savage rage to injure the man

who had struck her, hadn't he come close to her in much the same primitively intimate way? The only difference was—he hadn't come close to her with the intention of doing her harm. But the same savage currents had flowed for an instant between them, bringing them very close.

She was sitting so close to him that he could feel the warmth and yielding softness of her body through her thin summer clothes—a softness that was also a firmness, a roundness—and his temples began to pound, and a trip-hammer started up in his loins.

He glanced at her quickly and saw that her eyes were shining in a very strange way. A wild kind of excitement seemed to be stirring in her.

It should have given him warning, should have given him pause. It should have at least flashed across his mind that a woman can become wildly excited in the most primitive of all ways—by just the sight of two men fighting over her, willing and eager to kill for her. And even if one of the two had just struck her brutally and no longer desired her, just the fight alone . . .

But he did not realize that for many days.

For a fortnight they were together constantly, and his admiration for her had become like a singing flame, his every instinct had whispered that he had found the one perfect woman at last, and that nothing could mar for him the perfection of her body when she came, slender and white and trembling a little, into his arms.

It had not taken him long to discover that wherever Helen Lathrup went—people whispered that she went everywhere, but never in his presence had one of those whispers been heard—she stood out, was the center of all eyes. In a crowd, at concerts and recitals, in smoke-filled Beatnik-patronized expresso restaurants in the Village, on the exclusive, walled-off beaches of fashionable summer resorts there was and could be only one Helen Lathrup.

And when the blow finally came and she refused even to speak to him on the phone, when he surrendered all of his masculine pride and allowed himself to become defenseless and completely at her mercy, he had not at first completely despaired, or turned against her like some sick and humiliated dog backed into a corner and forced to bite at last.

He had gone on begging for her favors, for one more dinner date, one more hour alone with her, one last opportunity, however brief, to prove to her that their quarrels had been needless, and he would find a way to please her still.

He had gone on pleading even when he could no longer

deceive himself about her. Tormenting him gave her pleasure and she was not only the most beautiful but the cruelest woman he had ever known.

It was only when she attacked him where he was most vulnerable . . . in his work . . . it was only when she sneered at the novel she had once praised and returned it to him with blue-pencilings that made him no longer want to go on living . . . it was only then that he decided that he could endure no more, and that only her death would set him free.

Chapter V

LIEUTENANT OF DETECTIVES JOSEPH FENTON of Homicide West was remembering some of the others. The tragic and unusual cases, the sensational ones, the kind that stayed in the headlines for weeks and months and increased the circulation of newspapers from coast to coast by hundreds of millions of copies.

He sat staring down at his best lead so far, the only lead he could really sink his teeth into, wishing to hell he didn't have to remember. He drummed with his fingers on the desk top and hunched his shoulders a little. He was making a big mistake and he knew it. It was always a mistake to think back across the years when he had a job to do that called for a maximum of effort and concentration. It made him feel guilty and took the edge off his keenness. It was the worst kind of mistake but he kept on making it, because murder was always a shock to him.

Every time he saw a beautiful white body stretched out cold on a mortuary slab he remembered how he'd fainted at the sight of the first one, twenty-five years in the past when he'd been a young rookie. Just fallen to the floor and passed out, the way medical students sometimes do when they first have to dissect a cadaver—the organs are put in separate trays, each neatly labeled—and even experienced, case-hardened surgeons when an operation is especially sanguinary . . . like on the human eye, for instance. He'd read that somewhere, and he didn't doubt it, not for a moment.

Well . . . there was no danger of that happening to him now. He'd seen too many of the really gruesome ones, and the badly marked up ones, and the "floaters" with no fingerprints left to identify them by, every vestige of flesh dissolved away by weeks in the water, and . . . the beautiful unmarked ones who were in some respects the most tragic of all.

He had watched many of them carried away in baskets, feeling angry and resentful but forcing himself to remain calm, refusing to let the photographers and print men sus-

pect that he was dying himself a little inwardly, and had kept right on dying, inch by slow inch, across the years. His hair was white now and his face a little more heavily lined than it should have been, but otherwise it didn't show on the surface.

In some of them he had sensed a strange kind of peace—like a hand reaching out to touch him from beyond the grave; cool, steady, no longer feverish. But over most of them there still seemed to hover a penumbra of violence, a crying out for vengeance and retribution, a protest that even death could not wholly silence.

There was no need for him to remind himself that the Lathrup case was one of the explosively violent ones, with that strange residual violence remaining, making itself felt, every time his thoughts returned to it. Not only in the magazine office itself, with her loveliness only slightly marred by the small, dark hole in her temple—the wound had bled profusely, but the blood had not spread over her features—but later, when the body had been lifted into a sheet, and removed from the office, and the last flash-bulb had gone off and he'd been left alone with the medical examiner. He had been just the same as being completely alone, because Hunter had completed his preliminary examination, and his thoughts were back in a smoke-filled room where a poker game was in progress. To Hunter it had been no more than a routine interruption, breaking in on a winning hand and making him so morose and ill-tempered that Fenton, who had always found him a hard man to deal with, had shut up after asking him only two questions.

The residual violence was there, all right, a something in the room that seemed to point an accusing finger, to demand that justice be not too long delayed, to threaten reprisals if the vanished killer were not relentlessly tracked down and made to answer for his crime. It was a feeling Fenton had—nothing more. The threat of reprisal was not directed at him, but at the nebulous entity known as society. But it was always there, always present, a demand for retribution from beyond the grave, a screaming and a pleading, an insistence that justice be done or all hell would yawn for someone.

All right, it was only something he imagined, peculiar to him alone. But he knew from experience that it was unwise to take even imagined horrors lightly. They were part of a man's thinking, his inner life, his individuality. It was a mistake to take them *too* seriously, but just as bad to brush them aside as of no importance.

All right, the violence had been there, but in another way the office had seemed the opposite of crepe-somber. It had seemed still filled with her living presence, as if she were still

striding back and forth from her desk to the window, or sitting at her desk impatiently talking into the intercom.

That she had been a strong-willed, very determined woman despite her aspect of pulse-stirring femininity he'd strongly suspected the instant he'd entered the office with its costly but severely functional furnishings. The choice of furnishings had quite obviously not been influenced in any way by feminine whims and extravagances. No woman, surely, would have really liked such severity in the decor surrounding her. But a woman determined to keep her professional and private lives in separate compartments might well have made such a choice deliberately and taken pride in her ability to impose a severe discipline upon herself.

The conclusion he'd drawn, the kind of woman he'd pictured her as being, hadn't been based on anything very solid. It had been a mere hunch at first, a gathering together of intangibles. But the few questions he'd had an opportunity to ask the editorial staff immediately on his arrival had completely confirmed it. She'd been a considerable woman, and had ruffled a great deal of fur the wrong way, apparently, and there had probably been some baring of claws.

Well . . . all right. The Lathrup slaying was one of the sensational ones. It would arouse widespread indignation if it were not solved quickly and even more indignation if it remained unsolved for the next fifty years, as well it might. If the murderer was caught and stood trial—the newspapers would have no reason to complain and it would enrich a great many other people in a dozen or more ways, perhaps even the murderer himself if he wrote the story of his life for a major news syndicate the week before he went to the chair.

He couldn't take it with him—but what the hell. There'd be the thrill of making all that money overnight. Or was the stipulation that a murderer couldn't profit from his crime a bugaboo in that department too? Thirty years on the Force, and he still didn't know for sure.

Well . . . there was nothing to be gained by shaking his head and dwelling with anger and pity on the tragic circumstances of a crime he could have done nothing to prevent. Her beauty, so cruelly hidden now from all but the eyes of a mortician—there would be a brief moment when it would be again on view—every aspect of her personal life; the way she'd walked and talked and held herself, her wardrobe, her personal likes and dislikes, the friends she'd made, the enemies who did not think too highly of her, her jewels, her rumored affairs, her choice of restaurants, had all become the emotional property of the public.

Not too short a life perhaps. But to die at thirty-six always meant . . . many of the great moments, the moments of complete fulfillment and happiness, however brief, which every human being born into the world had a right to look forward to, would never be experienced at all. A cruel and tragic outrage had been perpetrated upon her, cutting off her life in mid-stream.

That the outrage could be attributed to the inscrutable workings of Fate or Destiny or whatever you cared to call the big, continuously revolving wheel . . . that it struck down thousands of women just as beautiful every day all over the world . . . that illness and accidents took a far more grievous toll . . . did not diminish by one whit the tragedy of it. And when it was brought about by a deliberate act of willful criminal violence it had a special quality which made it seem a hundred times more cruel and unjust.

Fenton looked down at the three letters, spread fanwise on the desk before him. Each was neatly typewritten, neatly creased and just as neatly signed in a firm, precise hand. *Michael Willard*.

An article writer, and a good one, if the staff at Eaton-Lathrup were right about him and there was no reason to doubt their competence. A free-lance article writer who had quarreled violently with Helen Lathrup three weeks before her death. Fenton had found the letters in the slain woman's desk.

Each was a hot-tempered letter and one was extremely violent, not quite threatening Lathrup with bodily harm but strongly hinting that such harm might be visited upon her if she did not correct what the writer claimed was a *very serious* mistake.

It seemed incredible to Fenton that anyone, no matter how enraged, would send a prominent editor such threats and sign the letters with his own name.

The man had practically started himself on a walk to the chair. And that particularly irritated Fenton, because Willard would have to be captured before he could complete the walk, and a three-state alert had proved as ineffective in locating him as a fast-moving city dragnet and three Westchester roadblocks in the vicinity of his suburban home . . .

Fenton was still frowning down at the letters, the only strong lead he had, when someone said from the doorway: "He's given himself up."

Fenton looked up quickly, annoyed, the statement not registering immediately, as First Grade Detective John Gallison had apparently assumed it would.

Gallison was a big man, almost as big as Fenton, and

he had much the same look about him—the look of a man aged in some ways beyond his years, but with a curiously unlined face, and the almost boyish aspect that seems to hover until late in life about big, ruggedly built men with beat-up features who never take the trouble to comb their hair.

“What is it, Gallison?” Fenton asked, and then the words themselves penetrated, and he rose from his desk, a look of stunned disbelief in his eyes.

“Is it Willard you’re talking about?”

“Who else?” Gallison said, coming into the office and sitting down opposite Fenton in a chair that was two sizes too small for him.

“He came in and gave himself up. He said he knew we’d found the letters, and it would only be prolonging the agony for him to hide out in a furnished room somewhere and live in fear until we closed in on him. He thought of heading north into Canada, or south into Mexico, and even of hopping a freighter to South America. That’s what he said, believe it or not. I’m practically quoting his exact words.”

“Well, what made him change his mind? We’ve had such a tough job tracing him he could have gotten all the way to Brazil by this time. If you’re going to tell me he was afraid the Brazilian non-extradition policy doesn’t cover murder . . . skip it. I’m not in a very humorous mood right now.”

Gallison smiled slightly. “He said he just wasn’t capable of it. Too sensitive, too imaginative, too afraid of life in the buff to take it by the horns that way. I’m still quoting him. He said he was never cut out to be a fugitive. Anything connected with the police terrifies him. If a Government agent should call on him about some trivial, completely innocent matter he’d have a heart attack. He just can’t take that sort of thing. He has made a full confession. He says he killed her because she pulled an outrageous gyp on him.”

“Yes, I know,” Fenton said. “It’s what he claims in these letters. He claims he wrote a series of articles for her about juvenile delinquency, and I guess you saw the major, six-million-dollar movie that was based on his material. The Clark Gable—Monroe sort of thing. And now it’s on TV, a two-year contract for a weekly series and I think the sponsor is General Motors, but I’m not sure. In case you don’t know, all of that is about as big-time as you can get. It would make practically any writer feel entitled to walk down Fifth Avenue shoulder to shoulder with the biggest names in TV and stop for a moment to shake the paw of the MGM lion. The lions in front of the library would look that way to him.”

"He says he didn't get a cent out of it," Gallison said. "Not one single penny."

"That's hard to believe," Fenton said. "It seems he sold the Eaton-Lathrup Publications all rights to the material. I haven't looked too deeply into the technicalities involved in such transactions but I'm pretty sure that 'all rights' means exactly what it says. If a magazine buys material on that basis it is entitled to all of the profits accruing from subsequent re-sales, to TV, the movies or whatever."

"Willard practically admits that," Gallison said. "In fact—"

"Wait a minute," Fenton said, a little impatiently. "Let me finish. It's my understanding that not many of the really big magazine groups buy all rights. There's usually a contract involved, with a stipulation in it concerning the rights. And even when they do buy all rights they're seldom one hundred percent legalistic about it. They'll often lean backwards to see that the author gets a break, gets at least a slice of the pie if the work passes into the so-called big time. I don't know how Lathrup felt about that or just what her policy was, of course. But if he claims he's been gyped out of money he's entitled to in a strictly *legal* sense, I don't believe he has a legal leg to stand on. Not if he sold the group all rights, with no reservations whatever."

"That's just it," Gallison said. "That's where he claims she took advantage of him. He says that, like plenty of other writers, he's no businessman. You'd laugh to hear the way he's been going on about that, if he wasn't a self-confessed murderer. Nothing a murderer says or does is ever funny. But the way he put it would have gone over big on a TV comic program. He claims he has no more business sense than a two-year-old; would sign any contract that was pushed under his nose without looking at even the large print, let alone the fine. He claims he's—well, the term he used was 'a commercial imbecile.' He takes a sort of pride in it. And he thought she understood that some writers were like that—some of the biggest names, in fact, in the writing business."

"They can't even bring themselves to glance twice at a contract. It's not important to them, they're way off in the clouds somewhere, figuring what their characters are going to say and do in the next chapter."

"He could be right about that," Fenton said, sighing. "Up to a point anyway. I've known two or three big-name mystery writers in my time, and my wife sort of—well, collects them. Writers in general, I mean, along with painters and musicians. It's an odd hobby for the wife of an old police warhorse, but show me just one thing I can really understand about women and I'll get you a lieutenantcy tomorrow, if I

have to go down to Center Street myself and beg for it. You'd be the biggest asset the Homicide Squad could possibly have."

It was Gallison's turn to sigh. "I guess I'm the way Willard is about contracts when it comes to understanding women," he said. "You seem to forget I've been married myself for fifteen years. Every day my wife is a different kind of woman. But the big difference came between the day before and the day after I married her."

"It's usually that way," Fenton said. "You wake up and discover your wife is a human being."

His expression sobered abruptly. "Where is Willard now? In a cell or still under the lights. If you've got a signed confession—"

"We've got it, all right—signed, sealed and delivered."

"So you just went ahead without even consulting me, is that it? What am I supposed to be around here—a rookie fresh from the asphalt?"

"It couldn't be helped, Lieutenant . . . It all happened so fast."

"John! You're asking for trouble, boy!"

"All right then, Joe. I swear it really couldn't be helped. It all just poured out of him, so fast we had trouble in taking it down and had to ask him to read it over three times. We wouldn't have laid a finger on him, anyway. You know that as well as I do."

"Sometimes I wonder. A cop can get terribly angry at times and once, about four years ago, I saw something I deliberately shut my eyes to, and I've never regretted it. They had this . . . human animal . . . stripped to the waist in the tank room and were . . . well, never mind. He committed a brutal sex crime and when they were through with him . . . they had a full confession. I just turned on my heels and walked out."

"We still wouldn't have laid a finger on Willard."

"I know, I know. I guess I'd better have a talk with him."

Willard was sitting alone in a cell that dwarfed him a little, despite its narrowness, because he was both a very small and a very frail-looking man. Fenton put his age at about forty-five, although he could have been four or five years older.

He didn't look very much like a writer, but Fenton knew that few writers conformed to the picture people had of them. In general, they looked remarkably like everybody else.

Willard was about five-feet-two in his socks, and he was in them now because both his belt and his shoes had been

taken away from him. He had thoughtful gray eyes, and rather handsome features and there was nothing in the least aggressive-looking about him. He was hard to picture with a gun in his hand, taking deliberate aim and shooting a defenseless woman through the head. It was difficult even, to think of him as a man with a violent temper who could write threatening letters or resort to any kind of extreme physical violence, even under the goadings of rage.

He looked up quickly when Fenton and Gallison entered the cell and then got slowly to his feet.

Fenton frowned a little and gestured toward the cot upon which he had been sitting.

"Sit down, please," he said. "No sense in standing. We're just going to have a brief talk and then you can see your lawyer, if you wish. You don't have to say a word, if you prefer to wait until he gets here. It's my duty to tell you that, even though you've signed a confession. Anything you may decide to tell us can be used as evidence in court, in addition to the information in the statement you've just signed. Is that clear to you?"

Willard nodded and sat down again on the edge of the cot. "What does all that matter now?" he said. "I'm going to plead guilty anyway. I killed her because—well, you don't know what kind of woman she was, so you probably won't be able to understand how a man can be driven to desperation—"

"I've just read the statement you made," Fenton said. "It doesn't tell me what kind of woman she was, but it tells me a great deal about you. I've read the letters you wrote to her as well. You seem to feel that you've been very shabbily treated. I would like to know a little more about that."

"What more can I say? What more can I possibly say? When a writer who has lived most of his life on a very modest income loses at least a hundred thousand dollars—"

"You mean . . . your rightful share in what your series of articles has brought the Eaton-Lathrup publications in cash so far? Or will bring them within the next few months? Or merely what you *believe* should be your rightful share, putting aside for the moment all legal considerations. You signed a contract giving the concern all rights, didn't you?"

"Yes, but she gave me to believe—"

"Just what did she give you to believe?"

"That she was prepared to be very generous about the entire matter if the articles should make a great deal of money for the magazines. She wouldn't hold me to the strict letter of the contract. She'd waive the 'all rights' clause. A great many magazines do that. It's taken for granted—"

"I see. But are you sure about that? Don't you think you should have made sure before signing the contract, if you had any doubts at all? There's nothing in the least unethical about a magazine group buying all rights, you know. It's their privilege under the law."

"But she knew how impractical most writers are! She knew how—well, yes, even infantile they can be about such things. And she made me feel that she was my friend, that she'd never dream of taking advantage of me in any way."

"But she didn't, if you signed a contract giving the concern all rights, unqualifiedly, with no strings attached."

"And I still say she did! She led me on, deceived me. She—"

He was on his feet again now and some of the mildness, the constrained look, the look that *didn't* make him look like a man who might be capable of resorting to violence under stress, was gone from his eyes.

"She led me on, I tell you. There was something about her, something I mistook for great generosity and warmth—"

Fenton looked at him steadily for a moment, carefully weighing what he was about to say. He asked the question in a quiet tone, but he knew that it was emotionally charged, and strategically just the right question to put to the man at that particular moment.

"Were you her lover, Willard?"

Willard flushed scarlet and lowered his eyes.

"Were you?"

Willard compressed his lips and said nothing, but a look of torment had come into his eyes.

"You slept with her, didn't you, Willard?"

"Yes, damn you!" There was a look of naked agony in the frail man's eyes now, and the words came out choked with rage.

Then, quite suddenly, he was trembling violently, clenching his fists like a man deranged.

"Why don't you ask me if she was good in bed? Or if I was? Haven't you a spark of decency in you? I've heard of the third degree but a question like that is worse. Oh, damn you to hell!"

"Why, Willard? I mean—why do you feel it's such an indecent question, a question I've no right to ask? You've confessed to a very serious crime. You've confessed to—I'm going to use another police term I hope won't shock your sensitive spirit too much—you've confessed to what we call the Big One. You can't stand on the niceties when you've taken a human life—or question the right of a policeman, sworn to uphold the law, to ask what, under ordinary circum-

stances, you might consider a damned impertinent question, an invasion of privacy. Sensitive women, wives and mothers, have been asked far franker questions on the witness stand. There are times when every question must be asked and answered, no matter how much it may anger you or make you writhe."

Perhaps, deep in Willard's nature, there was a submerged substratum of logic . . . a willingness to give ground before an incontestable fact or an argument he could not hope to win. Fenton knew that to be true of the more volatile types . . . on some occasions, at any rate.

Most of the anger went out of Willard's eyes and he sat down again on the edge of the cot, and cradled his head in his arms.

Fenton took a different tack. "The statement you signed wasn't too clear in a few respects," he said, casting a glance at Gallison that was generously forgiving, but still a little on the withering side. "I'd like to go over a few of the details with you. Just what happened when you entered the office and Miss Lathrup looked up and saw you standing there with a gun in your hand? Just what did you say to her before you shot her—and what did she say to you? Was she genuinely frightened from the start? It would be strange if she wasn't, but I'd like to have you tell me more about it in your own words. There are a few other questions I'd like to have answered. Take your time, try to think clearly. I'm not pressuring you. It's just that we've got to be convinced that every statement in your confession is true."

Willard looked up quickly, some of the anger sweeping back into his eyes. "Why should you need to be convinced? Don't you sometimes slap around poor devils who are completely innocent just to get *any* kind of a confession out of them?"

"You've been reading too many paperback novels," Fenton said.

"I'm not a fiction writer," Willard said. "I haven't read a paperback novel in five years."

