

Tell It To The Birds
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by James Hadley Chase

Tell It To The Birds
Part One

Chapter 1

At the far end of the narrow road, scarcely wide enough to take two cars and bordered by high prickly hedges, Anson finally found the house he had been looking for for the past hour. The house hid behind a barrier of overgrown shrubs that stood either side of shabby double gates. It wasn't until Anson got out of his car and approached the gates that he had his first glimpse of the house. He didn't immediately look at it because his attention became riveted on the garden. Although quite small with a twenty foot square lawn as immaculate as the surface of a billiard table, the garden presented a horticultural picture seldom seen outside professional floral exhibitions.

Everything, including a miniature fountain, a tiny waterfall, massed bedding plants, blazing with colour, standard roses in perfect bloom, flowering shrubs and even a dove cot was there.

For several moments, Anson stood at the gate staring at the garden, then he looked beyond the garden to the house. By comparison, the house was as surprising as the garden. It was a two storey brick and wooden structure with a red tiled roof. At one time, the wooden face of the house had been painted a dark green, but the rain, the wind and the sun over the years had played havoc with the paint work, and the house now presented a shabby, neglected and uncared-for appearance. The windows were streaked with dust and dirt. The brass door knocker was black with grime. To the left of the house was a two car garage with a broken window and many of its roof tiles missing. Anson looked at the garden, then at the house, then at the garden again. He stepped back and read the name painted in crude white letters on the gate: "Mon Repos".

He zipped open the well worn leather document case he was carrying and took from it a letter he had received that morning. He read it again:

Mon Repos.

Nr. Pru Town National Fidelity Insurance Corporation Brent Dear Sir,
I would be glad if your representative would call between two and four o'clock any
afternoon this week.

I have a few pieces of jewellery worth about \$1,000 which my husband thinks I
should insure against theft or loss.

Yours, etc.

Meg Barlowe.

Anson pushed open the gates, drove the car onto the tarmac drive, then walked up the drive to the house. Heavy, rain clouds hovered threateningly overhead. The sun, obscured by the clouds, made a faint, brave light over the spectacular garden. In an hour or so, Anson thought, as he reached for the dirt grimed knocker, it would be pouring with rain. He lifted the knocker and rapped twice.

There was a pause, then he heard quick footfalls; the door opened.

Anson remembered to the moment of his death his first meeting with Meg Barlowe.

At the age of fourteen, Anson had his first sexual experience. His parents had gone on a short trip, leaving him in charge of the hired help: a woman some twenty years older than Anson: plain, fat and a Quaker. His parents had been gone less than four hours when the woman had come into Anson's bedroom where he had been lolling on the bed, reading a lurid paperback. Half an hour later, Anson had moved from his youth to corrupt manhood, and from then on, the sexual hunt was ever present in his alert, active mind. This first experience left him with a conviction that didn't last long, that all women were easy. Later, when he discovered his error, he preferred to consort with prostitutes rather than

be bothered to persuade and woo. He was fastidious in his choice, and the women he went with cost him a considerable amount of his weekly earnings.

Beside this constant sexual urge, Anson had yet another weakness: a persistent and incurable urge to gamble. He had little luck. The combination of paying for his sexual pleasures and losing to his bookmaker had him continually struggling to keep solvent. His shrewdness, personality and drive had gained him a Field Agency of the National Fidelity Insurance Corporation that covered three small prosperous towns: Brent, Lambsville and Pru Town. This district offered a rich field for an energetic insurance salesman. It was a farming district, and most farmers owned two or three cars, were interested in life insurance and anxious to insure their crops and property. But what Anson earned, he threw away until he was now facing a financial crisis that alarmed even his irresponsible conscience.

Before leaving Brent for his weekly visit to Pru Town and Lambsville, he had received a telephone call from Joe Duncan, his bookmaker.

In his wheezy asthmatic voice, Duncan had said, "Listen, Anson, you know what you owe me?"

Anson had said, "Sure, Joe. Relax. You'll get paid." "You owe me close on a thousand bucks," Duncan said. "You settle on Saturday. If you don't, Sailor will be around to talk to you."

Sailor Hogan was Joe Duncan's debt collector. At one time he had been the light heavy weight champion of California. His viciousness was legend. If he failed to collect a debt, he left a permanent mark on the welsher.

But Anson wasn't worried about a mere thousand dollars. If the worst came to the worst, he could scrape that amount up by borrowing from his friends, selling his TV. set and even hocking his car, but the pressure was now on, and as he hung up, he remembered he owed Sam Bernstein, the local money lender, eight thousand dollars and he had to the end of the year to settle or else... When he had signed I.O.U. back in June, next June seemed a long way off. He had plunged the whole of the borrowed money on a rank outsider at 100 to 1 from a tip straight from the stable boy and the horse had turned out to be exactly what it was: a rank outsider.