"You should," Fenton said, wryly. "Some of the strongest, most realistic writing in America today is being done in that field. But cops get slandered in them a helluva lot. Not always, but sometimes. Some of the writers don't seem to like cops too well. They are often very sensitive, imaginative guys themselves and they don't like what cops sometimes do, even when they try to be very hard-boiled and call a spade a spade. And I won't deny that cops sometimes do step a little over the line. But it isn't as bad as you might think. Not nearly as bad."

"I've only your word for that."

"You may take my word for it. I've been on the force for thirty years. You get sadists in any department of life—I'll challenge anyone to deny that. And if an innocent man happens to get a bad break—comes up against the wrong kind of cop—it can be very bad. You could justify a certain degree of cop hatred in almost anyone on other grounds. The world we live in isn't for children. If cops were mild-mannered intellectuals, or held completely modern, psychiatric views about crime—and the causes of crime—society in general might be in for trouble on a day-to-day realistic basis."

"It might not do any harm at all if we gave it a try," Willard said.

"On a theoretical level there are times when I'm inclined to agree with you," Fenton said. "But there's another part of my nature that says there has to be a kind of binding cement to hold society together meanwhile—I mean, until Utopia's here. Cops have to be picked for toughness—to a certain extent. But that doesn't mean they can't be completely fair. A lot of them lean backwards to be fair, will be a big brother to young hoodlums if they think there's an ounce of decency left in them and all they need is a little of that 'not being completely rejected' feeling to give them a different slant on things. You know what I mean. But some cops can be sadistic, mean, even downright vicious. I would be the last to deny it."

Fenton smiled, trying his best to bring a little warmth into his words, to get the man on the cot to trust him. "There are times when I don't like cops myself, any better than you do. It's a very human feeling. Could I go any further than that, considering that I'm supposed to be just about as tough as they come in some respects, being a Lieutenant of Detectives on the Homicide Squad?"

"What do you want to know?" Willard asked. "What do you want me to tell you? I walked into her office and shot her dead. Isn't that all down on the record now? Haven't I confessed to it?"

"It still needs a little filling out," Fenton said. "Suppose we start at the beginning and just go over it all again, step by step."

A half hour later Fenton sat again at his desk, drumming with his fingers on the big double-file spread out before him.

Gallison hadn't seated himself this time. He stood awkwardly shifting his weight from foot to foot, and casting an occasional glance toward the window and at the large framed photograph of an Inspector in uniform on the opposite wall—

Inspector Henry Millard, who had been dead for twenty years. He did not seem to want continuously to meet and hold Fenton's level, almost accusing gaze.

"He didn't do it," Fenton said. "I knew that the instant I started questioning him, but I had to make sure, beyond the faintest possibility of a doubt. All of the things he told me—and at least one-third of the details in his signed confession—are completely wide of the mark. He wasn't there, didn't shoot her, couldn't even tell me how she'd looked in falling fifteen seconds after the shot was fired. How she must have looked, I mean, for her head and shoulders to strike the desk the way they did, upsetting an ashtray, and to be consistent with the position she was in when Miss Prentiss found her. And the body wasn't moved—not a half-inch—until we arrived.

"Other things—a dozen, at least. I had the impression he wasn't even sure just where the bullet had entered her head. Oh, a murderer can be mistaken about many things, way off in some respects. But not quite that far off. Not nearly that far off, in fact, when he's studied everything published in the papers about the case, and has been in that office many times. There were details we didn't tell the reporters, details he couldn't possibly have known and he was completely wrong about all of them, with one or two exceptions. And that only strengthens the case against him—the very damaging evidence which proves that he wasn't the killer and couldn't possibly have been."

Fenton nodded, his fingers still tapping on the file. "You'd naturally expect him to be right about one or two things, even if they didn't appear in the papers. He's no dumb-bell. He couldn't have written those juvenile delinquency articles and foster-fathered a major movie if he was. He'd naturally be pretty good at guessing games. It's always the exceptions which strengthen, lend real weight, to that kind of rule."

Fenton cleared his throat. "It's like in medicine. You take a very rare, unusual kind of disease. Say there are twenty symptoms which are very diagnostic of that particular disease. But one of them only occurs in one case of the disease out of a hundred. And the patient has that one symptom, along with the others. Now . . . let's say that in the whole United States, in the course of the year, only about two hundred people die of that rare disease.

"Don't you see what I'm driving at Gallison—or do you? It would have to mean that only about two people die from that disease with that particular symptom attached to it every year out of a nation of a hundred and seventy-five million people. According to the law of averages, how likely would the patient be to have the disease? The very symptom which does

sometimes occur in connection with the disease—but rarely—which you might think would strengthen the diagnosis, actually helps to weaken it, to make it so unlikely as to practically eliminate the possibility that the patient could have it.”

“So it’s medicine he’s talking about now,” Gallison said, unable to keep a slight trace of acidity out of his voice, but wishing, almost instantly, that he hadn’t spoken at all.

“I only used that as an example,” Fenton said, his voice sharpening slightly. “But it spells the difference between a crack medical diagnostician and a bad one. It’s always those little, subtle intangibles you have to take into consideration. And that’s really just another way of saying you have to have imagination to be either a good cop or a good doctor.”

A slightly wistful look came into Fenton’s eyes. “I sometimes wish I’d taken up medicine. Healing people is much better than wallowing in the kind of ugly—Oh, well, skip it.”

“But you can’t clear a self-confessed murderer completely on that basis alone,” Gallison protested. “His confession could be off in a hundred ways, and he could still be guilty. At least . . . it would remain a possibility. You practically just admitted that yourself. If we had other evidence . . . and we do have a little additional evidence . . . we could still take it before a jury.”

“You mean the DA could,” Fenton said, his voice becoming tinged with the kind of impatience a grammar-school teacher might have displayed toward a pupil who had just pulled a boner in geography. “What are you trying to do—add to our burdens? The DA could take it before a jury, all right. But he’d get his ears pinned so far back that the next time he ran for election it would be as a dog-catcher. Did you ever hear of an alibi, Gallison? Or is that too involved a point of law for you?”

Lieutenant Fenton sighed heavily and his voice softened a little. “Sorry, Gallison. That was a lousy thing for me to say. But at least you know that I wasn’t pulling rank on you. It’s something I’ve never done or never will do—unless you come in here and toss your badge on the desk and I have to hand it back to you and tell you to go through channels.”

“Okay, Joe. I understand. Don’t let it worry you.”

“A policeman shouldn’t have nerves, I guess. But things have been moving a little too fast for me in this case.”

“Just how good is his alibi?” Gallison asked.

“Iron-plated,” Fenton said. “And of course it isn’t *his* alibi in a strict sense, because he didn’t even present it to us. It’s an alibi we’ll have to force him to accept as absolute proof that he couldn’t have done it, because we want him to walk

out of here without hallucinating when we release him. Otherwise someone might get the idea that this is a side wing of Bellevue. We've done our best so far to create that impression anyway."

"You mean—you think he may be . . . a psycho?"

"Yes—and no," Fenton said.

"That's sure enlightening. Gets right back to what you just said about medical diagnosis. Maybe you should have been a psychiatrist, Joe."

"Maybe I'd better explain. He's not only a very brilliant writer of true-fact crime articles for the better magazines, with the stress placed on juvenile delinquency—he happens to be pretty much of a confirmed alcoholic. The wild binge kind—once in every three or four weeks he loses a week-end. Completely, goes absolutely blotto."

"Like in that Jackson novel that made such a big splash about twelve or fifteen years ago, you mean? I remember the movie even better than I do the book, but I read the book—"

"We seem to be very literary today," Fenton said. "Everywhere we turn in this case we come up against famous novels, or big-name writers or major movies or guys with a grievance against female editors. I suppose that's only to be expected—considering what kind of murder it was and where it took place. But it's hard to understand why so much of it has to drift our way in a single day. To answer your question—yes, he's the *Lost Week-End* kind of heavy drinker."

"Then why did you say 'yes—and no,' when I asked you if he was a psycho?"

"Because it's not a term you can use loosely when you're talking about alcoholics. What I guess I should say is—it's not a term you should use *unambiguously*. It had to be 'Yes—and no,' with a lot of half-way stages in between. There is such a thing as alcoholic insanity, you know—a clear-cut psychosis with very definite symptoms. You can get alcoholic softening of the brain, which is something else again, because it's physical as well as mental and it's usually fatal. You can be just a periodic drinker—not a hopeless alcoholic at all, although you'll be headed that way—and have the D.T.'s occasionally. Or you can be a very heavy, constant drinker and never have the D.T.'s.

"It all depends on how alcohol affects you. Just a little alcohol, for instance, could give Edgar Allan Poe the D.T.'s. And when a man has the D.T.'s, he's a psychotic, if only temporarily. Or behaves like one in all respects. And just constant, heavy drinking can make a man behave so erratically at times you could practically call him a psycho. And

when a man is dead drunk, under any circumstances, would you say his behavior was merely neurotic?

"The thing you've got to remember about heavy drinking—periodic or otherwise—is that one of the things it most often does is bring about memory lapses. Very serious memory lapses—prolonged blackout periods. And that especially applies to the *Lost Week-End* kind of drinker."

"So Willard had a memory lapse and couldn't remember whether he shot her or not. Is that what you're trying to say?"

Fenton shook his head. "Nothing of the sort. You're forgetting about the alibi, apparently."

"Sorry I interrupted."

"Think nothing of it. But I'd be very grateful if you'd listen carefully. I'm just giving you a few simple facts about alcoholism."

"Not as a warning, I hope. I hardly ever touch the stuff."

"I'll just bet. I might have gone for that idea—that he couldn't remember if he'd shot or not, if we hadn't got all this new information about him just in the last hour. He's had memory lapses going back ten or twelve years. He's been in the Bellevue alcoholic ward seven times. And he just happened to be there on the morning of the murder. He was picked up the night before in a bar on West Eighth Street, after a brawl that was a little on the special side. He was roaring drunk and he blackened the eye of one of his drinking companions and knocked the other down, almost giving him a concussion.

"They were good friends of his, so they covered up for him. No police charge was lodged against him. But he was carted off to Bellevue and he remained there for two days. I don't believe in murder by thought control, do you?"

"But why did he confess? It makes no sense at all to me."

"Doesn't it? It makes plenty of sense to me and I'm sure it will to you if you'll give it a little thought. You know what guilt feelings can do to an alcoholic, don't you? You must have arrested at least a dozen drunks in the last ten years who were burning up with impatience to confess. To homicides they didn't and couldn't have committed."

"Yeah, that's true enough," Gallison said.

"You saw what she meant to him, how he felt about her. When I just asked him if he'd slept with her it set off a trigger mechanism in his brain. It was like a delayed time bomb. He was dead sober when he turned himself in and confessed, but alcoholics can be dead sober and still have a kind of emotional hangover—sometimes lasting for days after a real wild binge on a lost week-end. He was—still is—in a very abnormal state."

"But why should he feel so guilty about his relations with her?" Gallison asked. "Why the threatening letters. You mean that he didn't actually feel she gyped him on that article sale to the movies and TV? If he didn't, he sure is a great little actor. He should have played a leading role in the movie himself."

"Oh, he felt she gyped him, all right. And that increased his load of guilt. He couldn't remember just when he'd last spent two days in Bellevue—not the exact date. He thought he'd gone to the Eaton-Lathrup publications on the morning of the murder, had a showdown with her and shot her dead. He might not have been completely sure about it, but he couldn't forget his earlier memory lapses. Some alcoholics feel guilty on just that basis alone. They know they're subject to memory lapses and they're always wondering what terrible crime they just might conceivably have committed during the blotto stage.

"And every aspect of his relations with her was steeped in guilt, apparently. Just being her lover made him feel guilty, apparently. You saw how he flared up when I questioned him about it. It sounds crazy, but there are a few men like that left in this day and age. A Puritanic hangover that alcoholism makes a real fighting issue, if it's ever openly discussed.

"Don't you see? She probably threw him over, rejected him, told him he wasn't her idea of a lover boy just about the time that big movie sale went through. So he had a double reason for hating her—a triple reason, in fact, since he felt guilty about just having an affair with her—and it all came out in the wash when he walked in here and confessed to a crime he didn't commit.

"But how about that movie and TV angle."

Fenton frowned, staring down at the double-file on his desk. "That's the screwiest part of it, the part that really ought to be used in a book sometime, by one of those mystery writers I told you about—two writers I know very well and would probably give me a percentage for bringing it to their attention, if I wasn't more or less incorruptible regarding Homicide Squad files. Fact is . . . she leaned backwards to be fair, to see that he made a fairly large sum out of the movie sale . . . even though he wasn't legally entitled to anything at all. He did get pretty close to his hundred thousand dollars."

Gallison whistled softly. "Brother, that's hard to believe. What happened to the dough? He's still living in fairly modest circumstances. He has a small house just north of White

Plains, as you know, but he bought it several years ago and it's mortgaged right up to the hilt."

"You've hung around bars quite a bit, haven't you?" Fenton said, smiling a little. "I mean, just in line of duty, of course. Haven't you heard guys say: 'I made three hundred dollars last week, but it was burning a hole in my pocket. I blew it all in one night.'"

"Sure, sure," Gallison admitted. "I've heard guys talking that way often enough. But a hundred thousand dollars—"

"Not quite, probably. Seventy thousand would be closer, I should imagine. And income tax would take a big slice. Half of the rest could go as a feedback."

"What do you mean . . . a feedback?"

"Money squandered on her while he was still in her good graces, as her number one lover boy. That would also give him an additional reason to hate her, when he thought about it afterwards. Know what it costs to take a woman with her expensive tastes out five nights a week, for perhaps three months?"

Gallison shrugged. "How should I know? I get upset sometimes when my wife orders three cocktails before dinner at a midtown bar."

"He's probably been living very high for the past three or four months, ever since the picture was sold and she gave him a slice of what it brought in cold cash. Just why she did it I can't imagine. Maybe there actually was a generous streak in her, and she really thought the concern owed him something, despite the contract. She could even have been a little in love with him at one time. He's not a bad looking guy, remember. And she probably knew she'd get quite a bit of it back in jewelry, furs and expensive entertainment."

Gallison whistled again. "I'm beginning to get the picture," he said. "If the dough actually was burning a hole in his pocket and there are plenty of guys like that. And if he had blotto periods—"

"Well, that winds it up," Fenton said. "We'll have to release him, of course. No reason to hold him now. The poor little guy. In a way, I feel sorry for him. It's no joke to be an alcoholic and feel *that* guilty about getting himself a piece of very high-class tail."

"You're not fooling me, Joe. I bet you have a Puritan streak yourself. The only woman you've been interested in for the past fifteen years is the glamor doll you married."

"It could be," Fenton conceded. "My father was a farmer in Iowa and he went to church every Sunday, rain or shine. It's something you never entirely outgrow. But if I ever hear you shooting your mouth off about it—"

It was Gallison's turn to smile. "Don't worry, Joe. The secret's safe with me. I'm just glad I'm not that way."

"I see. You step out now and then—just tell your wife it's a double-duty assignment that will keep you up until dawn."

"I didn't say that. Hell, there's a difference between loyalty and the kind of act our little friend put on. He actually blushed, or didn't you notice, when you threw it up to him."

"Some day you'll become tolerant of every kind of human behavior," Fenton said. "We all have a chink in our armor somewhere."

"I suppose, I suppose."

"You don't have to suppose. It's goddam true. A guy can be a prig in one respect and a liberal-minded, very intelligent kind of human being in another. We're all jackasses one third of the time, at least."

"It's funny," Gallison said. "One of the Eaton-Lathrup editors is an alcoholic too. That Ellers guy. Do you suppose he has blackouts now and then?"

"With nothing more than that to go on," Fenton said, "we'd have no justification for suspecting him. Something may turn up, of course. We'll see. We've got a lot of digging to do, and our best lead so far has gone out the window. I didn't say that all confirmed alcoholics worry or feel guilty about what they may have done during a lost week-end. Only a few of them do, the ones who have criminal impulses or a strong reason for hating someone even when they're sober. We'll see, we'll see. Right now—"

The phone at Fenton's elbow started ringing.

He picked up the receiver, listened for a moment and re-cradled it, a very odd look coming into his eyes.

"Now nothing can surprise me," he said. "A first-class lead goes out the window and one just as promising comes flying in, like one of those goddam pigeons that are always messing up the sill."

"What is it?" Gallison asked. "Or would you rather make a production out of keeping me guessing?"

"Well . . . there's a young writer whose work Helen Lathrup took very seriously at first and then tore into, ripping his self-esteem to shreds. I got that from the editor you just mentioned, Ellers. They were also sort of close and cozy for a time and then she refused to even see him when he phoned. She slammed his book manuscript back with a hell of a harsh criticism—Ellers read what she wrote. He also saw the manuscript and thought it was pretty good."

"Sounds sort of familiar," Gallison said. "Like the same retord almost, but with a different groove maybe in it some-

where. I mean, she sure was an expert in the tease line. Give them every encouragement, the better to watch them writhe."

Fenton nodded. "Yeah . . . in general I'd say yes. We've run into it twice before and in questioning the office staff I got the impression I'd just scratched the surface. She covered a lot of territory with her teasing. Except that most women who fall into that category either won't let a man touch them or won't go beyond a kiss. She was very generous with her encouragement, apparently."

"You mean she was willing to start off as if she was playing for keeps?"

"If you want to put it that way. What puzzles me a little is that she didn't have to. Just one long, lingering look and most men would have been hooked, right through the gullet like a frog when you use it for bait. Ever fish for bass with frogs, Gallison? Sometimes they climb out of the water on a nearby bank and stare back, looking forlorn and pathetic as hell—pathetic enough to tear your heart out. But they're still hooked."

"So is the fisherman—if he doesn't catch any bass. Fisherwoman in this case, of course. What did she hope to gain by it?"

Fenton shrugged. "Who can say, exactly? Probably the same kind of cruel pleasure most women who fall into that category get from keeping a man dangling. Only, as I say, she seems to have been exceptionally generous-minded about it, at least at first. Women like that really fall into three categories. The first is scared stiff when a man so much as touches them, but they enjoy leading men on. The second had some kind of trauma in childhood which prevents them from warming up to men, but they'd genuinely like to be generous and don't intend to be deliberately cruel. The third kind is like Lathrup. What they are, basically, is men-destroying women. They can be both generous and cruel, and aren't actually repelled by men physically. They'll go all the way, but the hooked frog had better watch out."

"You know what, Joe? You really should have been a psychiatrist."

"Suppose we drop all that for the moment. You asked me what I'd found out. You want to hear it, or don't you?"

"Why not? We're supposed to be working together on a homicide case."

"All right, here it is. I put a trailer on the young writer. Not a shadow, no Squad close-check. Just did a little more digging, keeping him in view. He was just one of twenty suspects. Thought nothing important would turn up. His

name's Ralph Gilmore, by the way. I gave you a brief run-down on him. Have you forgotten?"

"Naturally not," Gallison said. "But when you just called him a young writer—"

"All right, you remember. Good. I won't ask you how much you remember, because I went into most of this before and you failed to remember straight off. But anyhow, the digging paid off. All Gilmore did, about ten days ago, was go into a pawnshop on Park Row and buy himself a gun. The kind of under-the-counter deal that infuriates me, and this is one pawnbroker who'll wish he'd thought twice—or three times. He'll have the book thrown at him."

Gallison narrowed his eyes. "What kind of gun was it, Joe."

"What kind do you suppose? It couldn't have been any other kind, could it? She was shot with a forty-five, and if he'd bought a pearl-handled woman's gun did you think for a moment I'd have looked as stunned as I did just now?"

"You might have. It would have shown he had murder on his mind. At the last moment, he might have decided that a big automatic was what he really needed."

"Yeah, I can well imagine."

"I'm serious in one way," Gallison said. "You can fit silencers on smaller guns. An amateur doesn't usually commit murder with a forty-five—a big Luger cannon or anything like that—unless he just happens to have such a weapon lying around . . . a war souvenir, say."

"You can't argue with a fact. Gilmore bought a big, long-barreled gun. Maybe the pawnbroker had only one gun to sell and that was it. Try buying a gun from a pawnbroker sometime. Gilmore was one of the lucky ones."

"And now you think his luck is running out?"

A weary, slightly embittered look came into Fenton's eyes. "How should I know, at this stage? If I was in his shoes I'd be plenty worried. But our job is simply to do what we can and take nothing for granted . . . until we've checked and double-checked."

"Then we'd better get right after it."

"I think so," Fenton said.

Chapter VI

RUTH PORGES COULD NOT have explained, even to herself, why the scream had unnerved her so. Like the others, she'd been unable to identify the voice. But she did have a faint, will-of-the-wisp kind of suspicion that it was Lynn Prentiss who had cried out in shock and horror. It hadn't sounded like Susan's voice at the desk or the voice of Joyce Sanderson from the linotype room.

And somehow, all morning, she's been expecting something alarming to happen. She couldn't have explained that either. It was just that—well, things were coming to a head as far as Lathrup was concerned. She was reaching the saturation point in arousing bitter anger and adding fuel to long-standing grievances.

Ruth Porges had only to close her eyes to bring it all back. She'd thought that what had happened had been filed securely away in her mind; was just a collapsed file covered with dust, the pages so yellow and brittle they'd crumble if she thumbed through them again.

But now she knew better. It wasn't that old a file. It had all happened less than ten months ago, and it had left a raw red wound in her mind. It could be put in very simple terms—no file was really needed. It would have sounded like a musical comedy refrain if it hadn't been so cruelly tragic. Over and over, echoing still.

She stole my man. Went right after him, with no scruples and no holds barred. And when she discovered that he wasn't too accomplished a lover—not too good in bed, why not say it?—she cast him aside like an old shoe.

Ruth Porges leaned back and shut her eyes and let the memories come flooding back.

He was wearing a gray trench coat and his hair was short-cropped, and he looked handsome and distinguished enough to make her think of Paris in the spring and she was sitting alone at a table in a Left Bank cafe, and there he was coming toward her, smiling his handsome, slightly crooked smile and it was just three years after the end of World War II.

But of course it hadn't been like that at all. She'd met him

at a party in the Village and he'd been a writer of a sort and a painter of a sort and knew quite a few important people in the musical world. As far as she knew he hadn't sold a single story or article to a magazine and he certainly wasn't wealthy, but he always seemed to have enough money to take a girl out for the evening and spend perhaps fifteen or twenty dollars and he never tried to economize by suggesting they go to little Italian restaurants where you could get red wine by the bottle and the bill never exceeded three or four dollars.

No lavish spender, no Rainbow Room sort of escort, but her own salary was large enough to enable her to go to the Stork Club occasionally in the company of girl friends with escorts to spare, so she didn't begrudge him a fairly modest evening's entertainment when he seemed to like her so much.

And he did like her—no question about that. Roger Bendiner, the only man who'd ever really thought of her, entirely and all the time, as a woman who had so much . . . so very much . . . to give to a man.

"So you want me to meet your boss?" he said. "That's quite amusing, you know. A reversal of the usual sort of thing. A harrassed husband comes home to a wife who's a little on the uncooperative side and says: 'Darling, I'm bringing the boss home for dinner. Try to build me up instead of tearing me down, just for this one evening, and make the meal a little outstanding, eh?'

"But this way it's much simpler. Your boss is a woman and I just have to charm her a little. All you have to worry about is whether or not I have enough charm. But since we're not married yet I'll have an ace to start with. Every executive-type woman is interested in an unmarried man, no matter how much he may be lacking in the social graces and even if he has a bashed in nose."

"You haven't a bashed in nose and you're not lacking in the social graces," she reminded him, smiling a little.

"Well, that's a matter of opinion," he said. "Of course you're right about my nose. But my ears are much too large and only Clark Gable could get away with ears this size and still—well, you know what I mean."

"I think you're just as handsome," she said.

The evening went so well at first that any kind of resentment directed toward Lathrup would have seemed to her ungracious and lacking in common sense. She wasn't quite sure why she'd invited Lathrup to meet Roger; was unable to explain it later to her own satisfaction and would have been at a complete loss to explain it to anyone else.

The impulse hadn't been prompted by a desire to impress Lathrup with her capacity to attract and hold a handsome

man or to ingratiate herself with the woman in any way. She'd begun to dislike Lathrup a little even then, along with every other member of the editorial staff.

Probably she'd done it to impress Roger. Not that he'd needed to be impressed in that way, but to a woman deeply in love and not quite able to accept the miracle at face value a desire to shine, to seem exceptional in all respects can become almost a compulsion. And Lathrup was decorative, an exceptional woman in so many different ways that it was a feather in Ruth Porges' cap to claim her as a close friend as well as her employer. Simply to parade her before Roger in that capacity was so irresistible a temptation that she had succumbed to it with no particular misgivings, since it had never even occurred to her that Ralph could transfer his adoration from her to another woman.

The transference had taken place so gradually that at first she had remained completely unaware of it. Even when she saw them together on the dance floor, and Roger was holding Lathrup a little more tightly and intimately than most of the other men were holding their partners and their cheeks seemed to remain in contact for a surprisingly long time—seemed, in fact, almost never to separate—she did not become in any way alarmed.

Annoyed, yes. She was a little annoyed, because even during a lull in the music they remained so completely absorbed in each other that they did not once glance in her direction.

But she thought nothing of it, really, and when they returned to the table and sat down and kept looking at each other, completely ignoring her, it was a full ten or fifteen minutes before her color began to rise a little and a look of concern crept into her eyes.

She wasn't angry at Roger even then . . . or with Lathrup. She put their behavior down to a momentary infatuation brought on by Roger's five Manhattans, and Lathrup's three Old Fashioneds, an infatuation which would evaporate like dew in bright sunlight the instant the next dance number began and she and Roger would get out on the floor together, and she'd mold her body to his and he'd hold her more tightly than he'd have dared to hold Lathrup, and their lips would come together at least once in the course of the dance in a long and passionate kiss.

The lights were dim; no one would see. It would not cause a scandal. It would be in bad taste and unacceptable on such a dance floor in the presence of patrons who would never think of going so far, however much they might want to do so, and it in a brighter light it might even have brought a tap on the shoulder from an irate head waiter.

But she'd do it anyway . . . she'd prove to Lathrup that she was a woman who was not afraid to dance with her man like a hellion on a Village cellar dance floor, like a real gone Beat nineteen years of age with a rose pinned in her hair and an upthrust of breasts that could make the most distinguished of midtown, gray-templed, capital-gains league patrons feel as primitive as a Dawn Man.

There were swanky night clubs where it was winked at and took place all the time, of course—the danse primeval. But this just didn't happen to be that kind of night club. She'd make it that kind, however—for Roger and herself alone. And if anyone saw or objected or tried to interfere she'd really show them what a hellion she could be. If the protests really angered her—she'd take off her clothes.

She suddenly realized that she'd allowed herself to become more drunk than she'd ever imagine she could be. She'd had five Manhattans too, and the last one she hadn't sipped. She downed it in a gulp, her eyes on Roger's face.

Roger had apparently forgotten that there was more than one woman seated at the table with him. And that woman wasn't herself. He was looking at Lathrup now in a way that made her turn away with a half-sob of shock. The pure animal flamed in his eyes. He was undressing her with his eyes and she was smiling back at him, apparently not caring in the least, giving him the kind of encouragement that could only be characterized as lascivious, the look of a wanton lost to all shame.

Ladylike as well . . . that was the most shocking, revolting, unbelievable part of it.

Ruth Porges had an impulse to get up, lean across the table and slap Lathrup's face.

In her present state of intoxication it would not have been a ladylike slap. She was quite sure of that. She'd lose her job, of course, along with the man she'd already lost—her satyr-lover whom she'd allowed herself to idealize. And to think that he'd held her in his arms, and she'd yielded her virginal body to him, surrendering utterly to his fiercely insistent, madly passionate caresses. A man incapable of loyalty, a man consumed by the kind of gross sensuality that degraded a woman by its complete lack of respect for her as an individual.

If he could look at Lathrup that way, at her thighs and burgeoning breasts—the more burgeoning because of the wanton way she'd constricted their swelling roundness—and her hair and lips and eyes . . . he could look at any woman that way, feel the same way about any woman attractive enough to catch his eye and even some who were the

opposite of attractive, but who had something about them that stirred men of primitive instincts to a frenzy of desire. The more coarse and slatternly the woman the more some men seemed to be stirred.

Not that Lathrup was coarse and slatternly—just the opposite. And Roger was the kind of man who would be repelled by a real slut. She gave him that much credit. He was nothing if not fastidious, he would seek to pluck only the unique and delicate blooms that grew very high up, on trees of rare growth arching above white marble terraces, their branches stirred by breezes from the blue Mediterranean, or the New York equivalent of such blooms.

What kind of woman was Lathrup anyway? A hard, executive type woman two-thirds of the time, a woman some people might wonder about and even just possibly think a lesbian—although there was little about her to suggest that—and then, *all woman*, so completely feminine that she could bring a man to his knees before her with a single provocative glance.

How could she hope to compete with a woman like that? And she no longer wanted to, because Roger was clearly unworthy of her, not the kind of man she'd thought him, not the eternally devoted lover who had found in her alone something special that he had been searching for all his life, just as she had been searching . . .

She stiffened suddenly, an intolerable anguish arising in her and making it difficult for her to breathe. Roger had arisen from the table again and was moving out onto the dance floor with Lathrup held firmly in his embrace. The orchestra was playing a waltz now and the tempo of the music was slow and sensuous and Lathrup had abandoned all pretense of reserve.

The way their bodies blended, seemed almost to melt together, was more outrageous than the Village cellar wildness she had pictured to herself a moment before and which she would not have hesitated to engage in if she'd felt that Roger had wanted to feel that close to her in a defiantly intimate way.

This was a more outrageous intimacy, because it was unmistakably the clinging embrace of two lovers in a darkened room, behind the privacy of a securely locked door.

Neither of them seemed to care that the dance floor wasn't quite that dimly lit and that their completely shameless amorousness would be observed by everyone on the floor. And then she saw that they were kissing each other just as shamelessly, that their lips were meeting and clinging, and that one of the kisses seemed to go on and on.

She had opened her lips and . . .

Oh, dear God, how could she endure watching them, knowing what such a kiss could mean, how it could burn and scorch and drive a man and woman deeply, truly in love, to the kind of madness that wasn't in the least profane when it was sanctified by that kind of love. But when it wasn't—

How she ever lived through the rest of the evening without becoming hysterical and screaming accusations at both of them she had never been able to explain or analyze in a rational way to her own satisfaction and seal away in the mental file that would become, from time to time, a raw, profusely bleeding wound again.

Perhaps the salve which Roger had applied to the wound toward the end of the evening had helped a little. He'd begun to pour it on at the end of the second dance, chiefly by noticing her again and pressing her hand warmly, and when they arose to leave he was all courtesy, all consideration again.

He'd put Lathrup into a taxi at her own request and they'd gone home together. Not to her home, but to Roger's apartment. But for those three weeks Roger's apartment had become more of a home to her than the two-room, rent-controlled apartment she'd occupied for ten years on the northern fringe of the Village.

As the taxi shot westward and then turned south toward the Chelsea section—the night club was on Fifty-Second Street just east of Broadway—his arm went around her and he pressed her very tightly to him.

"Your boss is quite a woman, Honeybunch," he said. "But she can't hold a candle to you. All right, she's a top-drawer beauty, distinctly on the special side. There are a lot of men who would find her irresistible, but not me. No matter how much I found myself attracted to her it wouldn't . . . well, flower into an immediate interest, the kind of interest that doesn't quite make you know whether you're coming or going."

She wasn't deceived or mollified, but some instinct of caution deep in her mind prevented her from giving too free a rein to her anger.

"Your interest in her seemed immediate enough to me," she said. "I happened to notice the way you were dancing."

He gave her waist an even tighter squeeze. "Good grief—you can hardly blame me for going overboard just a little. How often does a guy like me get to dance with a lady in sables?"

"She never wears sables—or mink either. It just happens

to be an eccentricity of hers. I wish to hell you'd shut up and not try to be amusing."

"Okay, let's not have an argument about it. We had fun, didn't we? It was a good evening."

"Not to me, it wasn't."

"But why, for Pete's sake? Tell me why? What did I do, that was so unusual? Do you mind if I tell you something? Please don't get on a high horse, don't lose your temper—"

"I've already lost it. It's so far lost I'll probably never get it back again."

"All right, but just listen . . . please. You're a wonderful person. But you have so low a boiling point at times that you're your own worst enemy. You cut off your nose to spite your face. I do it, too . . . often enough. Maybe that's why we get along so well together."

"Do we? Right now I'd say we were more like a tiger and a lion in a cage together."

"All right. A tiger and a lion can get along very well together, if their temperaments coincide. They can even mate and give birth to a *tigron*. There's one at the Bronz Zoo. In fact—"

"Now you're trying to be amusing again. You'd better be damned serious, because I was never more serious in my life . . . about what happened on that dance floor. I'm going to say something that will shock you. You think I'm a prude. You've said so often enough, despite the fact that I've never behaved like one with you in bed, have I? *Have I?*"

His eyes became suddenly serious. "No, darling—of course not. And if I ever called you a prude I'm sorry. That was only when I first met you and you did seem—"

"A scared virgin? All right, maybe I was. You wouldn't understand, probably, if I told you what torments I went through before I met you; what a high, terrible price I had to pay for feeling that way, for being like that. Most people think it amusing."

"I never did. I thought it tragic but I loved you all the more because of it."

"You felt sorry for me, did you? Pitied me?"

"I didn't say that. Do we have to talk about it now? Do you want to spoil the rest of the night?"

"What rest of the night? Do you think after what happened this evening there's going to be any more fun in bed for us?"

"Be quiet, will you? Drop it. I know what it cost you to say that. You're not the kind of woman who thinks in those terms. What has happened between us meant something to me. Why can't you believe it?"

"Oh, yes—it probably did mean something. Laying a round-

heels would mean something to even a young hoodlum with about as much sensitivity as a chimpanzee. It's important to the male. I've been told that."

He said nothing in reply, but he withdrew his arm from her waist, and sat very straight and still at her side. She could imagine what he was thinking. He was afraid of angering her further, of saying the wrong thing. What *could* he say, really? There were no right words, everything he told her would be a lie.

She'd seen the way he'd kissed Lathrup on the dance floor and the burning outrage, the shame she'd felt, after all she'd meant to him—or had allowed herself to think she'd meant to him—couldn't be driven from her mind by anything he might say.

She looked down at her legs. She had fine legs, shapely legs, and she had a good body too, a damned good body, but all that she had been able to do was unleash a savage lust in him and now that lust had been turned elsewhere.

If she'd known the truth about him at the beginning she wouldn't have allowed him to touch her. She'd have—yes, scratched his eyes out. She felt degraded, soiled, and the band of despair and bitter anger she'd felt on leaving the night club continued to tighten about her heart.

She'd ask to be taken home. She'd demand that he tell the driver to continue on to the Village. If he thought for one moment she'd go to his apartment now and spend the rest of the night with him he was a fool as well as an amorous opportunist with nothing but concealed evil in his soul.

Concealed? That was good. He hadn't made any attempt to conceal it on the dance floor, hadn't cared how much he hurt her or made her feel ignored, rejected, degraded. And he had dared to call it a good evening, had dared to pretend that she hadn't noticed, or would be broad-minded enough to dismiss what he'd done as meaningless, just a light flirtation that could be dismissed with a shrug of the shoulders.

For all his brazen disloyalty and the progress he'd made with Lathrup in one short hour he didn't know enough about how a sensitive, completely devoted woman would feel about such behavior to make him anything but a clod at heart, a miserable excuse for a lover whom no woman in her right mind would look at twice.

What was wrong with Lathrup? Couldn't she see what kind of man he was? Hadn't she even suspected the truth about him? If she'd taken him away from a completely unattractive woman, some ugly-looking strumpet or a vicious nag, it would have been easy enough to find excuses for him and to think of him as romantic and misunderstood. But couldn't she

see that he was a switch artist, and a very clumsy one at that, drawn to a new face like a moth to a flame?

The more she thought about it the more she became choked with fury. She found herself unable to say a word, even when the cab turned west on Thirty-fourth Street and continued on toward his apartment.

He spoke again then, and there was a kind of pleading tenderness in his voice.

"Let's pretend it didn't happen," he said. "I was pretty tight, I guess. And I swear to you I didn't make a deliberate play for her. Believe me, I didn't. That dance production was her idea—"

She turned on him, her eyes blazing. "What a stupid, conceited thing to say! Production is good. It certainly was that. If you'd been dancing naked together you couldn't have made more of a spectacle of yourselves."

"She's a very attractive woman and I'm only human, darling. Sometimes you seem to forget that."

"That's the oldest male excuse in the world. But just let a woman use it—and see how far she gets."

"Oh, I don't know. Lots of women with a great deal of integrity, completely devoted wives, let themselves go a little when they're dancing with exceptionally good-looking guys, and their husbands don't blacken their eyes or threaten to divorce them. Not if they're mature and realistic enough to—"

"Shut up, will you? I've heard enough. I'm not married to you, remember that."

"I don't see what that has to do with it, either way. I'm just trying to be logical, that's all. I'm not stupid enough to believe that only men are capable of thinking logically and realistically, as so many people claim. Women have a logic of their own. I'll concede that. But it's on a different plane entirely."

"Are you through? I'd think you were just talking to hear yourself talk, if I couldn't read your mind like a book. You're trying to cover up. You think if you pile up enough important-sounding excuses you'll be able to get around me again."

"Will you listen to me—"

"I'm through listening. I'm not going home with you and that's final. Tell the driver to turn south when we get to Eighth Avenue."

"Why? It doesn't make sense. You know I love you."

"I'll just bet."

How she ever allowed herself to be persuaded she never quite knew.

She no longer felt any real warmth toward him. She was quite sure, in fact, that she hated him now . . . loathed and despised him. But something deep in her nature urged her to have it out with him, to come to a complete showdown in the apartment they'd shared together, to let him know, in an unmistakable way, with gestures as well as words, that they were at the parting of the ways.

They'd kept their voices low, but she was by no means sure that the driver hadn't overheard some of their conversation and the thought brought a hot flush to her cheeks, made her even angrier than she had been. What right had he to expose her to such an indignity, when he knew how sensitive she was about discussing private matters in public? He'd raised his voice at times, just a little, and she was sure that though they had spoken in whispers most of the time the driver had been all ears and was doubtless gloating over another choice tidbit of Manhattan falling-out-between-lovers.

He'd talked about Lathrup, mentioned her by name, and probably nine taxi drivers out of ten knew that the Eaton-Lathrup publications were a big-time magazine group and that Lathrup herself was often mentioned by Winchell. She'd been on TV often enough—and so had Ruth Porges.

"I picked up a couple of real dog-and-cat fighting celebrities last night. Brother! It happens about three times a night, when you're cruising around Fifty-Second. They don't care what they say—get a big kick out of airing their dirty linen when they know you can't help overhearing what they're saying. Yap, yap, yap. The guy apologizing, making excuses and the dame ready to stand off and lam him one. They might as well stand in Times Square with a megaphone—"

But the driver seemed courteous enough when the cab drew in to the curb in front of Roger's apartment-house residence, perhaps because Roger tossed him two dollars and told him to keep the change, but more probably because he was a very young, pleasant-faced lad who looked as innocent as a new-shorn lamb.

Roger had two cocktails with cherries aswim in them standing on a tray five minutes after he'd turned the key in the door of his apartment. He was very good at that and even now, despite her anger, she admired that aspect of his woman-pleasing competence.

"Why don't you take off your dress and be comfortable, darling," he said. "We're not exactly strangers, you know."

She shook her head. "You're entitled to believe what you wish. But we started being strangers about two hours ago.

Right now I feel as if I knew absolutely nothing about you—beyond the fact that when you meet an attractive woman for the first time she's tight in your arms a half hour later. You don't believe in letting a single blade of grass grow under your feet, do you?"

"Now look—" he protested. "Do you have to be *quite* that touchy? I'll go further than I did. It was partly my fault. You could say, I suppose, that I put up no resistance, was carried away by the liquor, the soft lights, the music. And I was plenty pie-eyed. It usually takes a dozen Manhattans to make me as tight as I was a few hours ago. Too much acid in the system or something like that. It happens sometimes."

"It's worn off now . . . is that it? So you've got a perfect excuse and any other woman would understand and fall into your arms and beg to be forgiven for her lack of understanding."

"No, you've a right to be a little burned up. But do you have to work over it the way you're doing, build it up into something criminal? You'd think I'd tried to rape her or something."

"You almost did. I was afraid for a moment we'd be asked to leave . . . and not too politely."

"You're exaggerating a hell of a lot and I'm sure you know it."

"Nothing of the kind. The way you were dancing wouldn't have been tolerated in half the dives in the Village. I mean the real dives—not the kind that are reserved for tourists."

"You know all about them, I suppose. Have you been to them often?"

"I've never stepped inside one. But I wasn't born yesterday. I know what goes on in such places."

"Look, we're getting nowhere. Will you believe me and listen? If I met her tomorrow on the street I'd just say hello, and smile and tip my hat and pass on. I swear it."

"I can just picture it. She'd smile back, and the way she smiles when she knows what she wants and will have no trouble getting it—doesn't require any effort on her part. It just comes naturally. And going home with her would come naturally to you, too."

"She has a beautiful place. Have you seen it? Of course you haven't . . . because you met her tonight for the first time. So perhaps I'd better describe it for you. You go up in a private elevator, and you step out and there you are—in a real golden Rembrandt setting. The lighting is the newest Paris importation, and there are a lot of abstract paintings on the walls of her bedroom, you know, all little colored squares in

different colors that mean absolutely nothing but only hang on the walls of the major league museums because the smaller museums can't afford them.

"'I'll be back in a minute,' she'll say, and away she'll go, tripping lightly, into the bathroom—all black onyx with gold fixtures—and when she comes out you'll be sitting with a cocktail glass in your hand—she'll have invited you to mix your own, with just the right shade of icing, at a private bar that will knock your eyes out—and when you see what she's wearing, or isn't wearing, you'll forget where you are and think you're in a kind of glorified cathouse."