This day was Tuesday. Anson had five more days ahead of him in which to find a thousand dollars to keep Duncan quiet. This wasn't an impossible task, but he flinched from the thought of how to raise eight thousand dollars for Bernstein. But here, at least he had time.

Because he was now getting anxious, Anson was a little too persistent, a little too pressing, and when a salesman gets into that state of mind, he doesn't and never will sell insurance.

This week had begun badly, but he was a salesman enough and optimistic enough to assure himself it should finish well.

As he lifted the knocker on the shabby, paint peeled door of this shabby house standing in this extraordinary garden, he had a presentiment that his luck was about to change.

Anson looked at Meg Barlowe as she stood in the doorway, regarding him with her large, searching cobalt blue eyes.

At the sight of this woman whom he judged to be a year or so younger than himself, Anson experienced a rush of blood through his body that inevitably happened when he met any woman who awoke his sexual feelings.

She was tall: an inch or so taller than himself, and built with the strength and durability of a wooden wedge. She had broad shoulders, a provocative bust, a small waist, neat hips and long legs. She wore a close fitting orange sweater and black tight fitting slacks. Her auburn coloured hair was caught back with a strip of green ribbon. All this he took in at a glance. She wasn't beautiful. Her mouth was a little too large, and her nose too solid for perfect beauty, but she was the most sensational and sensual looking woman Anson had ever seen.

For a long moment they stared at each other, then her red lips parted as she smiled, showing white, even teeth.

"Good afternoon," she said.

Automatically, but with a conscious effort, Anson moved into his sales approach. His expression, schooled by years of experience, was bright, friendly and alert.

"Mrs. Barlowe? I am John Anson. National Fidelity Insurance Corporation. I have a letter from you ..."

"Of course ... do come in."

Still aware that his heart was thumping, Anson followed her through a dark little hall into the living-room.

It was a big room, comfortably furnished. There was a bright log fire burning in the oversized fireplace. Before the fireplace stood a vast settee: large enough to seat four people comfortably. There was an oval shaped table in the bay window. On the table was a portable typewriter and a mass of papers, carbons, and a Webster's Dictionary.

As Anson moved into the room, he became aware of dust and dirt everywhere. The room had the same uncared for appearance as the exterior of the house.

The woman walked over to the fireplace and now stood, her back to the fire, her hands on her hips, looking at him.

Disconcerted by the quizzing expression in her eyes, Anson walked over to the window.

"What a garden you have!" he said. "You must be very proud of it!"

"My husband is." She laughed. "He thinks of nothing else."

Anson turned. His eyes moved over her body.

"Is it his profession?"

"Not exactly. He wants it to be. Right now, he's with Fram-ley's Store in Pru Town. He is in charge of their horticultural department." She waved to the settee. "But do sit down, Mr. Anson."

He came around the settee and sat down at the far end, disturbed by being so close to her. She knelt on the seat away from him.

an air crash out at sea. They have to wait six months before it does happen. Immediately the news is flashed to the

terminal, the boy friend puts the woman's name on the passenger list. He also takes care of the ticket receipt and so on. The woman has moved out of the district where she used to live and is keeping out of sight. He telephones her, warning her of the crash. Then later, her sister puts in a claim for the money showing proof supplied by the boy friend that the woman, her sister, was on the plane." She paused, took a sip of her drink, then looked at him. "Of course the details have to be worked out, but that's the general idea ... do you think she would get away with it?" During the twelve years he had been an insurance agent, Anson had become familiar with the tricks and dodges dreamed up by people ambitious to swindle insurance companies. Every week, he received a printed bulletin from Head Office setting out in detail the various swindles attempted. This bulletin came from the Claims Department run by Maddox who was considered to be the best Claims man in the business.

For the past three months, when money had become so desperately short, Anson had thought of ways and means by which he himself might swindle his company. But for all his shrewdness and experience, he realized he could never succeed unless he had someone on whom he could rely to help him. Even then, there was always Maddox who was said to have a supernatural instinct that told him a claim was a phoney the moment it was laid on his desk.

"It's a nice idea," Anson said. "It might even be believable as fiction, but it would never work in real life." She looked enquiringly at him. "But why not?"