She became a little frightened when she saw the way Roger was looking at her and lowered her eyes, wishing she'd kept silent. Simply had it out with him, the way she'd intended and walked out of the apartment for the last time, slamming the door behind her.

Why had she ranted on so recklessly? She'd talked like a shrew driven half out of her mind by jealousy, and that had been a mistake. It was giving him too much ammunition, giving him the kind of satisfaction he wasn't entitled to. Angering him at the same time, making him look at her in a strange way, a way new to her, as if the suggestive picture she'd painted for him of a totally shameless Lathrup had aroused in him instincts that were base and dangerous. Something about the look not only scared her, it caused her to pale a little and move further away from him.

Then her own anger came sweeping back and she said the worst possible thing, and could have bitten her tongue out the instant it left her lips. "Don't looked so shocked, little man. I've a feeling it wouldn't take much finesse on the part of any woman to seduce you."

It was cruelly insulting for two reasons, but she realized that too late. He wasn't a little man. He was a very big man and completely sure of himself as far as his masculinity was concerned. And no man likes to think that it is the woman who is doing the seducing. It was almost as bad as those ridiculous cases you read about in the newspapers, where a man goes into court and claims he's been taken advantage of by a woman in a physical way, his high-minded morality impaired. A male virgin, backed into a corner by an Amazon determined to rape him.

She remembered one case in particular—it flashed across her mind in that instant of wild folly completely unbidden. Three young hoodlum girls had captured a man at the point of a gun, taken him for an auto ride and forced him to make love to them. What she'd just said was like telling Roger that, in circumstances like that, he wouldn't have been more

than eager to oblige, or found the experience less than exhilarating.

"I asked you to take off your dress and get comfortable," Roger said, still looking at her in that frightening way. "What's got into you, anyway? What makes you think that Helen Lathrup would be so much more attractive to me than you are? Right at this moment I'll waive the soft lighting and the abstract paintings and even the gold-and-onyx bathroom. I'm just a plain guy with plain tastes, anyway. In room decorations, I mean. I like my women to be a little on the special side, decorative and all that. I'm speaking in the plural, because you insist on it so strongly, and seem to feel that I should have a lot of women chasing after me. You probably wouldn't believe me if I told you I've had only three serious affairs in my life and one of them ended in divorce and the two I didn't marry I would have married under ordinary circumstances, but death can move in fast sometimes and make even marriage impossible.

"No—I didn't poison them. I'm not a bluebeard, whatever else you may think me. One died in my arms and it kills me even now to think about it and I'll probably never get over it. Died in my arms with the blood running out of her mouth, in a hospital with an incurable disease and she was glad that I could be there. There was one parting, years later, on completely friendly terms, with a girl who didn't think I'd make too good a husband, because we just happened to be temperamentally poles apart in our thinking. And that's the whole of it—until I met you."

Ordinarily what he'd said would have moved her, and completely changed the way she felt. Banished her fear even, all of it, made her willing to forgive him. But she was beyond herself with anger still, too confused to think clearly.

"I'm going to leave you," she said. "This is the end. I'm going right out of here now and I'm not coming back."

"Sit down!" he said, his voice suddenly harsher than she'd ever known it to be. "You love me and you know it. You're just being a stubborn little fool. Sit down and relax. And drink this cocktail. It will do you good."

"No," she said. "I'm leaving right now."

What he did then was totally unexpected, she wouldn't have thought him capable of it.

He stepped forward, grasped the top of her dress and ripped it all the way down her back to her waist. Then he half-swung her about and planted a kiss in the middle of her back, so fierce a kiss that it bruised her flesh, causing her to cry out in protest.

He held her firmly and continued to kiss the bare flesh of

her shoulders and back, and then he ripped more of the dress away, and buried his face between her breasts, a strange, stricken, almost sobbing sound coming from his throat, as if even in that moment of primitive lovemaking he was begging her to relent a little, to forgive him and be tender, to run her fingers through his hair, as she had so often done in the past.

But she was too frightened to do anything but struggle violently to free herself. Always in the past he had made love impetuously, his great strength sometimes causing him to hurt her a little. But never had his ardor gotten out of control and his hands moved over her trembling body in quite so demanding a way. He was pressing her to him so fiercely she felt half-smothered, his fingers bruising her thighs, her buttocks, refusing to relinquish their grip.

She feared only his capacity for self-control, not that he would be deliberately cruel or brutally force her to submit to him against her will. But she did not know how far he could hold in check his desperate need to make this renewal of their intimacy a kind of masculine triumph so complete and overwhelming that it would bring them closer than they had ever been before and put an end to all future uncertainty. And in so doing, he might lose all awareness of his own strength and inflict an irreparable injury upon her.

Her emotions were mixed, strange, verging on utter panic in that awful moment of smothering proximity, when his body seemed like a rod of steel bruising her from knee to shoulder and threatening to turn into a steel trap with cruel jaws which might snap shut at any moment, shattering the very bones of her body.

She began to kick and moan, to beat with her fists on his shoulders. And then she was screaming at him, demanding that he release her, increasing with an energy she hardly knew that she possessed the frenzy of her twistings and turnings.

How she ever managed to reach down and get a firm grip on her right slipper and wrench it off she never quite knew. Only that she had the slipper in her hand suddenly and was beating him on the face with it, hitting him on the side of his face with the high heel as hard as she could, and then across his forehead and not even stopping when he cried out and slapped her on the face with the flat of his hand.

She struck at him again and again, not caring if she hurt him severely, because he was still refusing to release her and the slap had turned her into a wild woman. Some instinct, some lingering trace of sanity or compassion, prevented her from striking him across the eyes. But she didn't stop hitting

him even when she saw a bright splotch of blood leap out on his right temple.

When the pressure of his arms fell away and went staggering back from her she tossed the slipper into a corner of the room, snatched up the cocktail from the center table—he'd set the tray down before seizing hold of her—and emptied the glass in his face.

The liquor splashed across the right side of his face, wetting his hair and running down his cheek, dissolving the blood. It drenched both lapels of his dinner jacket and gave him an almost clownish look, for his face remained faintly red-streaked, and he kept swaying for a moment, with a sickly grimace on his face.

He closed his eyes and blinked twice furiously and when he opened them again the grimace was gone. Hot anger flamed in his eyes instead. But he didn't advance upon her and slap her again. He simply stood very still, glaring at her.

"All right," he said. "Maybe you'd better go. I was a fool to think I could reach you in any way. What did you think I was going to do—ravish you? Sure, sure, I know. I was a little rough. But I'm not an eighteen-year-old kid. I'm thirty-four and when two people are in love—or are supposed to have been in love and one of the partners still thinks along those lines, and hasn't forgotten the other times when the big, important part has been welcomed and has meant something—you let yourself get dizzy with longing and you don't think you'll be mistaken for the kind of brute no woman would trust herself alone with in a hotel lobby when the doorman's back is turned. Not for more than ten or twelve seconds anyway."

"You shouldn't have torn my clothes off," she said, swaying a little herself now, feeling sick inside.

"Oh, so I tore your clothes off. When will you outgrow that exaggerating tendency of yours? You asked me to tear your blouse off once, remember? You said: 'If I was wearing a dress, darling, I'd ask you to unzipper me down the back. But just this flimsy blouse—Darling, will you think me shameless if I ask you to tear it off. I'd like to hear the silk rip, under your big, strong hands.'"

A hot flush suffused her cheeks. "I never said anything of the sort. You're putting the words of a wanton into my mouth."

"No, I sincerely don't believe so. You may not have used those exact words, but it's practically what you did say. And I didn't think you a wanton. I loved and respected you and—I still do, I guess. But it's hopeless. I realize that now.

There is a streak of prudery in you you'll never overcome. And when you add jealousy to it—"

"Do you dare stand there and tell me you don't think I had a right to feel jealous, after the way you carried on with Lathrup tonight?"

He shook his head. "No, you had every right. But I told you I was sorry . . . damned sorry and ashamed of myself . . . and I meant every word of it. Jealousy can be flattering to a man. Some men don't like it at all, but others do. I always have. It's the surest sign there is that a man means something to a woman, that she really loves him. And real love is too precious a commodity for a man to take the other attitude—that jealousy is an annoyance and justifies anger or resentment. But there's one kind of jealousy no man likes, unless there's something wrong with him—unless he's a masochist and enjoys torturing himself. It's the kind that won't listen to reason, that makes no allowances for the fact that a man can look at another attractive woman without bringing the world toppling down about his ears. Or even hold her a little too tightly on a dance floor and kiss her once or twice."

"Once or twice would have been quite all right with me. But the kind of kiss—"

"All right. We've had a violent quarrel and you've hit me as hard as you could with the heel of a shoe—and that ought to even things up. Now I'm afraid it's goodbye. I'll always love you, I guess, but I've never been a glutton for punishment."

"You went very far tonight—with Lathrup and what you call slightly rough love-making. You went a hell of a long way."

"All right, I won't deny it. So it's hopeless, isn't it? We both agree about that."

"Yes," she said, speaking very slowly and carefully, emphasizing each word, but her heart felt dead within her. "We both agree."

Even though Ruth Porges dressed severely enough in the office she had always—unlike Lathrup—had a liking for mink. An entire coat she could not have afforded, but her mink stole was a very capacious and expensive one. She removed it from the back of the chair where she had tossed it on entering Roger's apartment and draped it carefully over her shoulders. It concealed almost all of the torn parts of her dress. A mink stole in July was an affectation but tonight she was grateful that she had succumbed to the impulse to appear at the nightclub with a fur piece draped over her arm.

She stopped by the door for an instant, bending to put on

her slipper. She wondered if, on arriving home, she would find the tip caked with dried blood. She hoped she wouldn't. It might have made her break down and sob half the night. She'd have to remember to take a Miltown on retiring. There was another tranquilizer she was thinking of switching to. It was a little stronger, but quite harmless, really. As harmless as the memory of Roger would be a year from now. Every woman was entitled to at least one mistake in her choice of a man, and, having started late, she was well ahead in that respect.

She walked out into the entrance hall without a backward glance, opened the front door and shut it very firmly behind her. She was glad that Roger had not offered to see her to the elevator or to accompany her to the street and put her into a taxi. She had a great many things to be grateful for. And she wished—she wished that she were dead.

It was six days after Helen Lathrup had been found slain in her office by Lynn Prentiss that Ruth Porges found the murder weapon. She stumbled upon it by pure accident, in a place where the police hadn't looked and would scarcely have thought of looking.

That she found it at all was due to one of those almost unbelievable blind flukes which fiction writers prefer to shun, but which persist in occurring, with surprising frequency, in real life.

She not only found the weapon—a black metal, long-barreled forty-eight calibre pistol equipped with a silencer—but she knew immediately who the owner of the gun was, precisely when and how it had come into his possession, and hence, by inference, who the murderer had to be. Unless, of course, someone who was not the murderer had loaned the gun to someone else. And that seemed unlikely, since a man or woman owning such a gun would know exactly how it had been used and would have gone immediately to the police and cleared himself of all suspicion by naming the borrower and explaining the circumstances under which he had allowed himself to be made an unwitting dupe to the one crime in which a taste for silence could lead straight to the electric chair.

Ruth Porges found the gun in a sixty-foot-deep excavation. In New York City, there are many scenic beauties and intricate works of engineering construction which can be said to be typical of the city as a whole. Every city has them, of course, but some cities are famous for their numerous bridges and reservoirs, or high stately office buildings, or parks and playgrounds, or triple-laned speedways, or museums and schools. New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago and San Francisco

all shine in that respect, along with perhaps fifty other cities from coast to coast.

New York is a city of bridges, of course, the most beautiful bridges in the world, if you're willing to waive the Golden Gate. It is also a city of equally beautiful parks and its cluster of tall buildings is second to none. But New York, in recent years, and perhaps more than any other city in the throes of a refurbishing and a reconstruction, of a tearing down and a putting up, is a city of excavations.

Everywhere there are excavations, three or four blocks apart, deep and yawning and carefully encircled by board fences to keep absent-minded people from falling into them in the dark or even in broad daylight. Some are one hundred percent walled in and others are open a little on one side and are hence a menace to the unwary and should painstakingly be avoided if one does not wish to die.

If one does not wish to die! But if the psychologists and the psychiatrists are to be believed, there are a great many people in every large city who wish to die. People on the run, thieves and murderers, wanted by the law, hiding out from day to day in dismal furnished rooms and never knowing when the blow will fall, a knock on the door, a voice demanding: "Open up, Buster—or we'll start shooting through the door!"

Death, blood, a corpse on a mortuary slab. Violence and the aftermath of violence—a grieving widow, fatherless kids, for a cop could die too, and the law and its defiers were tragically intertwined.

The only real difference was, a cop or any reasonably normal person didn't want to die. They wanted to go on living as long as they could. It was the guilt-ridden, the guilt-tormented, who wanted to die. They didn't know it, but they did. To beat their brains out against a stone wall was one kind of temptation to them—a gun, a knife, a noose another. To hang themselves was perhaps best of all, to their distorted way of thinking. But everything that invited death through a lack of foresight, a careless misstep, a needless risk was attractive to them—including a yawning excavation between two towering office buildings on a city street, only four-fifths boarded up.

But when Ruth Porges passed the excavation on her way to work, at nine in the morning, she wasn't thinking of the guilt-ridden alone and how appealing a leap downward through a gap in the boarding might have seemed to some of them. The idea crossed her mind, curiously enough, but only for an instant and then her thoughts went off on another track.

How easy it was to put a quick end to your life if you really wanted to. You didn't even have to go to the top of a tall building and jump. You just had to be a little careless in crossing the street between the early morning traffic—any day in the week.

True, you might be horribly injured and suffer pain and it certainly wasn't the best way. But it was a way, and a very simple one. Not that it would have appealed to her even if her morbid, half-despairing mood of several months ago had failed to depart, leaving only the ugly scar that she was determined to keep from opening again. Lathrup's tragic death had shaken and sobered her, making her realize how uncertain any kind of happiness was and that wanting to die was a very bad thing, because you never knew when it would be your turn to find happiness for a month or a year.

To keep from remembering the shocking, horrible morning in the office six days before, with the police making it harder for everyone, driving Susan to the verge of hysteria and making Lynn Prentiss bite her nails and look so pale that she expected the girl would faint at any moment and Eaton himself bristle like a porcupine and then look worried and a little frightened, as if losing his business partner and most important editorial wheel—big wheel Lathrup, who specialized in messing up the lives of people of no particular importance to her—might cut heavily into his two-hundred-thousand-a-year-income. How could he hope to replace her, unless he applied to some very high class employment agency for some exceptionally brilliant call girl who could step right in and take over where Lathrup had left off.

To keep her mind off that kind of bitterness she looked straight down into the excavation where it wasn't boarded over and a wave of dizziness swept over her. Sixty feet wasn't a long drop, but it gave her much the same sensation as standing on the roof of a fairly tall building and staring down into the street below would have done. She had a fear of heights, but there was a fascination in it too.

She was still standing there, leaning a little forward, when she felt the chain at her neck break and saw the locket go spinning downward, a flash of gold in the bright morning sunlight. She saw it strike the torn-up earth far below and rebound and come to rest in a deep crevice a foot or two from the base of the incline.

She cursed softly under her breath, reproaching herself for letting the locket dangle on so fragile a chain and then craning her neck unthinkingly. She'd been intending to have a heavier chain put on the locket for months. It was the most

fragile kind of chain, as thin as a thread almost, the links so tiny you could barely see them with the naked eye.

And the locket was valuable, an heirloom. She couldn't afford to wait until the construction gang arrived at nine-thirty or ten and work started up in the pit. If she told one of the men or even the construction boss that there was a solid gold locket just waiting to be picked up down there her chances of ever seeing it again wouldn't be too good. She might and she might not . . . get it back. Honesty was an intangible in a situation like that, and the locket meant too much to her to weigh the chances pro and con.

She'd have to climb down and recover it herself. Could she? Of course she could. The incline wasn't steep enough to prevent her from descending all the way to the bottom, if she moved with care and didn't start an earthslide.

She looked up and down the street, feeling a little self-conscious about it, knowing how foolish she'd look if anyone from the office saw her. Macklin especially, with his slow, good-natured grin, which could, on occasion, convey more than a hint of mockery. The excavation was only three buildings away from the Eaton-Lathrup offices and she'd probably be seen by someone she knew before she was back on the street again. But to heck with that. She just couldn't afford to lose that locket.

It was an act of folly to even hesitate. She climbed resolutely under the rope which stretched between the break in the boarding and started downward, leaning a little backwards and being very careful not to dislodge any of the small stones embedded in the gravel.

Two minutes later she was at the base of the excavation, standing in the shadow of an enormous crane which looked not unlike a Martian monster on stilts—a Wellsian *War-of-the-Worlds* kind of Martian. But nothing like a war of the worlds was taking place about her and the only really ominous thing about the pit was its proximity to the scene of a brutal slaying.

In the depth of the excavation the sunlight seemed deeper and redder than it should have been, the shadows so thickly clustering that they seemed to be conspiring together to cast a pall upon her spirits. But she refused to allow the dismalness of the pit to upset her. Any deep, hewed-out hollow in the earth was dismal, with the damp smells of freshly-turned earth conjuring up a cemetery-like atmosphere.

She didn't envy the men who had to work sixty feet beneath the sidewalk all day long, in rain and slush on bad days and always with the deafening clatter of steam-shovels and riveting machines to add to their woes.

She found the locket without difficulty, because she had a quick eye for tracing the course of small glittering objects falling from a height and the crevice into which it had fallen was a yard long and it stood out.

She picked it up, examined the chain and shook her head in chagrin. One of the tiny links had simply parted and now the chain was in two parts and she would throw it away and get a heavier one this time for sure—no further putting it off. She snapped open the locket, looked at the picture of her father and a twinge of guilt shivered through her. She'd replaced her father's picture with a photograph of Roger, and had carried Roger around her neck like an evil talisman for almost a year. She was cured of that now and she hoped her father would forgive her, if a man dead twenty years could forgive, for what she had done. All of it—not just the disloyalty to his memory she'd committed by giving Roger a preferred place close to her heart.

Her father had been old-fashioned enough to think any kind of an affair a degradation, the equivalent of harlotry undisguised, a living in sin which he could not have forgiven. He'd been a kindly, charitable man, but not without a terrible, inward struggle which would have seared his soul. "That a daughter of mine—"

She glanced at her wrist-watch, and saw that she was still quite early—barely twenty minutes to nine. If she ascended to the street again quickly none of the Eaton-Lathrup office staff would be likely to see her emerging from the excavation, breathless and with a complete lack of dignity, her skirt swirling up above her knees.

She opened her handbag, dropped in the locket and snapped the bag shut, tightening her lips a little as her father's handsome, but sad-eyed, rather melancholy face flashed again before her inward vision. She was quite sure she *didn't* have a father-complex, but the thought of bringing any kind of pain to him—

Oh, damn such thoughts—damn such modern jargon silliness. You'd think people today spent nine-tenths of their lives on psychiatric couches. Perhaps they did—or that's what the head shrinkers wanted everyone to believe. She liked that word—head shrinkers. It put them in their place. A cult, that's what it was. Sweeping the country and poor old Freud himself had known poverty and heartbreak and if he could have gotten twenty dollars an hour he might have been able to smoke better cigars, at least, and taken more rides through the beautiful streets of old Vienna and have gotten in his personal life a few of the compensations genius was entitled to as a young man. How was he to know his theories would make

perhaps a billion dollars for practitioners he'd never set eyes on in a far-off land?

She had turned and was just starting back up the slope when she saw the big flat stone. What is there about that kind of stone which fascinates almost everyone, which few people can resist overturning to see what lies beneath? Young school-boys do it all the time—young naturalists in search of beetles and centipedes and all kinds of damp, hueless crawling insects. And adults do it for a dozen reasons, often for the same reason, or to see if there's any grass growing underneath, in a region of barren, tumbled earth, or if it's covering a diamond necklace someone dropped weeks before—just as Ruth Porges had dropped the locket, but had given up more easily than she had done. Or just for the sheer pleasure of overturning a big flat stone, covering dampness, covering mold.

The stone was about forty feet from the base of the crane and almost directly in the path of a sturdy-looking steam shovel with a large enough scoop to lift it up and deposit it in a heap of tumbled earth into which it would sink, and be carted away and dumped elsewhere, along with the tons of earth which had already been scooped out of the pit.

As soon as the construction gang arrived and the clatter started up the stone would lose its identity, become just an impediment to be removed and buried in tons of earth and rubble. Its position on the floor of the excavation had quite possibly been changed already, shifted about a bit by the upheavals going on about it. The earth on both sides of it had a decidedly torn-up, worked over look.

Ruth Porges glanced at her wrist-watch again, hesitated for a moment and told herself that she was a complete fool to allow the stone to interest her.

Oh, well—why not? It would take her only a second or two to bend and overturn it.