"The sum involved is too large. Any claim over fifteen thousand dollars is examined very closely. Suppose this woman insured with my company. The policy would go immediately to the Claims department. The head of this department is a man who has been in the racket for twenty years. During this time, he has had something like five to eight thousand phoney claims to deal with. He has so much experience he can smell a bad

claim the way you can smell a dead rat. So what does he do when he gets this policy? He asks himself why a woman should be insuring her life for such a big sum. Who will benefit? Her sister? Why? Is there a boy friend around? He has twenty experienced investigators who work for him. He'll turn two of them onto this woman. In a few days he will know as much about her as she knows about herself. His men will have unearthed the boy friend at the air terminal. Once they have dug him up, then God help them both if she is supposed to have died in the air crash. No, it wouldn't work in real life. Make no mistake about that ... not with Maddox around." Meg made a face, then shrugged.

"Oh well! I thought I was onto a good gimmick. I'm disappointed." She drank some of the whisky, then reaching forward, she picked up the poker and stirred the fire into a blaze. "Then it is very difficult to swindle an insurance company?" she asked without looking at him.

Again, Anson felt an intense prickle of excitement run through him.

"Yes ... unless ..."

She was staring into the fire, a little flushed by the heat, her eyes reflecting the red of the flames. "Unless ... ?"

"It could be done, but it needs two people to do it. One couldn't do it."

She twisted around to look at him.

"That makes me think that you have thought about it," she said. "If you do get an idea would you share it with me? I'd write the story and we could go fifty-fifty if I sold it."

He finished his drink, set down the glass and reluctantly got to his feet.

"If I think of anything, I'll call you." She stood up. They faced each other; again Anson's eyes moved over her body.

"If you do think of something, you could come out here, couldn't you? It's not far from Brent, is it? We could talk over the whole thing and I could get the idea down on paper."

He hesitated, then said what was in his mind: "I guess your husband won't want me around after a day's work." She nodded.

"You're right. Phil isn't sociable and he hasn't much patience with my writing, but on Monday and Thursday nights he is always at Lambsville. He takes night school there and he stays the night with a friend of his."

Anson's hands suddenly turned damp. "Does he? Well..."

"So if you get an idea, you'll always find me alone here on those two nights. Don't forget, will you?"

She moved to the door and opened it. Picking up his document case, Anson followed her to the front door. As she opened the door, he said, "By the way, does your husband carry any life insurance?" "No. He doesn't believe in insurance."

They looked at each other and Anson quickly shifted his gaze.

She went on: "I'm afraid there is no hope for you in, that direction. Other salesmen have tried to sell him insurance. He just doesn't believe in it."

Anson stepped out into the rain.

"Thanks for the drink, Mrs. Barlowe. If I get an idea for you, I'll call you."

"Thanks. I'm sorry about the jewellery." She gave him a quick smile as she closed the door.

Scarcely feeling the rain on his face, Anson walked down the drive towards his car.

From behind the curtains Meg watched the car drive through the gateway and onto the lane. She watched Anson get out of the car and shut the gate then return to the car. She remained motionless until the sound of the car engine had died away, then she turned swiftly, crossed to the telephone and dialled a number.

There was a short delay, then a man's voice came over the line.

"Yeah? Who is this?"

"Meg. The fish bites."

There was a pause, then the man said, "Hook him first before you crow," and the connection was cut.

Chapter 2

Anson's weekly routine included two days in Pru Town. He stayed the night in the Marlborough hotel. At one time he had wasted much time in chasing the local prostitutes, but now, from experience and impatience, he had fixed a date with Fay Lawley, an easy going blonde who worked at a cigar store on Main Street. For sixty bucks and a dinner, she was willing to go with him to his hotel where the desk clerk who knew Anson well, looked the other way as he look her up to his room.

When Anson arrived at the hotel after his first meeting with Meg Barlowe he had every intention of following his usual routine, but while he was shaving he began to compare Fay with Meg and it occurred to him with surprising force what a cheap hustler Fay was. Disconnecting the razor, he sat on the edge of his bed and lit a cigarette. He told himself he had never met another woman to touch Meg, and she had actually invited him to visit her when her husband was away for the night! Surely that could only mean one thing!

The thought of having an affair with her made him breathless. Again he considered Fay's flashy cheapness, her high pitched giggles and her vulgarity. Acting on the spur of the moment, he reached for the telephone, but there was no answer to Fay's number. Irritated, he hung up and went back into the bathroom to complete his shave.

It was while he was slapping after-shave lotion on his face that he heard movements in his bedroom. Frowning, he went to the bathroom door and found Fay looking through his wallet.

At the sight of him, she dropped the wallet hurriedly back on the chest of drawers.

"Hello sweetie," she said. "I thought I'd surprise you."

Anson looked her over, his face expressionless. A week ago, he had thought Fay Lawley an exciting woman. Now, comparing her with Meg, he saw her shortcomings. She was shabby,

I overdressed, dyed and sordid. "You did surprise me," he said, coming into the bedroom. "Or did I surprise you?"