When she started to lift it she discovered that it was even heavier than it looked, but she didn't let that discourage her. She tugged and the end she was gripping came completely loose and the rest of the stone began to rise also.

She toppled it with a single, vigorous heave, exposing the hard-packed earth underneath—an oblong of earth about two feet in length and twelve or fifteen inches wide.

She stared down at it, a cold chill coursing up her spine and all the blood draining from her face. The gun was half-buried in the earth, but its outlines were distinctly visible, as if it had been quite deeply buried at first, but had arisen to the surface of the earth when the ground about it had been shaken by the steam shovel, precisely as a corpse will arise

to the surface of a lake when a dynamite blast has been set off in close proximity to it.

Closely packed as the earth was, it took her only a moment to work the gun free from its clinging overlay of earth and small pebbles. Her lips were shaking now and she could scarcely breathe, but she continued to dig and wrench at the weapon with her fingers until the butt was firmly in her clasp and the long black metal barrel, capped with a bulky-looking silencer, was pointing directly toward the slope.

If the killer had materialized before her at that moment at the base of the slope, ghostly and threatening, she would have screamed in terror and fired and fired again, not caring at all that deep in her mind another voice, also her own, would be screaming at her that it was only a specter and that she was completely alone.

She had seen the gun before—it had been shown to her with pride. And she had seen and talked with the killer, and even allowed the killer to compliment her on her hair-do, and drop a dime in a jukebox and say to her: "Just listen. Isn't that quite a song? Not the sort of song you'd expect to come out of a jukebox, is it?"

She had seen the gun before and she had talked to Lathrup's slayer, not once, but many times.

She knew exactly who the killer was. Knew, too, that that cunning, fiendish individual was still at large. But when you met and talked with a monster, a fiend—how could you know, if you had no warning, no reason to suspect the truth?

The police, too, would not be likely to suspect the truth, ever—unless she told them.

Unless she told them! Unless she went to them and said: "There is a remorseless slayer loose in the city and some night . . . soon now perhaps, very soon . . . another woman may be found slain, more horribly slain this time, her throat slashed from ear to ear. It may have been only a solitary crime, brought about by uncontrollable rage. But how can you know, how can you be sure . . . when I myself suspected nothing and we were such close, good friends?

There is nothing ordinary about a killer, nothing predictable . . . even a killer with completely innocent eyes, who can smile and order a cocktail and say: "Heads I pay. Tails we go Dutch."

A little whimsical fun, on the part of a dangerous killer. You enter one door and you meet a charming individual, light-hearted, brimming over with a friendly interest in you, your problems, your daily concerns. You enter another door and you meet the same individual, but only for a moment. There's suddenly a tiger close to you, with an odor of death

everywhere and long, quivering flanks move in and out, in and out, and, low-crouching, you see death creeping toward you with bared fangs.

It seemed to her that her heart had become encased in ice—in a solid block of ice—and was no longer beating.

Should she go to the police? Dared she tell, did . . . did she really want to send Lathrup's slayer to the electric chair?

Supposing it had been a solitary crime, brought on by a wrong so terrible and cruel and heartless that the killer hadn't been a tiger at all? Was there not a killer in everyone, if the provocation was great enough, if all the civilized layers of the human mind were to be stripped away by the inhuman conduct of someone who was bent on destroying you, with no mercy shown, no slightest trace of compassion, no yielding at any point?

There, but for the grace of God, go I.

Had she not herself been one of Lathrup's victims? Had she not once had an almost uncontrollable desire to make Lathrup suffer as she had suffered, to pay in full measure for the crime which Lathrup had committed in cold blood, with nothing really to gain, for she hadn't wanted Roger to go to bed with her for more than a week or two, if she could have endured him as a lover for even that short length of time. Hadn't she taken Roger away from her, stolen his love just to indulge a cruel whim, just because she happened to be a little bored at the time, and also had a streak of sadism in her nature which made her enjoy inflicting so cruel an injustice upon a woman she had no real reason to dislike?

Hadn't that injustice made her want to die, and aroused in her so furious a resentment that she had pictured herself fastening her fingers in Lathrup's throat and forcing her backwards across the desk and pressing and pressing until Lathrup ceased to draw breath?

She wouldn't have done it, of course. But did she really want to send one of Lathrup's other victims to the electric chair, simply because he was a little more primitive than she could ever be and had become, for a moment, a kind of madman, driven to desperation by a wrong which, for all she knew to the contrary, might have been much greater than the one which Lathrup had inflicted on her?

She suddenly remembered that there was a term for that in law which two or three states recognized as a justifiable legal defense in a first-degree murder case. An irresistible impulse. A man might know the difference between right and wrong and hence be legally sane and yet be compulsively driven to kill.

It was horrible, yes, She'd always go in fear of such a man

and you couldn't think of him as entirely normal and he wouldn't deserve to get off scot-free. You could be modern and enlightened and humane and fight for a more civilized legal code, but there had to be streak of hard cruelty in all killers which set them apart from men and women who merely killed in their thoughts. Or if you wanted to think of it in another way, their ability to go all the way—irresistible impulse or not—was a very terrible thing; it did make them wild beasts in a sense, more tigerlike than the overwhelming majority of mankind.

Her hands shook so she had difficulty opening her handbag again and putting the gun into it. But she was breathing a little more easily now, and there was a less frightened look in her eyes. The killer wouldn't know she'd found the gun, and she certainly had no intention of confronting him with it. She'd hide it somewhere or get rid of it—perhaps go right over to the East River at noon and very cautiously throw it in. Unless—she did decide to . . . to go to the police. Had she any right to take so much for granted—that he wasn't a human monster who might not kill again?

If she got rid of the gun she'd be committing a very serious crime. She could be sent to prison for a long term of years. An accessory to murder after the event was what concealing that kind of evidence would make her.

She wasn't a criminal. She knew deep in her heart that she wasn't. But the law took a very dim view of that kind of personal interpretation of what was or wasn't a criminal act.

She'd have to decide. She'd have all morning to decide, to think about it. She'd put the handbag in her desk and pretend that nothing had happened to upset her, that it was a perfectly normal morning as far as she was concerned, if a morning six days after a murder could be thought of as normal. Eaton would come into her office, smiling a little, still worrying about the problem of replacing Lathrup, and putting twice the usual amount of responsibility on her shoulders, and on the shoulders of Lynn Prentiss and Macklin and Ellers—who would probably be too tight to give a damn. With Lathrup gone he probably wouldn't be fired, although he deserved to be, with his inability to remain sober two days in a row. The whole staff had been under quite a strain.

It helped her to swear inwardly, to be as cynical and hard-boiled as she could in a moment of torment and uncertainty such as this. Her father's face in the locket flashed once more across her mind and she thought: "Poor dad! Poor gentle, kind, moralistic, unworldly dad, who never quite knew what

it was all about and whom I loved so very much. Do you know what your darling daughter has become? She has not only slept with a man out of wedlock, she's about to become an accessory to murder after the event. Or she may decide not to. It would make her much more of a hypocrite and less honorable and decent, actually, because she wanted to kill Lathrup herself. But maybe you'd prefer her to stay on the right side of the law."

Climbing up out of the excavation took her less than three minutes but she was conscious every moment of the bulge which the big pistol made in her hand-bag—it was a miracle she'd been able to fit it in—and she hoped no one would notice how lopsided and distended the bag looked when she arrived at street level.

It was only when she reached the pavement above the pit again that she realized that the worst possible calamity had taken place. Not one member of the office staff but three saw her climb out of the excavation, for it was now five minutes to nine and a rush to reach the office on time was in progress.

Lynn Prentiss passed and stopped to stare, raising her eyebrows slightly and then continuing on, as if she did not wish to embarrass a fellow editor in any way. But there had been more than a glimmer of bewilderment in her eyes, as if she found it difficult to picture Ruth Porges scrambling out of an excavation in such haste and in so undignified a manner. What could have prompted her to climb down in the first place? A rendezvous with the foreman of the construction gang? Unthinkable . . . if you knew what kind of a girl Ruth Porges was—

Then Tommy Anders, the oldest of the two office boys passed, turning what was probably the sports pages of a morning newspaper, and probably not even seeing her, although he was looking straight in her direction. Then Susan, who had the courtesy not to stare at all, but must have been as startled as Lynn, and just as bewildered.

All she had to do was stand very still with the bag in plain view and everyone who hadn't reached the office a little earlier would know that she'd been behaving in a very strange manner, because there was dust all over her skirt and she was still breathless from her exertions. A half-dozen more Eaton-Lathrup employees would see her and perhaps even Eaton himself. And they'd be sure to notice the bulge in her hand-bag. The awful thought flashed across her mind that the very outlines of the gun might be visible.

And of course it would be all over the office in another half-hour, and—he would know. That was the really terrible, frightening thing. Even if he didn't pass and see her, along

with the others, he'd be sure to know. At least twenty people would know and he'd be among them. Lathrup's slayer, shaken as he'd failed to be by all the police questioning, although she remembered—now that she thought about it and knew the truth about him—he had paled visibly once and almost betrayed himself. He'd said the wrong thing and had been forced to cover up quickly.

The man who had entered Lathrup's office six days before and shot her dead would know that a girl he couldn't possibly have imagined he'd have any reason to fear had gone down into the excavation where he'd hidden the murder weapon and had found it, and he'd remember that he had once showed it to her, and if she went to the police with it—

Or was she taking too much for granted again, letting her fear completely distort her thinking? He'd have no way of knowing she'd climbed all the way down to the bottom of the excavation. He wasn't stupid, he'd consider the possibility that she'd simply dropped something—as she had—and climbed down a few feet to recover it. A book perhaps, or her lipstick. He might not even give the matter a second thought, even though he knew where he'd hidden the gun, and how dangerous it would be if someone stumbled on it ahead of the steam shovel.

It was all very strange anyway. Why hadn't he gotten rid of the gun in a simpler, safer way—simply tossed it into the river, as she had thought of doing? Or driven out into the country somewhere and tossed it into a lake or buried it? It wasn't as easy to get rid of small objects of a dangerous nature as some people thought—even small phials of poison had a way of turning up again and sending murderers to the gallows. She'd read about such cases often enough. But still—

She suddenly thought she knew why he'd hidden the gun under a stone in the excavation, probably taking care to see that it was buried first pretty deeply. The gun had probably been down there since the day of the murder. He'd had to get rid of it quickly, had to make sure the police wouldn't find it anywhere about the office and trace it to him fast. And as the excavation was only a short distance from the office his hiding it there made sense, was logical enough. He'd probably climbed down during a lull in the construction work, when the pit was deserted, and gambled on the steam-shovel scooping the gun up and carrying it off within a fairly short time. Possibly it hadn't even occurred to him it would still be there after six days. Quite possibly it had almost gone into the shovel. Been lifted up, tossed about and reburied. A steam

shovel functioned erratically at times and the tumbled, heaved-up look of the earth all around the stone made that guess—of course it was only a guess—seem quite plausible to her.

It had probably continued to worry him, kept him anxious, robbed him of sleep—if a man with blood on his hands could ever not be robbed at times of sleep. But even a nightmare kind of anxiety was better than immediate apprehension by the police. If he'd climbed down into the excavation again later, to make sure that the gun *had* gone into the scoop and been caught with the weapon in his hands or even just searching for a weapon that had vanished he'd be taking the same kind of risk a murderer with a psychopathic streak does when he returns to the scene of his crime in the grip of a morbid compulsion.

She'd just taken, all unwittingly, the same kind of risk herself but she was quite sure the police wouldn't suspect her, and if they did she'd have no trouble in clearing herself. Only the killer would suspect her—of knowing precisely who he was.

She felt suddenly that she'd been wrong about his not suspecting she'd gone all the way to the bottom. He'd be sure to suspect a little, when it went flying about the office that she'd been seen emerging from the pit. He'd hardly dismiss it with a shrug, even though he'd have no way of knowing for sure she'd succumbed to an irresistible impulse . . . to overturn a big, flat stone.

She came to a sudden, perhaps not completely wise decision. She wouldn't go to the office at all this morning. She'd go straight back home and decide what to do about the gun in the privacy of her own apartment.

Let Eaton think what he wished, let all the others gossip about her. Compared to what she'd just discovered it had about as much importance as a microscopic hair on the leg of a gnat. She could plead illness, a sudden attack of migraine. It was a good enough excuse.

Better to return home at once with the gun and come to as completely wise a decision as she was capable of. If she decided to go to the police, there was nothing to be lost by waiting until noon.

It was strange, it never ceased to amaze Ruth Porges, how much familiar surroundings, a chair you sat in daily, a painting on the wall that had become as well-known to you as the face and even the shared thoughts of an old friend, a potted palm you'd watch grow and watered dutifully for

years—just how much such objects helped you to think clearly when you were in a tormented frame of mind.

She'd made her decision now and she felt no remorse, no sense of guilt at all. She was probably a very unusual person in some respects, but she had long since ceased to reproach herself because she felt compelled at times to behave in an unusual way.

She'd hid the gun where she didn't think it would be found easily, if the police should suspect anything—they still kept dropping in at the office—and called unexpectedly within the next few hours to question her about her descent into the excavation and her sudden decision to take the day off. As soon as it became dark she'd take a taxi to the East River on the upper East Side, get out a few blocks from the esplanade that overlooked the most turbulent part of the river, walk calmly through the beautiful park that ended in an ascending terrace, and make sure that all of the nearby benches were unoccupied. Then she'd move quickly to the iron railing and toss the gun as far out into the river as she could.

Did they ever drag the East River for a murder weapon? Could they, with any real hope of finding it? She didn't know for sure, but she rather suspected they couldn't.

And how would anyone ever know, or even remotely suspect, where she'd tossed the gun? They'd have to drag the Hudson also and the bay all the way to Staten Island, because you could drop a gun from a ferry too.

She knew she couldn't morally justify what she was planning to do. It would have been useless to try. But if she had hated Lathrup herself enough to want to kill her, she couldn't see herself in the role of a hypocritical betrayer, sending to his death a man who had lost control completely and gone all the way. If the police had stumbled on the gun themselves, without her help, it would have been quite different. But having opened a Pandora's box, the horror that had come out had to be destroyed. It was her responsibility—hers alone. That the box had been a big flat stone that she had overturned impulsively, with no knowledge of what lay concealed underneath, changed nothing. The same woman's curiosity which had betrayed Pandora had been at work in her. It was the most destructive kind of curiosity in the world, but she had succumbed to it and must pay the price, even if it would mean that she would have to wear a gray prison uniform for four or five years.

Probably the killer should be caught and compelled to defend himself before the law, bolstering his defense with whatever justification he could offer. But she couldn't—she refused pointblank—to become the instrument of his de-

struction. It was a twisted way of thinking, perhaps, but it was her way and she would have to act upon it.

She had gone into the kitchen and was percolating some coffee when the doorbell rang. It didn't alarm her particularly or even bring the image of a policeman with one finger firmly pressed to the bell into her mind.

The doorbell usually rang eight or ten times a day when she was at home. Tradesmen mostly, with groceries she'd ordered by telephone the day before or a special delivery letter from the office with proofs that required a quick checking-over, or just a neighborly visit from the over-talkative girl who lived in the apartment across the hall. Sally Draper could be an awful pest at times—

Then she remembered that no one would expect her to be home on a week-day morning and did become a trifle uneasy. But salesmen and peddlers were always calling, weren't they, defiantly ignoring the big warning sign posted in the hall?

She turned off the gas under the percolator, removed the slightly soiled apron she'd put on to protect the severe, freshly-laundered office dress she'd been too emotionally upset to take off on arriving home and went to answer the bell, crossing the living room with a slight quickening of her pulse.

She paused for the barest instant with her hand on the knob of the front door, trying quickly to decide just what she had better say if it actually was a policeman.

Then she opened the door wide.

Her first impulse, prompted by sheer terror, was to close it again instantly, slam it in his face with all her strength. But he just stood there, staring at her so quietly, with not the slightest trace of hostility in his eyes, that she forced herself to remain calm. And when his expression changed, and his eyes narrowed to gleaming slits and his jaw hardened, he was too quick for her.

He brushed past her into the apartment and swung about to face her, nodding toward the door.

"Better put the chain on," he said. "I imagine the super has a key, and this is one time when we can't afford to chance any kind of interruption."

There was something about the way he was looking at her that compelled instant compliance. She closed the door, clicked the lock on, and inserted the head of the chain into the metal groove on the right side of the door. Her fingers shook as she ran it the full length of the groove.

He was staring at her very steadily now, his eyes still slitted. "You found it, didn't you?" he asked.

"Found what? I just don't understand. I didn't go to the office this morning because—"

"Because you found it," he said, not giving her time to finish, and taking a slow step toward her.

"No, you must listen. Please . . . I. . . ."

"Where is it? What have you done with it?" he demanded.

She shook her head, her lips deathly pale now. She was trembling so violently that it was like . . . a confession. How could she hope to deceive him when he already knew, when the truth was written in her eyes?

"I showed it to you once," he said. "That's the bad part . . . the really bad part. Just one word from you could send me to the chair. You wouldn't even have to turn it over to the police."

He took another slow step toward her and quite suddenly . . . she knew. He'd come here to kill her. Even if she told him where the gun was hidden, even if she put it into his hands and swore that she'd keep silent, that not even police brutality could force the truth out of her, he'd never feel secure while she remained alive.

He'd never trust her completely . . . because he didn't know her *that* well. She'd never really been close to him. Oh, if only she had. If only they'd been lovers, and she'd gone to bed with him . . . anything. The thought revolted her even now, but it was better than dying . . . and now she was going to die.

He wasn't the kind of man who propositioned every pretty woman he met. She would have had to let him know unmistakably that she was . . . that kind. He'd respected her too much to make even a pass the few times she'd gone out with him. There had been something terribly decent about him . . . and she'd admired him for it, respected him in return.

But it would have been better, far better, if she'd let him think her a whore. A killer could trust a slum prostitute because that kind of woman was herself an enemy of the law. Or felt put upon, an outcast, just as he himself had now become, because when he'd killed Lathrup he'd put himself beyond the pale.

She'd never been close to him, that was the trouble. He didn't know that there was a fierce kind of loyalty in her that would never have permitted her to turn informer, because she herself had been a criminal in her thoughts and had wanted Lathrup to die.

He could never have thought her a street-walking strumpet, but if she had slept with him he'd have known just what kind of woman she was, how fierce and determined her

loyalty could be. Now it was too late . . . much too late . . . and she was going to die.

It seemed unjust, horribly cruel and unnecessary. But how could she make him see that?

"You've hidden it somewhere about this apartment," he said. "I'm sure of that. You'd better tell me—fast."

She shook her head, a faint glimmer of hope arising in her. If she refused to tell him where she'd concealed the gun he might not kill her until he knew. He'd have to know, have to find it. Or would he? If she was dead, unable to testify against him, the gun might have been so well-hidden it would never turn up again. He might even jump to the conclusion she'd gotten rid of it already or take a chance on that and—

No, no, *no!* Now she was thinking crazily. Getting rid of the gun would mean she was capable of sympathizing with what he'd done, understanding it—would mean that she was on *his* side. And that was the very thing something deep in her nature, her every reasoning instinct, told her he'd never believe. The closeness again. She could plead with him until she was hoarse, but he'd never believe that. He'd kill her anyway. Kill her first perhaps and search the apartment for the gun afterwards . . .

And that seemed to be what he had made up his mind to do. He was losing patience with her; she could see that plainly enough and the tight knot of fear which was constricting her heart began to tighten even more, and she swayed a little and had to bite down hard on her tongue to keep from screaming.

It wasn't just that he was losing patience with her. There was a heightened tenseness in him, a kind of muscular rigidity that was making his neckcords bulge, his shoulders stiffen. She could sense it, feel it—that dangerous tension mounting in him.

He might want to search for the gun first, but there were times when the human mind went out of control, lost all of its capacity to reason intelligently.

His face was twisting terribly. She tried not to look at him, tried to avoid his eyes, and managed to do so for an instant. But she knew he was still looking at her, that his eyes were burning with a slow, merciless kind of rage simply because she had discovered the truth about him.

He was drawing closer to her suddenly. His feet made a scuffling sound as he advanced upon her and he was breathing in a strange way, hoarsely, almost raspingly.

Closer he came and closer, but still she dared not look at him. And then she did look and saw the glaze of fury in his

eyes and she screamed in wild terror, knowing even as she screamed that no help could come to her.

She fought him desperately, trying to push his arms away, trying to get free of his arms that were beginning to tighten about her. It wasn't a lust-crazed lover's embrace. If only it had been there might have been some hope for her. But how could she hope to escape from the embrace of a man so goaded, the embrace of a man who thought that his own life would be forfeited if he did not silence her quickly and forever.

The harder she struggled the closer his arms came and then it wasn't his arms but his hands she had most to fear. They were reaching for her throat and there was no way she could keep them from encircling her throat and tightening cruelly, no way of avoiding the strangling grip of his strong, muscular fingers.

His thumbs sank into the soft flesh just above her windpipe, and began to press . . . and to press . . .