Fay giggled and put her hand to her mouth. It was this movement that Anson was so used to that now drew his attention to her tobacco stained, chipped teeth.

"John, darling," she said, sinking down on the bed, "I have a favour to ask you."

He remained motionless, looking at her.

"I'm in trouble," she went on after a long and awkward pause. "I've got to have a hundred bucks by tomorrow or I'll lose my room. I'm behind in the rent."

A hundred bucks! Anson thought bitterly. She thought that was being in trouble! What would the silly mare do if she owed eight thousand bucks!

"What do you expect me to do about it?" he said, staring at her. "There's more than a hundred bucks walking Main Street. Go out there and earn it."

She looked sharply at him, her green-blue eyes hardening.

"That's a nice thing to say, Sweetie!" she said. "I didn't expect that from you. I'm your girl friend ... remember?"

He had a sudden urgent desire to be rid of her. If he had had the courage, he would have shoved her cut into the corridor and locked the bedroom door, but he was scared she might make a scene. Looking at her, he was horrified with himself for ever having associated with her. Meg now made all his women shabby and sordid.

He went over to his wallet and look out six ten dollar bills.

"Fay... I'm sorry. I'm not well. It's something I've eaten," he said. "Here take this ... it's the best I can do. Let's skip tonight. I want to go to bed."

She stared at the bills in his hand, then she looked at him, her eyes quizzing.

"Can't you run to a hundred?" she asked. "I tell you I'm in trouble."

He dropped the bills into her lap.

"Trouble? That's a joke. I'm in trouble too. Be a good girl... run along. I'm not well."

She put the bills into her shabby handbag and stood up.

"Okay, Sweetie, see you next week."

He went with her to the door. She paused and looked intently at him.

"Want to change your mind?" She put her hand on him, but he moved quickly back. "Well, okay, if you're as ill as all that... See you," and she went out into the corridor.

The rest of the evening Anson spent lying on his bed, his thoughts of Meg Barlowe burning holes in his mind

The following day when he wasn't actually working, he thought about her. His mind still tonmented by her, he left Fru Town for Lambsville where he had a few calls lo make. He got through his calls by half past five He had to pass through Pru Town again to reach the Brent highway, and he had to pass the dirt road that led to the lonely, intriguing Barlowe house.

As he drove along the highway, he tried to decide whether he dare call on Meg so soon. She had said she would be alone this night: that her husband would be staying in Pru Town. But suppose she really meant that stuff about a plot for a short story? He would look a dope arriving at the house with no ideas for her if he had misunderstood the setup and she hadn't after all been extending an invitation to him to share her bed.

He reached the dirt road and pulled up, drawing off the highway onto the grass verge. He sat for some moments, trying

to make up his mind what to do.

I'd better not, he thought to himself. It's too risky. I could spoil my chance. It shouldn't be too hard to think up a plot for her and I'll then have a legitimate excuse for calling on her. She'll be on her own again next Monday. Between now and Monday, I should be able to dream up something; it doesn't matter how corny it is, but I can't barge in there without something to tell her. Reluctantly he started the car engine and drove on to Brent.

"Have you something on your mind, Mr. Anson?" Anna Garvin asked curiously.

Anson started, frowned and looked across the office to where Anna sat behind a typewriter. She had been working for him now for the past two years. She was young, fat, cheerful and capable. Apart from wearing heavy hornrimmed glasses which Anson disliked on women, she also had a talent for wearing all the wrong clothes which made her look more homely and fatter than necessary.

She had interrupted an idea he had been developing: an idea for a story which had to do with an insurance swindle.

"I've spoken to you twice," Anna went on. "You just sit there as if you were hatching a plot to murder someone."

Anson stiffened.

"Look, Anna, I'm busy. Keep quiet, can't you?"

She grimaced, screwing up her good-natured, fat face, then she went on with her typing.

Anson got to his feet and crossed to the window to stare down at the steady stream of traffic passing along Main Street. This was Saturday morning. After lunch he had arranged to play a round of golf with a friend of his, but he now found himself in no mood for golf. He had Meg on his mind so badly he couldn't concentrate on his work. A dozen or so letters lay on his desk, waiting his attention, but he couldn't bring himself to bother with them.

... as if you were hatching a plot to murder someone.

And that was exactly what he had been doing: planning a murder for gain, but, of course, only for this story he was working out for Meg Barlowe. Just suppose he had really been planning a murder. Was he so transparent that someone as simple as Anna could read his thoughts?

He forced himself to his desk.

"Let's go," he said and when Anna picked up her notebook, Anson began to dictate.

Anson had a one room apartment on the fourth floor of the Albany Arms, a block of apartments near the Brent railroad station. He had lived in this rabbit warren of a place since he had become the Field Agent for the Insurance Corporation. Each apartment was provided with a garage which was situated in the basement of the building and approached by a long drive-in from the road.

Anson had played bad golf, had had an indifferent dinner, but he had had a lot to drink. Now, relaxed from the exercise and slightly drunk, he drove his car down the dimly lit drive-in and expertly swung the car into the stall allotted to him. He noticed that most of the other stalls were empty. This was the weekend. There was always a rush to get out of Brent over the weekend, and Anson liked the quiet that prevailed in the apartment block, free from the racket of television, people walking over his head and children screaming and quarrelling in the courtyard.

He cut the engine, turned off the headlights and got out of the car. As he slammed the car door shut, he became aware that he wasn't alone. He looked sharply to his right.

A tall, thick-set man had appeared out of the shadows and was now standing looking at him from the entrance of the stall. His unexpected appearance gave Anson a start. He stared into the gloom, looking towards where the man was standing.

"Hi, palsy," the man said in a thick, husky voice. "I've been waiting quite a long time for you to show up."

Anson's heart skipped a beat and he felt a cold clutch of fear. He recognized this threatening, massive figure: Sailor Hogan! During the past days his mind had been so obsessed with Meg Barlowe he had entirely forgotten Joe Duncan's threat. Now he remembered what Duncan had said: You pay up on Saturday. If you don't, Sailor will be around to talk to you.

Anson recalled a story he had heard about Sailor Hogan. How he had visited a client of Joe's who had failed to pay up. Sailor had maimed the man. Anson had actually seen the man after Sailor had dealt with him so he knew the story to be no exaggeration. Sailor, so they said, had laced his thick fingers together and had hit the man a frightful chopping blow on the back of his neck. The man was now going around in a wheel chair, looking and acting like an idiot. When the police had tried to pin the assault onto Sailor, he proved with the help of five bookmakers that he was playing poker with them in Lambsville at the time the assault had taken place.

And now here was Sailor Hogan walking slowly and deliberately towards Anson who backed away. It wasn't until he felt his heels grinding against the concrete wall that Anson came to a standstill. By now, Sailor was within four feet of him. Sailor paused, his hands thrust into his trouser pockets, his shapeless hat cocked over one eye, a cigarette dangling from his thick, moist lips.

"I've come to collect, palsy," he said. "Let's have it."

Anson drew in a quick uneven breath.

"Tell Joe he'll have it on Monday," he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Joe said for me to collect it now or else ..." Sailor said and took big, knuckly fists out of his pockets. "Come on, Palsy, I want to get home."

Anson felt the cold concrete wall pressing against his shoulders. He could retreat no further. He thought of the man in the wheel chair.

"I'll have the money on Monday," he said. "Tell Joe ... he'll understand. I'm expecting..." He broke off as Sailor sidled towards him. Suddenly more frightened than he had ever been before, he said in a high hysterical voice. "No! Keep

away from me! No!"

Sailor grinned at him.

"Palsy, you're in trouble. When I'm not working for Joe, I work for Sam Bernstein. You owe him eight grand. Sam doesn't think you'll pay him. Okay, you have time, but Sam is worried about you. Joe's worried about you too. You'd better pay Joe on Monday or I'll have to work you over." His small white teeth gleamed in the overhead light as he smiled viciously. "If you don't raise Sam's dough, I'll fix you till you wish you were dead. Understand?"

"Sure," Anson said, feeling cold sweat running down his ribs.

"Okay. You pay Joe on Monday ... that's fixed, huh?"

It's going to be all right, Anson thought wildly. I've gained two days. Monday night I'll be with Meg.

But it wasn't all right for Sailor moved forward with a quick, shifting movement that left Anson helpless to defend himself.

Sailor's hammer-like fist sank into Anson's stomach with paralysing and awful violence and sent him forward in a jack-knife dive.

Anson sprawled face down on the oily concrete floor. He heard Sailor say, "Monday, palsy. If you haven't the dough, then you're in for a real beating and remember Sam ... you don't pay him and you're as good as dead."

Anson lay still, his hands clutching his stomach, his breath moaning through his clenched teeth. He was dimly aware of the cold ground that chilled his pain wracked body as he listened to the quick footfalls of the ex-light heavy weight champion of California as he walked briskly up the drive-in and out into the darkness of the night.