She could only shake her head, frantically back and forth, and plead dumbly. "No. Please don't. There's no need. I'd have thrown the gun—"

When he finally arose and left her she was lying stretched out full length on the floor, her sightless eyes staring straight up at the ceiling, as if it were a great, rushing river sweeping above her and carrying with it a gun which he spent thirty-five minutes trying to find, ransacking the apartment and cursing softly from time to time, and even crying out once in savage rage and frustration.

He did not find it, and left the apartment without even stopping to look once more at the swollen, purplish face and protruding tongue of a woman who would have gone to prison to protect him.

Chapter VII

IN NEWSPAPER JARGONESE IT was what is known as "crowding." It drove copy-desk men half out of their minds and made reporters more than unusually bar-conscious. The overtime chalked up by the police department in the July heat was no more staggering than the extra hours that had to be divided up between newspapermen covering the Lathrup slaying.

Another slaying a few days after the first would have been sensational enough in itself. But two days after the lifeless body of a second Eaton-Lathrup editor had been found in that editor's own apartment, the victim of a brutal strangler, a third Eaton-Lathrup editor vanished.

Allen Gerstle, the magazine group's bespectacled, white-haired cafe society exposé editor failed to appear at his desk at his usual hour on a rainy Tuesday morning and in forty-eight hours, goaded into an extraordinary burst of check-up activity by frantic telephone calls from his wife and the implications involved in such a disappearance when the Lathrup slaying was being referred to, by a few papers at least, as the crime of the century—goaded, indeed, beyond the call of duty, the police had made certain that it really was a bona fide *missing persons* development.

Gerstle hadn't simply gone off somewhere and gotten drunk. He wasn't given to that and with every policeman in the city on the lookout for him it is doubtful if he could have carried it off if he had been. A five-state alert had failed to turn up any trace of him. He had apparently disappeared into thin air, and while it wasn't quite as sensational a development as the Ruth Porges slaying, it added variety and spice to the headlines, and greatly increased the number of aspirin tablets—and in a few instances, tranquilizers—gulped down in haste by cops on double-duty and around-the-clock news commentators on all the major networks.

A "mysterious disappearance" following so close on the original slaying was just what the case needed—or didn't need, if the harassed brigade could have made their protests heard—to round out the pattern of violence.

To complicate everything, and give the Homicide Squad an additional headache and a feeling of bitter frustration, all this had taken place when they had been quite sure that the killer had been apprehended, and was safely in custody.

A young writer who had wanted to kill Helen Lathrup badly enough to have gone out and purchased a gun and visited the office on the very morning of the slaying! Now he would have to be released, in all probability. There was actually nothing to hold him on that would stand up in court, because Ballistics had confirmed that the gun he'd purchased had not been the murder weapon. He'd violated the Sullivan Law, of course—

The comments of Lieutenant of Detective Joseph Fenton on that particular aspect of the case would not have been printable.

But there was nothing unprintable about the conversation of the four men who sat now in the Eaton-Lathrup offices discussing the case. In Macklin's office, to be precise, because Macklin was the calmest, most unbiased and level-headed of the four and seemed to know just how comforting a cushion a little sensible talk could provide for pent-up or over-charged emotions.

"I still think we'll have to look for a pathological killer and will get nowhere if we write off that probability," Eaton was saying. He sat in a chair by the window, the sunlight bright on his wide bald patch, the lenses of his frameless glasses and the dial of his costly wrist-watch. He was of medium-height, medium-build and had a gray executive look—a top-echelon executive look—although he was sincerely trying to relax and fraternize.

"I think so too," Ellers said. "I've thought so from the first. I was pretty sure, when they arrested Gilmore and Lieutenant Fenton told me they'd traced the purchase of a gun to him, that they had the right man. That's doubtful now, but I agree with you about the psycho likelihood."

"It's very curious," Eaton said. "This whole pathological killer possibility . . . stranger and more chilling that you might suspect. You'd understand better why I'm saying that if you'd known Helen as well as I did. There are people insurance companies shy away from or label very high risks. They're known as the 'accident prone.' It may be based on nothing but superstition, but you'd have a hard time convincing an experienced insurance-policy salesman of that.

"Some people seem to have a rare gift for making accidents happen, of drawing down the lightning upon themselves. They become seriously injured time and time again. And Helen . . . well, you might almost say she invited a psychopath to

kill her . . . just because she dwelt on the horror of that kind of occurrence so often in her mind. The more gruesome aspects of crime fascinated her, and she liked to read about 'ripper cases' and brutal slayings in general. A lot of us do—normal, well-adjusted people in search of exciting reading in the mystery story field. But I always felt, with her, it went considerably beyond that. It was a horror which she acutely feared, a horror of the mind—"

By some kind of near-miracle the veteran ex-newspaperman wasn't even slightly tight and his voice was steady. He was standing a few feet from Eaton, leaning lightly against Macklin's desk and puffing on a light-weight briar.

"I was completely sure," Timothy Hansen said. "Every time Gilmore came to the office to talk with Miss Lathrup I felt uneasily, just looking at him. Those burning dark eyes, and that craggy, strange face of his. Brother! He sure fitted the picture most people probably had of writers—back in the Victorian Age. You'd think he'd stepped right out of the pages of *Wuthering Heights*."

Hansen was not quite an associate but a little more than an assistant editor. He was still quite young—twenty-seven—and had been on the staff for three years, working directly under Allen Gerstle's guidance. Macklin had always translated that as "thumb" in the preparation of the missing editor's cafe society exposure columns. Gerstle had a fiery temper and could lose it easily, but Hansen seemed to have a genuine affection for him and was taking his vanishment very much to heart.

Macklin sat behind his desk, idly running his forefinger over the space-bar of his typewriter, back and forth lightly, as if he were inwardly telling himself that if he should decide to write an account of the progress which the police had made so far, he would only need to depress the bar continuously.

"You're all making the same mistake," Macklin said. "It's one of the oldest mistakes in the world—and the most foolish. You're taking it for granted that there has to be something unusual, abnormal, different, about an imaginative young writer, or an old one, for that matter. Or a creative artist in any field. No, I'm not putting it in just the right way. There is something different about them, or they wouldn't be creative artists. But that difference doesn't reside in their sanity—or lack of it. It is my contention that creative artists are—if you wish to drag abnormality into it—almost abnormally sane."

"I'm afraid I don't get what you're driving at at all," Ellers said quickly. "I can quote you a passage in refutation of that from no less an authority than Aristotle."

He paused, smiling a little and nodding to himself, and Macklin found himself wondering if he were trying to impress Eaton with his learning, and was not otherwise interested in scoring a point in an argument which, with a little effort, might be enlarged to include alcoholics. It would be a completely false and unjustified enlargement, but Macklin hadn't said enough so far to give Ellers any inkling of that.

"Here's the quote," Ellers went on. "No great genius was ever without some mixture of madness, nor can anything grand or superior to the voice of common mortals be spoken except by the agitated soul."

"How can you dispute that?" Hansen said, nodding in instant agreement. "All geniuses are a little mad. And by the same token, capable of a sudden, explosive violence when a situation gets out of hand and becomes unendurable to them."

"I couldn't disagree more violently," Macklin said.

Eaton sighed. "And I couldn't care less," he interposed. "Not right at the moment, anyway. I wish all three of you would shut up."

"I'd like to thrash it out with Fred right now," Macklin said, staring steadily at Ellers. "It angers me when someone makes a statement like that—Plato, Aristotle or whomever. It doesn't matter what towering minds they were supposed to have. They lived long before modern science could give us just a little understanding, at least, of why human beings behave as they do."

"All right," Eaton muttered resignedly. "Speak your piece and get it out of your system. Otherwise we'll have no peace..."

He smiled thinly. "Sorry. No pun intended."

"I'll try to keep it brief," Macklin said. "To me the one great, distinguishing quality of creative genius is sanity—a sanity that illuminates every aspect of human experience. I'll quote *you* a passage from Emily Dickinson: 'Pardon me my sanity in an insane world.'"

"Well, that makes sense to me, that sums it up. I'll tell you why. A creative artist has superior insights into the nature of reality. Reason, completely rational behavior—common sense on a high level, if you want to put it in another way—is a *must* with the creative mind, if it isn't to be crippled or completely destroyed.

"A man of creative genius wages a terrific struggle for survival every waking moment and even in his sleep. He is torn by emotions a hundred times as tumultuous as those of the average person. He has all the emotional intensity of your so-called 'mad genius', granted. But it stops there. He's simply incapable of accepting the lunacies of society at its

most neurotic, its most hare-brained. In fact, he's incapable of accepting or compromising with those lunacies at any point. His basic sanity is too great."

"Just what are you trying to say, Jim?" Eaton asked.

"Simply this. He has a fifty percent chance of winning that struggle because a man of creative genius has much more than the average person's inner strength. Don't kid yourself. He has, or he'd go down fast. Few people could survive the kind of battle he wages with himself every waking hour for ten minutes at a stretch.

"Life itself, just the terrible kind of punishment that life inflicts—illnesses, misfortunes of every kind, tragic accidents, death—can hurt him much more than you or I can be hurt, simply because he has the emotional sensitivity which goes with genius.

"All right. He has at least a fighting chance of winning that struggle and contributing something important, a new insight, a new vision which will enrich human life. But what intensifies the struggle, making it so bad at times it's a wonder all creative artists don't go straight out and jump off the bridge, is the often completely irrational behavior of the people he meets.

"Don't you see? They fasten themselves on him, make impossible demands, take advantage of his sensitivity by making him a kind of target for all of their own frustrations and unrealistic adjustments to life—"

Macklin paused and spread his hands. "I could go on and on, but I think I've said enough."

"I think you have," Ellers commented, wryly. "I don't agree at all—with any part of it."

"There could be considerable truth in what Jim has said," Eaton conceded. "But I agree with Aristotle too, in a way. You might say that each opinion is a kind of half-truth. The trouble is, when you try to fit the two parts together you run into more trouble. I still say—and this really hasn't too much to do with what we've just been talking about—that the man who killed Helen Lathrup and Ruth Porges was probably mentally unbalanced. It has all the earmarks of that kind of double slaying."

"I'm not convinced of that," Macklin said. "And what makes you so sure the murderer was a man. It could have been a woman."

"I'm afraid I agree with Mr. Eaton," Hansen said.

Macklin regarded him steadily for a moment. "I don't think you do," he said.

"What's that?" Hansen's color rose a little and he returned Macklin's stare almost angrily.

"You've been agreeing with Mr. Eaton all along," he said. "And so has Fred. But I've a feeling you're really on my side."

"What makes you say that? Why should I lie about it?"

Macklin turned to Eaton. "If he tells you what he really thinks and why . . . will that be all right? I mean, you won't mind his speaking frankly?"

Eaton looked puzzled. "Why should I mind?"

"Because I don't think he has too much to go on, and neither have I. If I told you what I suspect, from the few talks I had with Gerstle and things he let slip out I'd have to do an awful lot of guessing. And I think Tim's been hesitating to speak frankly for the same reason."

For the first time Macklin grinned, in his characteristic, almost boyish way. It was the kind of grin which could have charmed a bird down out of the trees, and it dispelled both Eaton's puzzlement and Hansen's anger.

"Go ahead, Tim," Eaton said. "Disagree with me as much as you want to. And if there are gaps in what you suspect, don't let it trouble you."

"There are plenty of gaps," Hansen said. "Frankly, I'm a little ashamed of myself. But I was thinking of Mr. Gerstle, of the great danger he may be in, and I felt it might be wise for me to pretend to go along with the psychopathic—Oh, heck, I seem to be making it worse!"

"Not at all," Eaton said, reassuringly. "Things get around, even when they're told to me in strict confidence. I'm not speaking sarcastically, believe me, or actually blaming myself. Only a fool would claim he can always keep every part of a confidence. A few stray bits of information often slip out subconsciously."

"Well," Hansen said, a little more at his ease. "Gerstle had dug up something pretty sensational and was going to run it, but Miss Lathrup said, no. She was really putting her foot down about it."

"I see," Eaton said. "Did Gerstle show you what he was going to publish?"

Hansen shook his head. "I just know, in a general way, what kind of hydrogen bomb it was. No names, nothing specific. He wouldn't show me the signed statements he'd managed to assemble. But I do know this—it would have made that Jelke, cafe-society, party-girl scandal of ten or twelve years ago look like a pin-money racket."

"Was it wholly cafe society?" Eaton asked.

"No—it took in TV, and Hollywood. There were big producers involved."

"But it was a girls-for-sale racket, wasn't it?" Macklin asked, bluntly.

Hansen hesitated for an instant, then nodded.

"And that's all you know about it?" Eaton asked.

"That's all," Hansen said.

"Not much to go on," Eaton said. "But we'll have to tell the police about it."

"Should we, sir? That's what's been worrying me. If Mr. Gerstle is in danger, because of it, might it not be well to keep it to ourselves for a few days longer?"

Eaton shook his head. "I don't think so. When a child's been kidnapped, wise parents go straight to the police. It's the best, the safest way, in the long run. And I doubt very much if anyone is going to phone us, to say they'll release Gerstle if we promise to make him kill the story. If Gerstle is in danger—he'll need all the police help he can get."

"I agree with you there," Macklin said quietly.

Eaton got slowly to his feet. There was an utterly weary, half-despairing look in his eyes. "This is all very bad," he said. "It will do the magazines no good—although I suppose I shouldn't even be thinking of that. I haven't the least idea why Helen wanted to keep that story hushed up. She didn't tell me a thing about it and naturally Gerstle wouldn't take me into his confidence without her permission. He could have told me later—I wish to God he had—but I guess he had his own reasons for preferring to keep silent. It may cost him his life, if he isn't dead already."

Hansen paled visibly. "Sir, you don't think—"

"We just don't know," Eaton said. "You're pretty young, Tim. When you're my age, you'll give up trying to soften, or hide from yourself, just how ugly a turn life can take at times. There's nothing to be gained by it."

Chapter VIII

THE NEXT UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT in the Lathrup case took place in broad daylight, at two o'clock in the afternoon.

What does a police officer do when he has two sensational murders and a disappearance weighing heavily on his shoulders and he sees something of a criminal nature taking place right before his eyes?

There are several things he can do. If he happens to be sitting in a police car he can exercise quick judgment and gain an advantage right at the start. He can radio a half-dozen other cars to converge upon the scene or keep at a distance and follow his lead. He can put a call directly through to headquarters and in a matter of minutes a third of the police in the city will be alerted and a big dragnet will be spread fast.

He can even whip out a gun, step right up and do what he can to put a stop to it then and there.

But if he's on foot and off-duty, and weary as hell from days and nights of double-duty it isn't always possible for him to do any of those things, except the last, with its often dangerous and opportunity-destroying complications.

It was only by a kind of miracle—what else could you call a sudden, difficult-to-explain restlessness tugging at a cop who should have been home asleep with the blinds drawn?—that Lieutenant Fenton was there at all, a half block from the Eaton-Lathrup building at so early an hour in the afternoon. And the fact that other restless cops, cops who could never quite believe they'd done enough in the line of duty, had had similar experiences in the past, did not diminish the lucky-accident strangeness of it.

It was his sixth visit to the magazine offices in three days, and it could have been postponed. But there were still a few questions he'd neglected to ask the staff, and when sleep wouldn't come he'd gotten up, brewed himself two cups of strong coffee, put on his clothes—choosing a light gray tropical worsted suit because it was an unusually hot and muggy day even for New York in July—and taken the subway to the Eaton-Lathrup building, stopping only briefly at the

drugstore on the corner to buy himself a fresh pack of cigarettes.

He was about fifty of sixty feet from the building's main entrance when Timothy Hansen, Gerstle's Man Friday on the big magazine group's two cafe society, exposé magazines, emerged into the clear, bright sunlight. The young associate editor was not alone. His steps seemed almost to drag, and two heavyset men wearing light-weight summer suits just a little darker in color than the one which Fenton had donned, had fallen into step on opposite sides of him, their turned-down panamas shading features which Fenton did not like at all.

There was a suspicious-looking bulge in the coat pocket of one of Hansen's two escorts, and the slow, reluctant way the man seemed to be moving left little doubt in Fenton's mind as to what was taking place.

There was a black coupe parked at the curb, and the young associate editor was being escorted toward it. He entered the car a little ahead of the two heavyset men, but they wasted no time in climbing in after him, and Fenton caught the momentary glitter of sunlight on what looked like the barrel of a drawn automatic.

All this Lieutenant Fenton saw, and froze to immobility. Only for an instant, however. A short distance behind him a middle-aged man with a brief case was just getting into another car, a green Ford sedan. He'd noticed the car in passing, along with the man's unhurried stride. He'd even noticed the car keys dangling from the sedan owner's hand.

Fenton swung about and was grasping the door of the second car before the startled man could ease himself completely into the driver's seat.

Fenton whipped out and displayed his badge. "Get out, please, and give me those keys," he said, his voice so sharp that the man obeyed almost automatically and without waiting for Fenton to add: "This is a police emergency. I'm taking your car. Nothing to worry about. You'll get it back. Just get out and do as I tell you."

He waited until the man reached the sidewalk before he gave him further, urgent instructions. He was himself in the driver's seat and using one of the keys when he met the car owner's agitated gaze and said, still speaking sharply. "Listen carefully, please. Go to the drugstore on the corner, and ask for the police. Put the call through as quickly as you can. Say that Lieutenant Fenton of Homicide—get that, *homicide*—has started trailing a car from this address. Say the car is heading north. And tell them . . . it's a kidnapping.

Be sure to give them the number of this building: 584—and the street. It's a black coupe: YG67999. Got that?"

The man nodded, his face very pale now.

"All right. Make it fast. If you should run into a cop, tell him the same thing. Even *after* you've phoned."

Fenton barely waited for the man to nod again before he nosed the sedan out into the traffic flow and followed the black coupe at a cautious distance, taking care not to give it too much headway and slowing a little when he seemed in danger of overtaking it.

A half hour later Fenton was still trailing the coupe at a cautious distance and he was still alone. No wail of a police siren had arisen behind him and he was now grateful for that.

It had taken him a few minutes to make up his mind and decide that he was justified in feeling that way, and even now he had misgivings. He did not regret the instructions he'd given the owner of the sedan. The phone call had been routine, a necessary safeguard. He owed Hansen that much, at least.

And if police cars started converging around him he'd accept what came. But the kind of instructions he'd have *liked* to give the startled car owner only a policeman could have sent in to headquarters. Keep me in view, but don't give the game away. Don't interfere unless you see I'm in trouble. A chance like this may never come again. The payoff could be: two murders and a disappearance solved."

It wasn't what a policeman would ordinarily do. It was against all precedent and could cost him his badge. In one way he *had* increased the risks for Hansen, by not whipping out a gun and forcing a showdown in front of the building.

It would have been a risky showdown and Hansen might have ended up dead. Fenton also—but it was to Fenton's credit that he hadn't given that a thought. His decision—and he'd made up his mind about it only after a few minutes of driving—had been influenced chiefly by two considerations. The missing editor was in great danger, if he was still alive. It could almost be taken for granted that the murderer had kidnapped Gerstle, precisely as Hansen had been kidnapped. Not to force an instant showdown might lead to Gerstle's rescue and to force a showdown to Hansen's death. To forgo that and trail the car might be increasing the risks for Hansen in one way, but not in the most dangerous possible way. If given the choice—would Hansen prefer to be trailed or dropped to the floor of the car with a bullet in the head?

One other consideration weighed a little. The murderer

had slain twice and might slay again. He was no ordinary murderer, but the most dangerous kind of killer. This had become one of the big, nation-arousing series of crimes. To catch that kind of killer justified unusual measures, the taking of exceptional risks.

Or did it? Even now, he wasn't completely sure. When a policeman sees a crime taking place in his presence, he's supposed to draw a gun and start shooting, if the crime can be prevented in no other way. Immediately, without stopping to speculate as to what some of the possible repercussions might be.

Still . . . still . . . a man had to have the courage of his convictions, even if it meant bending the rules a little more than the Manual told young rookies they had a right to do. He wasn't a young rookie; and a cop who had been on the Force thirty years, and worked his way up to a Detective Lieutenancy the hard, patient way, had a right, surely, to exercise his own judgment in a situation like this.

He wouldn't be breaking the backbone of the rules, cracking the spinal column in a completely demoralizing way. The backbone would snap back, and a vicious killer would be started on his way to the chair . . . and all he really had to do was to make absolutely certain that the coupe did not get away.

If he should lose it in the traffic . . .

He relaxed a little, telling himself that there was much less likelihood of that now, because they had passed over the Triboro Bridge into Queens and the traffic had thinned considerably.

They were still on the main highway and quite a few cars were passing in both directions, but there was no heavy congestion or traffic snarls or many big trucks to block the view. Fenton was just as well satisfied to see the traffic change a little now and then, growing slightly heavy at intervals but thinning out again the instant a turnpike swept past.

Just two cars on a clear road would have been very bad, he told himself. This way there was at least a fifty percent chance Hansen's two escorts wouldn't suspect they were being trailed. A car traveling on a main traffic artery didn't have to be trailing anyone, even if it kept a variable distance behind another car for a considerable length of time.