Anson lay in bed. The day was Sunday. The time was eleven fifteen a.m. Around his navel where Hogan had sunk his fist the flesh was yellow, green and black. Somehow he had managed to drag himself to the elevator and reach his apartment. He had taken three sleeping tablets and had got into bed. When he woke, the bright morning sunshine was coming around the edges of the blind. He had limped to the bathroom. His guts felt as if they were on fire. At least, he thought, I am not passing blood, but he was frightened. He thought with horror of the next meeting with Hogan if he failed to raise Duncan's money. His mind moved ahead to next June. He must have been out of his mind to have borrowed eight thousand dollars from Bernstein. He must have been crazy to have put all that money on that goddamn horse! He felt a cold chill as he thought of the reckoning. He was certain now that he would never be able to raise that sum. He put his hand to his tender aching stomach and he cringed. Hogan would fix him. He knew it. He too would be going around looking like an idiot after Hogan had fixed him.

He lay there in a mood of frightened, black despair during the next four hours. His mind darted like a trapped mouse, searching for a way of escape.

There was one thought that kept moving into his mind and which he immediately rejected, but as the hours passed and no other solution presented itself, he finally began to consider the idea.

Up to this moment he had shied away from any criminal act to make money, but now he realized there was nothing left but to make money dishonestly.

He thought of Meg Barlowe.

She has something on her mind, he told himself. That story about an insurance swindle ... she knew that junk she called jewellery was worthless. So why did she ask me to call? Why did she tell me her husband would be away for the night on Mondays and Thursdays? This could be my way out ... this could be the chance I'm looking for.

He was still thinking about the idea when he drifted off into an exhausted sleep that took him through the night to Monday morning.

Anson walked across the vast parking lot of Framley's store with a slight dragging step. Movement caused him pain. He had to force himself to walk upright.

He pushed open the swing doors into the bustle of the store. He looked around, then asked one of the elevator attendants where he could find the horticultural department.

"Basement. Section D," the girl told him.

There was a big crowd around the horticultural stand and Anson wasn't surprised. He recognized the same genius that had created the garden at the Barlowe house. People moved around gaping and exclaiming at the blooms, the perfect floral arrangements, the little fountains and the beautifully arranged banks of cut flowers. There were four girls, wearing green smocks, busy with their order books. Barlowe stood by a desk, a pencil behind his ear, while he watched the girls book orders.

Barlowe was so unlike the man Anson had imagined him to be that after staring at him for several seconds, he asked one of the girls if it was Mr. Barlowe. When the girl said he was, Anson moved back to the edge of the crowd. He again studied the man who was now selling a rose tree to an elderly couple. How in the world could such a sensational looking woman like Meg have come to marry such a man? Anson asked himself. From his vantage point behind the crowd, Anson studied Barlowe with increasing surprise.

Barlowe was in his early forties. He had a shock of thick black hair. He was thin and undersized. His eyes were deep set in hollows that were dark ringed. He had a thin, ill-tempered mouth and his nose was pointed and long. Examining him, Anson decided that this little shrimp of a man's only grace lay in his long, slender and artistic hands: they were beautiful hands, but there was nothing else about him that could win anyone's favour.

Anson moved away from the scent of the flowers, suddenly very confident that he had no serious competition to fear.

He even forgot the nagging soreness of his stomach as he passed the parking lot towards his car. He had three prospects to call on. The time was now twenty minutes to four. He should be free to visit Meg by seven o'clock.

On his way to his car, he paused by a row of telephone booths. It took him only a few minutes to find Barlowe's

telephone number. He dialled the number.

Meg answered the call. The sound of her voice made him feel breathless.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Barlowe," he said, forcing his voice to sound brisk. "This is John Anson."

There was a pause, then she said, "Who?"

He felt a moment of irritation. Didn't she even remember his name?

"John Anson: National Fidelity Insurance. You remember me?"

She said at once, "Why, of course. I'm sorry. I was trying to write ... my mind was miles away."

"I hope I haven't disturbed you."

"Oh, no. I was thinking of you. I was wondering if you had an idea for me."

He was tempted to tell her that he had spent the whole of yesterday thinking of her.

"That's why I am telephoning ... I do have an idea. I was wondering ..." He let it hang, feeling his hand turn moist as he gripped the telephone receiver.

"Yes?" There was a pause as he still said nothing, then she went on, "I suppose you're not free this evening?"

Anson drew in a deep breath.

"I'm in Pru Town right now. I have a few calls to make, but I could drop by around seven o'clock if that would be convenient?"

"Well, why not?" Her voice went up a note. "Come to supper. There won't be much but I hate eating alone."

Anson was suddenly worried that she might hear the violent beating of his heart.

"Fine ... then, around seven," and with an unsteady hand, he put the receiver back onto its cradle.

She was sophisticated, sun-tanned and very sure of herself. She wore a sky blue shirt and close fitting white slacks. She paused before Barlowe and stared at him the way you stare at a sudden coffee stain on your best table cloth. "Mary Wheatcroft," she said. "Is it too early to plant?" Barlowe felt a tightening in his chest at the sight of this woman.

"Yes ... a little early, but I can take an order. We will deliver and plant when..."

Her sapphire blue eyes flicked over him indifferently,

"I want two dozen. It's Mrs. Van Hertz. I have an account with you ... arrange it for me," and she moved away, her hips rolling under the white material of her slacks.

Barlowe watched her go.

One of the assistants said sharply, "Mr. Barlowe ... you have cut yourself!"

Barlowe looked at the blood dripping from his fingers. His grip had unconsciously tightened on the pruning knife he was holding.

His pale brown eyes shifted once again to Mrs. Van Hertz's arrogant back. He lifted his hand and licked the warm blood from his fingers.

Chapter 3

As Anson reached the top of the dirt road, he saw the double gates leading to the Barlowe house were open and so too were the doors of the garage. Taking the hint, he drove his car into the garage, got out, shut the garage doors and then walked back and shut the double gates.

A light was on in the sitting-room. As he walked to the front door, he saw Meg's shadow pass the blind as she crossed the room, to let him in.

She opened the door and for a moment they stood looking at each other.

"You're very punctual," she said. "Come on in."

He followed her into the sitting-room.

In the shaded lamp light, as he took off his overcoat, they again looked at each other. She was wearing a flame coloured dress with a wide, pleated skirt. She was even more sensational looking than when he had first met her.

"Let's eat, shall we?" she said, "Then we can talk, I don't know about you but I'm starving. I've been working all day and haven't bothered to eat since breakfast."

"Sure, I'd like to," he said, aware that he had no appetite.

"How's the work going?"

"Oh, so ... so." She waved towards the table. She had pushed aside her typewriter and her papers and had set two plates on which lay some cold cuts of beef and pickles. The cutlery was dumped anyhow. There was a bottle of whisky, ice and charge water at hand. "It's a bit of a picnic. I'm no cook."

They sat down at the table and she poured two stiff drinks.

"So you have an idea for me?" she said, beginning to eat quickly and ravenously. "I'm terribly excited; I do want a good idea."

Anson sipped his drink, then making an effort, he too began to eat.

"It's something we can talk about," he said, paused, then went on, "Mrs. Barlowe... it interests me... have you been married long?"

She glanced up.

"A year ... the end of the month will be our first anniversary. Why do you ask?"

"I guess I get interested in people's backgrounds. I was in Framley's store this afternoon, Your husband seemed to be very busy."

"He's always busy. He's the original busy bee."

Was there a note of contempt in her voice? Anson wondered, suddenly alert.

"Meeting so many people as I do, I'm often surprised at the odd, unexpected married couples I run into. Seeing your husband, I should never have imagined you would have married

him." He paused and looked at her, wondering if he had gone too far. Her reply sent a hot rush of blood up his spine.

"Goodness knows why I did marry the poor fish," she said. "I guess I should have my head examined."

She continued to eat, not looking at him and he stared at her. Then aware of his concentrated stare, she looked up.

"You're not eating... is there anything wrong?" He put down his knife and fork.

"I haven't been too well over the week-end. I'm sorry. It's just I'm off my food."

"But not your drinking, I hope?"

"No."

"Why not go over to the fire? You don't have to watch me eat. Go on ... I won't be long."

He carried his drink to the settee. He sat down and stared into the flickering flames.

Goodness knows why I did marry the poor fish.

This could be the green light he was hoping for.

"Have I shocked you?" she asked suddenly. "You asked me, so I told you. Phil is a poor fish. All he thinks about is his garden. He has only one ambition: to set himself up as a florist with a greenhouse and to sell flowers. He will never do that because he will never make enough money to find the necessary capital. He would need at least three thousand dollars to start a business of his own."

"I should have thought he would have needed more than that," Anson said.

Meg grimaced.

"You don't know my darling Phil. He thinks small. All he wants is a greenhouse and an acre of land."

"Just why did you marry him?" Anson asked, staring into the fire.

There was a long pause. He could hear her cutting the meat on her plate.

"Why? Ask me another! I thought he had money. I thought I was escaping from the things girls like me want to escape from. Okay ... I made a mistake. Now I'd like to be a widow."

Anson leaned forward. He felt the need of the flickering flames. His body had suddenly turned cold.

He heard her push back her chair, then she came and sat near him.

"You're interested in me, aren't you?" she said. "Why?"

"Why?" Anson gripped his glass so tightly his knuckles turned white. "Because I think you are the most exciting woman I have ever met."

She laughed.

"I haven't had anything said to me like that since I was stupid enough to get married."

"Well, there it is. I'm saying it."

"Come to that if we are going to hand out compliments, I think you're pretty nice yourself."

Anson drew on a long, slow breath.

"The moment I set eyes on you I thought you were wonderful," he said. "I've had you on my mind every hour since we first met."