On sober reflection Fenton cut the likelihood that the pair in the car ahead would suspect anything from fifty to about twenty percent. To kidnap a man in broad daylight at the point of a gun from a building that the police had good reason to keep under fairly close surveillance was taking a big risk, of course. But it wasn't a police car that was

trailing them, and they'd seen nothing on the block to make them suspicious—just a middle-aged man getting into another car further down the block, and a pedestrian approaching the building with nothing about him to suggest that he was a police officer.

Of course if they had looked back and seen him take over the other car on pulling out from the curb, the percentage would soar again, right up to the hundred mark. But would they be keeping on this way if they had? The car ahead hadn't zigzagged in and out of traffic at any time or put on an unusual burst of speed, as if in an effort to elude a pursuing car.

Fifteen minutes later the scenery changed a bit, the traffic thinned some more, and in the distance there were occasional glimpses of Flushing Bay.

The car ahead remained on the main highway for another ten minutes and then made a sharp turn at a circular, three-lane intersection and started traveling in the direction of the Bay. Fortunately the traffic became fairly heavy again at that point, and Fenton was able to continue on a cautious distance behind without running the risk of losing sight of the coupe. There were two more turns and the last brought them to a quite narrow road running almost parallel with the Bay.

The shining bright waters of the Bay were almost constantly visible now, cut off by long rows of trees at intervals, but close enough to bring a wide expanse of open water into clear view. But the coupe didn't slow down to enable its occupants to train an appreciative eye on white sails glimmering in the sunlight or to inhale with pleasure the tangy, brine-scented air. Fenton sat very still, with no admiring eye for the scenery either, his face set in harsh lines.

The black coupe finally turned into a side road that ran directly downhill to the bay and Fenton drew in quickly to the side of the highway and waited until the car ahead was out of sight before making a turn that otherwise would have been a dead giveaway.

Fenton made the turn slowly and for the next few seconds kept his eyes straight ahead and watched the road for the slightest stir of movement. But his extreme caution proved unnecessary, for the coupe had vanished around a corkscrew curve, and it did not come into view again until a wide stretch of open water burst on Fenton's vision.

The car ahead was heading straight for what appeared to be a fisherman's landing at the narrowing tip of a wide inlet. Fenton could see the wharf and the boathouse clearly, and rowboats bobbing about in the tide at the end of the wharf.

Far out near the middle of the inlet a large motor cruiser rode at anchor.

Fenton drew in to the side of the road, switched off the ignition and descended from the car just beyond the corkscrew curve. He continued on down the slope on foot, taking care to keep in the shadows cast by overhanging foliage.

He had about a mile and a half of descending road to cover before he reached the boathouse and the open clearing in front of the wharf. He had just about reached it, still keeping close to the edge of the road with its protective foliage screen when the sound of voice raised to more than conversational pitch came to his ears.

Fenton stood very still, well within the last cluster of sheltering trees, and strained his ears to catch what was being said.

The voices came to him whipped by the wind, but he heard one, sharply-spoken order. "Push off! Don't just stand there! Every one of these goddam boats has taken on water!"

The complaint was followed by the steady click of oarlocks, and a dwindling murmur of barely distinguishable sound.

He did not emerge from the cluster of trees immediately, but waited several minutes. Even then he was careful not to step completely into the open, but crouched down and peered out from behind a waist-high clump of thinning foliage.

The rowboat was now about two hundred feet from the wharf and appeared to be moving out into the inlet on a very straight course, a course which could hardly fail to bring it close to the anchored motor cruiser.

He had very little doubt that it was heading directly for the cruiser, and that the three men in the boat would soon be going aboard. One of the heavyset men was plying the oars and the other sat in the middle of the boat facing Hansen, who sat in the stern. Whether or not he was keeping young Hansen covered with a gun Fenton could not determine. The sunlight was too bright and an automatic pistol too small an object to be visible from so great a distance.

Fenton stood very still for a moment, debating the wisdom of going straight to the boathouse and having a showdown with the man—or men—he might find there.

He was almost sure that whoever owned the wharf and the boats knew exactly what was going on and had been paid to cooperate. It seemed to him unlikely that the pair in the rowboat would have risked bringing Hansen there otherwise.

But he couldn't be completely sure, and getting in touch with Center Street fast was very urgent. He'd passed two Manhattan-bound police cars on the Queen's side of the

bridge and a cop on a motorcycle. But his decision not to flash a warning signal to the car ahead by enlisting police aid had hardened during the drive and he'd decided not to. Now he regretted having taken so much upon himself. A police escort would have swiftly overtaken the kidnappers and rescued Hansen. Any chance of finding out what had happened to Gerstle or trapping the murderer would have vanished into thin air, in all likelihood, for the two kidnappers couldn't be depended upon to name him. And they could still have silenced Hansen with a bullet, figuring maybe that a good mouthpiece, hired by the killer, might be able to turn it into an act of self-defense before a rigged jury. There was no chance too desperate and even suicidal for trapped gunmen to take, if you hardly gave them time to reason.

He'd done a foolish thing, however, and he realized it now. Only a quick phone call from the boathouse could set it right again. With luck, a dozen police cars could close in on the wharf in fifteen or twenty minutes. And it wouldn't take long for the police to get to the cruiser. If it started moving, the Coast Guard could be alerted.

Fenton made up his mind quickly. He had a gun, and even if there were two or three men in the boathouse the odds would be in his favor. He was reproaching himself so bitterly now that he decided on the spot he'd turn in his badge and make a full confession if anything went wrong and Hansen was slugged and dropped over the rail of the cruiser before he could be rescued.

He emerged from the cluster of trees and walked straight toward the boathouse, his hand on the butt of his gun, in instant readiness for any contingency.

He walked to the door, opened it and stepped inside—and stood blinking in amazement.

The boathouse wasn't deserted. But it had only one occupant—a frail little old man of about seventy-five, who sat dozing in a chair by a dust-darkened window.

Fenton cast one quick glance at the old man and then his eyes swept the interior of the boathouse and came to rest on a phone booth behind a waist-high coil of rope and six oars stacked crosswise. He lost no time in encircling the rope and oars and wedging himself in the phone booth.

He deposited a dime and waited, with sweating palms, for the humming sound to start before dialing. There was no humming sound. He jerked the receiver hook up and down, but nothing happened. In desperation he dialed the operator. Still nothing.

Cursing softly, he emerged from the booth and shook the old man awake.

He hardly gave him time to wake up completely. "The phone!" he demanded. "What's wrong with it?"

The old man stirred drowsily, and blinked sleepy eyes. Then, quite suddenly, he was wide awake and staring.

"What's matter?" he muttered. "Who're you? How did you get here?"

"Never mind who I am," Fenton said. "Just tell me one thing. Did you give a boat to three men just now? Better not lie about it. I saw them pushing off."

The old man shook his head. "Been asleep for an hour," he mumbled. His eyes had darted to the clock on the opposite wall of the boathouse, as if Fenton's question had filled him with alarm and an instant need to find out the time.

"But you expected three men to come and take a boat? One of them would be acting kind of frightened."

The old man nodded again. "Boss told me to be on the lookout for them. But I must have dozed off."

"You know why they wanted a boat in a hurry?" Fenton asked. "Boss tell you?"

"No, he just said they were friends of his."

"What kind of man is this boss of yours. Has he a police record?"

"A police . . . record?"

"I'd advise you not to go coy on me. Has he ever been in trouble with the police? You ought to know. You work for him."

The old man was becoming a little angry now. "Why are you asking me all these questions?" he demanded. "What business is it of yours?"

Fenton took out his badge and held it before the old man's eyes.

"A cop, eh?" the old man muttered. "I don't want no trouble with the police, mister. I'll tell you everything I know. It ain't much. I only been workin' here three weeks. No police ever came here. But the man who owns the motor yacht out there in the inlet came here and talked to the boss a couple of times. He didn't look like no crook to me. Man about forty or forty-five, hair cut short, and wearing a light-weight suit same color as yours. Figured he must be loaded, to own a motor yacht like that. Dressed like he was, too."

"Then what put the idea into your head he might have been a crook?" Fenton asked.

"Well, he acted kind of funny, kept his voice low and once I saw him slip the boss some money. And he mentioned the police a couple of times. Boss doesn't know I have sharp ears. I'm seventy-seven but there's nothing wrong with my hearing."

"All right," Fenton said. "Now suppose you tell me what I asked you when I shook you awake. What's wrong with that phone over there? I dropped a dime in, but there was no dialing sound."

"It's been out of order for two days," the old man said. "There was supposed to be a man come here to fix it yesterday, but he never showed up."

"Somebody did a little wire-ripping, maybe?"

The old man shook his head. "No, it just went dead on us. Boss juggled the receiver for about ten minutes, to make sure. He tried it again this morning."

"How far is it to the nearest phone?" Fenton asked.

"Hell, you got to go back to the road you turned off from and drive for about fifteen minutes. There's a gas station—"

"Never mind," Fenton said. "Do you think you could go back to sleep again, if I asked it as a special favor?"

"I told you . . . I don't want no trouble with the police," the old man said. "I got a grown daughter and two grandsons—"

It was a difficult decision for Fenton to make. If he walked back to where he'd parked his car and drove to the gas station twenty-five minutes at least would have to be written off. It might take even longer. And after that, he couldn't count on police cars arriving at the wharf within the optimistic time limit that had come into his mind a short while before. It was nothing that he could be sure of. It would depend on how many squad cars were in the immediate vicinity, and how fast the message went out.

It might be an hour before the police could get to the wharf.

Fenton wasted only about a minute making up his mind. He tapped the old man lightly on the shoulder. "All right. Just close your eyes again and stay put. One more question, first. When is the boss expected back?"

"Not for another couple of hours," the old man said. "His sister-in-law took sick. That's why he ain't here now."

"He has a car?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Well, just stay put," Fenton said. "You're in no trouble with the police right now. If you want to go on being lucky, don't move out of that chair."

"I won't," the old man promised.

When Fenton descended the slope on the east side of the wharf to the gleaming, bright water just beyond he was careful to remain as inconspicuous as possible. He kept close to the shadows cast by tumbled boulders, and the high fringe of

shrubby which ran almost to the waterline, weaving in and out between the rocks.

When he reached the water he paused for an instant to make sure that the rowboat was within a short distance of the cruiser and too far away to take notice of a solitary figure four-fifths concealed by the shoulder-high marsh grasses at the edge of the inlet.

He undressed quickly, stripping himself to his shorts, and placing his clothes in a neat pile behind a large boulder.

The water was not as cold as he'd expected it to be. The noonday sun had warmed it and he could feel the warmth on his scalp as he swam, using an inconspicuous breast stroke, and not even trying to get to the cruiser fast.

Several times he paused to tread water and stare out across the shining surface of the inlet toward the anchored craft. The rowboat had rounded the stern of the cruiser and was now on the other side, no longer visible from the shore.

He began to swim more rapidly only when he felt reasonably sure that Hensen's two escorts had had time to take the young associate editor aboard.

He reached the motor cruiser just as the rowboat drifted back empty on a tow-rope at the vessel's stern. The tide was running toward the stern and he let himself drift with it, keeping close to the dark green hull of the craft until he had rounded the stern and was swimming just underneath the tightly stretched rope.

He was swimming close enough to the cruiser to be invisible from the deck, unless the boarders had remained by the rail and were staring straight down at him. He treaded water for an instant, listening for sounds on deck, his ears alert for a startled grunt or shout of anger.

When he was convinced that he had not been spotted he grasped the rope firmly and ascended hand over hand to the rail. The aftdeck was deserted. Its polished surface glimmered in the sunlight and was encumbered only by a brass stanchion, and a waist-high coil of rope. Although the cruiser was quite large there was no stern or forward deckhouse, just the curving back of what appeared to be a companionway entrance shaped like a gigantic scallop shell.

A moment later Fenton was crouching just inside the shell, above a descending flight of stairs. A faint light was visible from the top of the stairs, but it wasn't the light that interested him. It was the hum of angry voices.

He started to move cautiously downward in order to hear better, but stopped when the voices rose sharply, becoming so heated and enraged that he could catch every word.

"We've kept our hands off you so far, but it wouldn't be

a sharp idea for you to keep shaking your head like that and pretending you don't know what the score is. Sit down, Hansen. Sit down. We told you to relax, didn't we?"

"He's stalling," a deeper voice cut in. "Darby would never have gone this far if he didn't think Gerstle told him more than it's safe for him to know. Why don't you come clean, kid? What have you to gain by stalling?"

There was a slight pause and then Hansen's voice rose as high in fright as the other two voices had in anger. "He didn't tell me a thing. Only that he was collecting information for a series of articles that he was hoping he could persuade Miss Lathrup to let him bring out under his own byline. Sensational material which would name names and be backed up with affidavits. Would I tell you even that much if he'd turned any of that material over to me, as you seem to think he did? I'd just pretend to know nothing at all about it."

"No—you're too smart for that, kid. You want us to think you're leveling with us, and if you denied you'd seen those names—"

"But I didn't. Not one name. He took me into his confidence most of the time, but this was too big, I guess."

"You'd make a good salesman, kid. The way you tell it . . . I can almost see myself buying it. But not quite. And that's going to make a big difference to you, kid . . . you're not quite selling us."

"What do you want me to do? Lie about it?"

"We're wasting time," the one with the lighter voice said. "We should at least try to persuade him."

"We should try, by all means. You want to begin, Foldes?"

There was a meaty thud, followed by a groan and a low, barely audible sobbing sound.

Fenton stiffened in instant concern, his lips tightening. He forced himself to remain where he was for a moment longer, however. It was safe to assume the two below would work up to what they were doing gradually and there were things he desperately wanted to know. Under stress of rage they might let something drop—some clue, some pointer, which would enable him to save both Gerstle and Hansen. They must know what had happened to Gerstle.

There was another thud, and Hansen's cry of pain was too loud, this time, to permit of further delay. Fenton unholstered his revolver, snapped off the safety catch and was down the companionway and in the cabin so fast the two kidnapers were taken completely by surprise.

He gave them no time to recover. The one who had struck Hansen was just raising a reversed automatic for another blow and was facing away from Fenton near the base of

the stairs. A sudden tensing of his muscles failed to save him. Just as a glint of awareness flickered at the perimeter of his vision Fenton's fist caught him flush on the jaw, and sent him crashing backwards.

He hit the opposite bulkhead, rebounded and sank with a groan to his knees. Fenton moved in close again, and chopped downward on his wrist, sending the gun clattering. It was a needless precaution, for the man was already going limp, and had held fast to the gun in his backward lurch by convulsively contracting his fingers.

He collapsed forward on his face and Fenton did not wait to see if he would try to rise again. The danger that his companion would get to the dropped gun first was too urgent. He could have prevented that by putting a bullet in him with his own gun, but he did not want to kill a key accessory in a murder case and he was too excited to be sure of merely splintering the man's kneecap.

The weapon had skidded half way across the cabin, but Fenton raised his right foot and kicked it two yards further a split second before it could pass into dangerous hands again.

The second man had dropped on all fours, and his hand hit the deck with a thud when the gun was kicked beyond reach of his fingers. Fenton reversed his own gun and clobbered the unsuccessful weapon snatcher across the back of his skull with a blow that flattened him out almost at his companion's side.

The big detective was breathing harshly when he straightened, his face very white and looked with concern at Hansen, who was moaning and slumping a little in a straight-backed chair, with a swelling ugly-looking bruise on his right forehead. One eye was half-closed, and his breathing was harsher than Fenton's.

Fenton bent and gripped him firmly by the shoulders, easing him into a less strained position. "Take it easy," he cautioned. "Just lean back and don't try to talk for a minute. You're going to be all right."

"Thanks," Hansen muttered, disregarding the advice. "They . . . slugged me twice. Felt like the whole top of my head was coming off the second time."

Fenton nodded. "They were just being gentle," he said. "I know the breed. Each time they hit you a little harder and they don't stop until you black out. But they do it the slow way, even when it's the butt of a gun they slug you with. They keep hoping you'll talk . . ."

"They were going to kill me," Hansen said.

"I know. I heard them talking from just up above."

"Thank God for that," the young man breathed.

"Yes. I'm glad I could get here in time."

He turned and swept the cabin with his eyes. The two kidnappers were still out.

Fenton hesitated for an instant, then tapped the handle of his gun, letting it rest on Hansen's right knee, and tightening his grip on Hansen's shoulder. "I don't suppose you've ever shot a man, in self-defense or otherwise. But do you think you could handle a gun if you had to . . . handle it well? There's a coil of rope on deck, and I've got to tie these two up. The quicker it's done the better."

Hansen nodded, an angry glint coming into his eyes. "You can trust me," he said. "Just let one of them make a move—"

"All right," Fenton said. "But be careful—the safety catch is off. If one of them comes to, and tries to take the gun away from you—shoot to kill."

Fifteen minutes later Fenton stood by the rail of the cruiser, staring down into the clear, blue-green water, a deeply worried, almost tormented look in his eyes. He had no right, he told himself, to feel the way he did, for Hansen was alive and safe and the two kidnappers securely bound.

If he'd stayed on shore until help arrived and Hansen had finished dead, a dark cloud would have hung over him for the rest of his life, even if he turned in his badge. He had a lot to be thankful for, for self-reproach to a man like himself could be harder to live with than the sternest kind of official censure.

But it took more than what had happened to drive away all of the clouds—far more. He still didn't know what had become of Gerstle, and although it wasn't too hard to picture what *might* have happened to the elderly exposé editor it was bad . . . very bad . . . for a cop to allow his imagination to paint a picture so ugly that he'd stop thinking seriously about how to rescue a living man and concentrate solely on capturing a remorseless killer who had included that man in his list of victims.

He was still confronted with the same problem which had prevented him from shooting it out with the kidnappers in front of the Eaton-Lathrup building. The pair might be persuaded to talk, since they'd have more time to reflect now, and would realize they could only hope to escape the chair by turning State's evidence. It would be a slim reed for them even then, but they might seize upon it. They might . . . but it couldn't be counted on.

He was rather glad that the motor cruiser had a tiny kitchen, and that he'd persuaded young Hansen to spend a few

minutes there percolating some coffee before they both went ashore in the rowboat with the securely bound pair. It gave him a chance to straighten his shoulders, collect his thoughts and breathe in the brine-scented air. It wasn't the open sea, only the fingertip of a bay, with the shoreline close on both sides. But there was something about any part of the ocean that could give a harassed man perspective, make him realize how small and quick-passing all human tragedies were, when you contrasted them with eternally breaking waves, and the vast shining permanence of the sea.

He had paused for only a moment by the rail, to stare down into the clear water, seeking perhaps to make that realization even stronger, to keep it more forcefully in mind. Or perhaps only because he was so inwardly preoccupied. He could not have said exactly why.

He could see every rock and crevice, every waving seaweed, every darting silvery fish between the cruiser's keel and the sandy bottom, for the inlet was now as still as a sheet of glass.

He was just turning from the rail when a faint gust of wind ruffled the water, spoiling its crystal-clear transparency. The ripples attracted his attention and he did not turn, simply continued on for a few paces parallel with the rail.

He was staring down idly when the ripples vanished and he could see all the way to the bottom again.

A look of horror came into his eyes and he gripped the rail with both hands, cold sweat oozing from the pores of his skin, bringing a glistening to his bare back, drenching him from waist to armpits.

The corpse was wedged in a narrow rock crevice, in a rigidly contorted attitude, the face white and staring and turned upward, the legs grotesquely bent. It was clothed only in shorts and the blonde hair on the naked chest was matted with seaweed, which swayed back and forth in the underwater current.

Curiously enough, the hair on the dead man's head did not move with the current, but the slack jaw seemed to move slightly, as if protesting against the indignity which had been thrust upon him.

There was neither strength nor weakness in Gerstle's lifeless features now, but there was something about the configuration of the face which suggested that great energy and firmness of purpose had once been dominant characteristics of the man. The cheeks were faintly blue with a two-days' growth of beard, the eyes wide and staring, the lips purplish.

Both the wrists and ankles of the slain cafe society exposé editor had been bound with heavy wire which glistened in the

downstreaming sunlight, and had cut cruelly into the flesh, whether before or after death Fenton had no way of knowing.

How long the corpse had remained at the bottom of the inlet was another thing which the detective had no way of knowing. But he was almost sure that it could not have been longer than two or three days, for no trace of decomposition was visible on either the face or the body.

It could have been dropped overboard from any part of the inlet and been carried by the tides to where it now was, but somehow he doubted that it had been carried far. It did not have a sea-battered look.

Fenton did not remain for more than a minute or two by the rail speculating about it. A grapple might have drawn it to the surface, but he had no stomach for such a procedure at that particular moment, even if he could have found a grapple somewhere on the cruiser.

He was content to let the body remain where it was, securely wedged in a rock crevice, until the police could follow their usual procedure, and examine it *in situ* before removing it.

A sardonic thought flashed for an instant across his mind, but he put it from him as unworthy. No dusting for fingerprints here, or surrounding the corpse with chalk marks. The bottom of a Flushing Bay inlet was quite different from a magazine office.

Chapter IX

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN a repeat of a conference that had taken place in the Eaton-Lathrup offices several days earlier, if twice the original number of people hadn't been present. Like the earlier conference, it was held in Macklin's office and in addition to Macklin, Eaton, young Hansen and Ellers, there were two women and two police officers present.

It was a conference . . . in a strictly official sense. Lieutenant Fenton had made it plain that there were a number of weighty matters to be discussed and that he wished precisely eight people to be present.

The eight, of course, included First Grade Detective Gallison and himself. One of the women was Lynn Prentiss, the other Susan Weil, who presided over the seldom-idle switchboard in the outer office.

As before, it was Macklin who seemed the most intent on asking blunt questions, and challenging the opinion of the majority. Even Fenton came under challenge, and the big detective seemed content to let Macklin talk on for several minutes in almost uninterrupted fashion, for many of the points which the boyish-looking editor brought up—he was almost phenomenally youthful-looking for a man in his forties, Fenton told himself—seemed both discerning and well-taken.

"I don't understand," Macklin was saying, "why there should be any doubt left in your mind, Lieutenant, as to the guilt of the man you've just arrested and charged with Gerstle's murder."

"Not as to Gerstle's murder," Fenton said. "I thought I made that very plain. He'll go before a jury for killing Gerstle. But the other two slayings—"

"For Pete's sake, Lieutenant," Macklin said, leaning a little forward and giving him no time to finish. "You've arrested the owner of that motor cruiser, and he turns out to be someone Helen Lathrup had known for five years. Not to mince words, John Darby had been her lover for that length of time, if not longer. They quarreled and she broke off with him a half-dozen times. But just recently the fire started burning again, for both of them. He practically admits

all that, because I guess he knows he'd gain nothing by denying it. What he doesn't admit is that they quarreled again even more recently."

Macklin paused an instant, as if to emphasize the importance of what he was about to say. Then he went on in a tone of absolute conviction: "Isn't it all pretty obvious? When the fires started burning again she sat on Gerstle's story, wouldn't let him run it. It was big, but that didn't matter. She was determined to protect Darby. Then it stands to reason they must have quarreled again. You'll never get him to admit that, because it supplies the strongest kind of motive for murder and would be the equivalent of a complete confession. They quarreled again and she threatened to give Gerstle the green light, and that's why he killed her."

"A pretty drastic way of making sure," Fenton said. "Why didn't he try making up again with her?"

"He probably did and got nowhere. When once her mind was made up, it usually stayed that way. Really made up, I mean. She might have quarreled with Darby off and on for years, enjoyed letting him dangle, but this time she probably turned absolutely venomous.

"Consider what kind of man he is. That's important, too. A cafe society procurer—a flesh-for-sale racketeer with a capital-gains league clientele—big names in Hollywood and the TV industry, not to mention the magazine field. Consider how far that kind of upper-echelon pimp would go if she thought she was about to blow his five-million-a-year racket sky high, and himself along with it? Of course Darby killed her."

"And Ruth Porges too?" Fenton asked.

Macklin nodded. "She worked here, didn't she? I knew that Gerstle was working on something big which she didn't want him to publish, and she may have found out more than either Hansen or I knew or suspected. She may have found out too much for him to let her go on living. It all hangs together, doesn't it? It would be the wildest kind of coincidence if Darby just murdered Gerstle and someone else killed Helen Lathrup and Ruth Porges."

"I'm afraid I can't agree," Fenton said quietly. "It would be the wildest kind of coincidence if the three crimes were not *closely related*. But they were, very closely, even if a different person committed the first two and for an entirely different reason."

"And I'm afraid I can't follow your line of reasoning," Macklin said. He grinned suddenly. "I don't know why I should be raising problems for the police to worry about,

when you're so convinced that you know just who did murder Helen Lathrup, and why!"

"We know," Fenton said.

"Then why don't you arrest him then?"

"We intend to," Fenton said. "But first I'd like to point out the flaw in your line of reasoning. You've just said the flame started up again between Helen Lathrup and Darby, and she sat on Gerstle's exposé. That we know—Darby, as you say, has practically admitted it, because he knows it would remove any motive he might have had for killing Helen Lathrup. He'd have a very special reason for wanting her to stay alive. And he did want her to stay alive, you can be sure of that."

"Not if she quarreled with him again still later," Macklin said.

"Just have patience," Fenton said. "I'm coming to that. What makes you so sure she quarreled with him again, in a deadly serious way this time, and was going to expose him? We haven't uncovered a shred of evidence pointing in that direction. It just possibly might be true, because she was a quarrelsome woman, but even if it were true, he didn't kill her for that, or any other reason. He didn't kill her, period. If they had another quarrel, I rather suspect he'd have known how to talk himself back into her good graces again. So the whole quarrel motive is pure assumption on your part."

"A very plausible assumption," Macklin pointed out.

"Under ordinary circumstances it would be," Fenton conceded. "But it carries no weight at all now, because we know who murdered Helen Lathrup and—well, we can make a pretty good guess as to why he did it, even if we're not absolutely sure about his motive."

Fenton nodded, his lips tightening a little. "By the same token, we know that Darby couldn't have murdered her. He happens to have an unbreakable alibi for that particular morning, and the two hoodlums who kidnapped Hansen have just as good an alibi, and they were the only professional, gun-carrying characters in his employ, as far as we've been able to determine. But Darby couldn't have murdered her anyway—because someone else did. Someone else went into her office and shot her dead and it was *that* which started the fire under Darby. With Lathrup dead, Darby had no longer a beautiful, protective, guardian angel—or crime-blinking witch, if you'd prefer that term—to keep the exposé under wraps, and Gerstle would have had a field day. And Gerstle was going ahead with it, not telling anyone, not even Mr. Eaton or Hansen here . . . although Darby made

the mistake of thinking Hansen did know and had him kidnapped also, to silence him."

Macklin shook his head. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I just can't buy it. I'm willing to be convinced, of course, if you've strong evidence to support it. But otherwise—"

"We've the strongest kind of evidence," Fenton said, "short of what an eye-witness would be able to tell us. No jury could listen to expert testimony regarding it, and stay locked up for more than ten or fifteen minutes."

He paused for a moment to stare around the office. His gaze lingered for an instant on Ellers and it seemed to Lynn Prentiss—up to that moment her own gaze had rested on Macklin and the detective—that the elderly editor paled slightly. But Hansen and Eaton appeared ill at ease too, the publisher extremely so, and even Susan Weil grew a little restive under the big detective's prolonged scrutiny.

It was to Susan that he spoke. "The switchboard keeps you pretty busy, doesn't it, Miss Weil," he said. "If someone came out of one of the offices on this side of the reception desk and darted past you—I'm using that word deliberately because it describes the way he probably moved—it would be quite possible for him to reach Miss Lathrup's office on the other side of the desk-division unobserved, I should imagine. Your back would be turned, because the switchboard faces toward the outer door. Isn't that so?"

Susan wet her lips before replying. But her answer was decisive enough. "Yes, sir. I'm quite sure I wouldn't have seen him, if I was plugging in a call."

"Then, if he'd darted back again a few moments later, it stands to reason you wouldn't have seen him then either . . . if you happened to be answering another call or even—if you just happened to have your back turned. It would have been very easy for him to pause an instant before darting back to make sure that your back would be turned."

Susan nodded. "That's right, sir. When someone comes into the outer office I usually see him right away, because I just have to glance sideways. But I seldom turn around and look behind me, unless an editor speaks to me. Editors pass back and forth all the time and even when I hear them I seldom turn around."

"I see," Fenton said. "That would have cut down the risks for him, made it even easier. But I imagine he did his best to dart past as quickly and silently as possible. Did you hear the sound of the silenced gun, Miss Weil?"

"Yes, I'm sure I did. But it didn't make much of an impression on me, until Miss Prentiss came out a minute or

two later and told me that she'd heard it also. It seemed to trouble her a great deal."

"Yes, well—that's all I wanted to know."

He looked directly at Lynn. "How long was it, Miss Prentiss, before you got up, after hearing the sound, and went to investigate? I questioned you about that on the day of the murder, but it wasn't of such vital importance then. I mean—it didn't seem so to us at the time. It should have, and I blame myself for it. Please try to think back again, and narrow it down as much as you can. A half-minute, a minute and a half?"

"It's hard to be sure," Lynn said, wetting her lips as Susan had done. "I should say—about one minute. I remember that I just sat staring at the manuscript I'd been working on, blue-penciled mentally a third of a page, in fact. Then my curiosity got the better of me—"

She sighed helplessly. "I really don't know. It could have been as long as two or three full minutes."

"Time enough for the murderer to get back into his office on this side of the switchboard, if he moved quickly."

"Yes, I should think so."

"That was not a question, Miss Lynn. It was a statement. For my part, I'm sure of it . . . in view of what you've just said. It could easily have been all of three minutes. Time enough—and to spare."

"Yes . . ." Lynn murmured, moistening her lips again.

"Just one more question, Miss Prentiss. The typewriters you said you heard clattering away. If one of them had stopped for as long as ten minutes, would you have realized it had stopped—if it started up again the instant you stepped out of your office? Think now. Several typewriters, a great deal of sound, and you were engrossed in your editing. Even if it had been the typewriter in the office next to yours—"

That too, Lynn was to realize later, had been more of a statement than a question, for Fenton did not even wait for her to reply.

He looked directly at Macklin and said: "It's your typewriter I'm talking about, I'm afraid. You didn't know she'd heard the sound of your silenced gun, but the instant she stepped out into the hall some instinct warned you that you'd have nothing to lose by battering away on your machine again. It would certainly help to make her believe you hadn't left this office at all—not even long enough to dart past the reception desk, shoot Helen Lathrup through the head and dart straight back again."

Macklin paled visibly, but not a muscle of his face

moved. He sat very quietly returning Fenton's accusing stare, a strangely withdrawn look in his eyes, as if he had half-anticipated exposure and had steeled himself to endure the agony of it, if it came, by erecting a kind of mental block within himself.

"We found the gun you killed her with in Ruth Porges' apartment," Fenton said, not unkindly—he could never bring himself to speak without compassion to a man who was certain to die. "We'll never know where she found it, unless you tell us, but we don't have to know. Ballistics has identified it as the murder gun. You searched her apartment after you strangled her, even tore apart two mattresses in your search. But you didn't look inside the flushing compartment of the toilet. It would have been so easy for you to go into the bathroom, lift the lid and look. But I guess you just didn't think of it.

"It's your gun, Macklin. A war souvenir gun with a long black barrel, the kind of gun some men, with your kind of war record, like to show to friends. Possibly you showed it to her once, but that's also something we'll never know unless you tell us. But she must have known it was your gun or she would not have attempted to hide it. If she'd found a stranger's gun—the gun of someone she had no reason to respect or like or want to protect, she'd have gone straight to the police with it. She must have felt you were justified in killing Helen Lathrup.

"If you did show the gun to her once—that wouldn't have prevented you from using it. You had no way of knowing she'd find it and that it would be traced to you. War souvenir guns are often very hard to trace to their owners, but we had very little trouble tracing this one . . . You're tagged with it, Macklin. You're also tagged with a fingerprint you left in Ruth Porges' apartment. I imagine you wore gloves and were very careful, but not careful enough. Remember taking one glove off for a moment? Well . . . it's not too important, so long as we have that one very fine print."

Fenton sighed and his voice hardened a little. "Would you like to tell us why you killed her, Macklin? I must warn you, though, that anything you say now—"

Macklin seemed not to hear him. He spoke softly, almost gently, as if the violence which had taken two human lives had been long since spent.

"There are two kinds of men in this world—leaving abnormality out of it. One kind, I think, is very rare. The old saying: 'Love is a woman's whole life—to men a thing apart' isn't always true. There are men to whom love is every-

thing. I have always been . . . that kind of man. And when she betrayed the great love I had for her, as she betrayed the others, she—"

A look of torment came into his eyes. "It would have been better if she had been the one to slay, to kill me then without compassion and without remorse. But that was one cruelty she was incapable of, and so I had no choice . . ."

"Every man has a choice, Macklin," Fenton said. "There was no need—"

Fenton was later to regret that he had not been more careful, not stayed more alert and on guard. But when a man does not in the least resemble a killer in his outer aspect, when he can grin boyishly, and disarm everyone with his blunt forthrightness, his wry humor, his complete absence of even the everyday, garden-variety kind of neuroticism which afflicts nine men and women out of ten—when, in short, he seems more robustly wholesome, normal than a football player with a well-rounded love life, it is very easy for a man to go a little astray emotionally and assume that he can't be too dangerous in an immediate way.

Fenton had not realized that Gallison was standing so close to Macklin's desk, facing away from Macklin and that the police positive on Gallison's hip could be a very formidable weapon in the hands of killer still bent on saving his skin.

The realization came a split second too late. Macklin had reached for the gun, whipped it from its holster and was gripping it firmly before Gallison could swing about. And swinging about did Gallison no good, for by that time he was weaponless.

Macklin snapped off the safety catch and fired twice. The first bullet struck Gallison in the right thigh, wrenching a groan from him, and dropping him to his knees. Blood spurted, spraying out over the floor.

The second shot, also aimed at Gallison, missed its mark. It went wild, causing Lynn Prentiss to cry out and clutch at her side. Beneath her fingers a dull stain grew. She swayed a little, staggered toward the desk and clung to it, supporting herself with one hand, staring at Fenton in mute appeal.

Fenton had his own gun out now and was taking careful aim at Macklin, who was heading for the door. But before he could fire Macklin was out of the office and was racing down the hall, Gallison's gun still in his clasp.

Macklin reached the reception desk, and started toward the door of the outer office. But he never reached the door. A tall, very thin young man with a sheaf of drawings under his arm had just entered the outer office and he had heard Lynn's stricken cry.

He was all very confused about everything. But the cry did something to him, because he recognized Lynn's voice and realized instantly that something quite terrible had happened.

And when he saw the distraught-looking man come rushing out of the corridor, with a gun in his hand, he acted on impulse, threw out one leg and tripped the man up, sending him sprawling. A moment later, while the man with the gun was still sprawling, another very big strong-looking man with another gun emerged from the corridor, piled on top of the man he'd tripped and clobbered him over the head with the butt of the gun until he gave up trying to rise.

It was all very confusing and hard to understand.

Chapter X

HE HAD ENTERED the hospital room so quietly that Lynn Prentiss was unaware that she was not alone—the nurse had left fifteen minutes before—until he was standing by the bed with a sheaf of drawings under arm and the strangest, oddest assortment of yellow flowers in the other she had ever seen.

"You'll have to turn on the light to look at these, I guess," he said and she didn't know at first whether he was referring to the flowers or the drawings. But when she switched on the light directly over the bed she saw that it was one of the drawings which he was extending toward her. The flowers he was holding a little awkwardly, not even venturing to offer them to her, as if he wasn't quite sure that she would approve of his taste in flowers or would not think him over-presumptuous.

Since he seemed to want her too look at the drawings first, she did so, studying them carefully as he passed them to her one by one.

"Well," he said, when she had remained for a long while silent. "What do you think."

She sat up very straight, took the flowers from him and pressed them to her nostrils, looking at him very steadily and with a strange warmth in her eyes—a warmth that made him return her gaze incredulously.

"Yes," she said.

"The flowers aren't too bad, is that what you're trying to tell me? But my drawings—"

"No," she said. "That isn't what I'm trying to tell you. I like both the flowers and the drawings. But these new drawings—well, they're a little on the terrific side, if you don't mind my saying so. And they *are* saleable. I can guarantee it. I can't do too much to help, because we only need six more drawings this month, and six sales to the Eaton-Lathrup publications will do no more than start you off. But when we've published six, I'm sure you won't have any difficulty in selling the rest to other publications."

"It went against the grain," he said. "I don't quite know why I did it."

She continued to look at him, and the warmth in her eyes told him why, but it took him quite a long while to grasp it.

It was over and they'd released him. Ralph Gilmore still had to appear in court on an illegal firearms possession charge, but that big detective he'd disliked so much at first had assured him that the worst he'd get would be a suspended sentence.

The law was designed, apparently, to discourage gangsters from carrying weapons—although it didn't always work that way—and a young writer, without a criminal record, would be shown a great deal of leniency.

Everyone, even judges, expected writers to behave a little strangely, a little differently from other people and that would count in his favor.

He hoped the big detective was right about that. It would worry him and keep him awake nights until the ordeal was over, because just the thought of appearing in court to answer a quite serious charge terrified him.

No reason why it should now, he told himself. He'd had the book thrown at him, hadn't he? He'd been booked at a police station, taken into court, fingerprinted and confined in a cell for more than a week. If he could survive that, he could survive anything.

And the way they'd questioned him, in a room without windows and a bright light flooding down—Not the third degree really, nothing as bad as that. But it had been bad enough.

There was a tap on the door and he looked up quickly. "Who is it?" he demanded.

"It's me—Nora. I heard about all what happened to you. I wanted to die myself, Ralph—I swear it."

He arose slowly, went to the door and opened it. "I told your mother about it," he said. "I went to that office with the intention of killing her. But at the last moment—I couldn't do it. I went there on the very morning of the murder. And I bought a gun—"

"I know, Ralph . . . I know, darling. It's painful to talk about and there's no reason why you should, now. You know I love you."

"Yes . . . and I love you, Nora. I must have been crazy not to realize it sooner."

"Don't blame yourself too much, Ralph. She must have been a very beautiful woman."

"Well—"

"Please don't worry about it, Ralph. It's all over now, done with. Don't even think about it."

"I'm trying very hard not to. But it isn't so easy—"

"Kiss me, Ralph. Kiss me and take me into your arms and make passionate love to me, like you did once."

"We're going to get married, Nora. You know that, don't you? We'll go right down to City Hall tomorrow, and apply for a marriage license."

"You don't have to marry me, Ralph. You don't—"

"But I want to. Don't you understand, you little fool. I want to and I'll do it . . . if I have to drag you all the way downtown by the hair!"

"Ralph . . ."

"Yes?"

"Oh, Ralph, darling—"

Fenton had slept so soundly for ten hours his wife had to tug at his arm three times to awaken him.

"Joseph," she said. "The hospital just phoned again. Gallison is completely out of danger. You said he was last night, but I could see you were still a little worried."

Fenton came wide awake in an instant. "They're absolutely sure about it, eh?"

"Yes, the bullet's out and he'll be reporting back for duty in two weeks. He told them to tell you that."

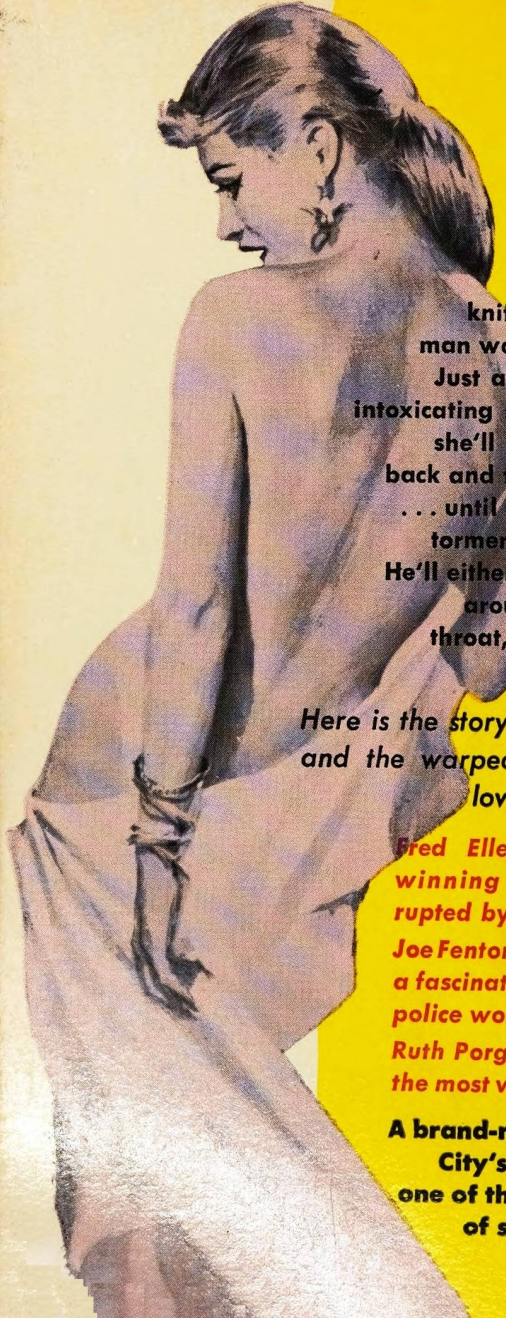
"Is he crazy?" Fenton grumbled. "He rates a month's sick leave, at least."

"I'm just repeating the message he asked them to give you."

Fenton sighed and rolled over on his side. "I always thought he was a little crazy. Well . . . it's good news, anyway. Will you please go away now."

"But why? Breakfast is—"

"Never mind about my breakfast," Fenton said, drawing the sheets up over his head. "I'm not anything like as crazy as Gallison is. I'm going to sleep for a month."



The Sadist

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