"These things happen, don't they?" She reached for a cigarette, lit it and blew the smoke towards the fire.

"Two people meet: there is a sudden chemical explosion and bingo ... !" She turned her head slowly and looked directly at him, her cobalt blue eyes inviting. "Don't let's waste time, John. Time is always running out on me. You want to love me, don't you?"

Anson set down his glass.

"Yes," he said huskily.

She flicked her cigarette into the fire.

"Then love me," she said.

A log dropped onto the red hot bed of ashes and flared up, lighting the room for a brief moment. Meg moved away from Anson and getting down on her knees, she put more logs on the fire and stirred the fire into a blaze.

"Like a drink?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at him.

"No ... come back here," Anson said.

She didn't move. Poker in hand, she continued to stir the fire, making lively shadows on the ceiling.

"Look at the time," she said. "It's after nine. Can you stay the night?"

"Yes."

She lit a cigarette, then squatting before the fire, the light from the flickering logs on her face, she went on, "Tell me about this idea of yours ... this idea for a story."

Anson stared up at the moving shadows on the ceiling. He was relaxed and happy. Their love making had been violent, exciting and satisfying. The ghosts of every girl he had made love with slid through his mind: that's all they were now: faded, dull ghosts.

"John ... tell me about your idea," Meg said.

"Yes, all right, I will have a drink."

She made two drinks, gave him a glass and then sat on the floor again before the fire. "Tell me ..."

"I don't know anything about story telling, but I think this more or less is how it goes," Anson said, staring at the ceiling. "An insurance salesman needs money badly. One day he calls on a woman who has made an inquiry about a fire coverage. He falls in love with her and she with him. She is unhappily married. He persuades the husband to take out a life policy. Between the two - the salesman and the wife - they concoct a plan to get rid of the husband. Because the salesman knows how to handle the set-up, they get away with it. It is in the working out of the details that the story is interesting," He took a long; drink and set down his glass. "Like the idea?"

She reached for the poker and again stirred the fire into a blaze.

"It's not very original is it?" she said doubtfully. "When we first met you said it was very difficult to swindle an insurance company and yet you say these two get away with it."

"It's not only difficult, but dangerous, but the insurance salesman knows how to handle it. If he wasn't in the racket himself, it would be more than dangerous."

"And isn't it contrived?" She put down the poker and turned to look at him. "I mean the reader would have to accept the fact that the husband would be willing to take out an insurance policy. But why should he? What I mean is, suppose it was Phil that was the husband. I know for certain he would never insure his life. He is against taking out an insurance policy."

"That depends of course on how the story is set up," Anson said. "But okay, just for the sake of discussing this, suppose the man was your husband, you were the unhappily married woman and I was the salesman."

There was a short silence, then without looking at him, Meg said, "Well ... all right ... let's just suppose ..."

"I am certain that I could sell your husband an insurance policy," Anson said. "It's the way I'd approach him that would hook him ... I'm sure I could do it."

"How would you approach him?"

"Knowing he needs capital," Anson said, "I wouldn't try to sell him a policy as a life insurance. I'd sell him the policy as security to get a loan from the bank. Banks accept life policies as securities for a loan, and as he is so keen to set up on his own, I would have him half sold already." Meg shifted to a more comfortable position. "You're clever," she said. "I hadn't | thought of that." "That's only the start of it," Anson said. "I know I wouldn't be able to sell him anything larger than a five thousand dollar coverage. That's not much good, is it? It's all right for him: he could raise a three thousand dollar loan on that coverage, but if he died suddenly, it wouldn't be much use to you, would it?"

She shook her head, staring into the fire.

"It wouldn't be much use to me either, but fifty thousand dollars would be ... wouldn't it?" She looked at him. "Yes, but..."

"The trick in this is I could insure him for fifty thousand and he would imagine he was insured only for five thousand." Again there was a long pause, then Meg said, "It's beginning to be interesting. Just suppose Phil did take out an insurance coverage for fifty thousand dollars ... then what happens?"

Here was the danger spot of the plan, Anson thought. He would now have to move very carefully. Maybe he was rushing this too fast.

"Don't let's keep this story on such a personal basis," he| said. "I was using your husband because it makes it more believable. Let's now imagine, shall we, we have a man - any man - insured for fifty thousand dollars although he doesn't know it... his wife and an insurance salesman who are in love with each other ... okay?" "Yes ... of course."

"These two are in love and they need money. If the husband dies, the wife will get fifty thousand dollars, which she will share with her lover, but it isn't going to be that easy because the husband shows no signs of dying. So these two begin to think about how to get rid of him. The wife mustn't have anything to do with the ... the getting rid of the husband. That would be completely fatal. His death must appear to be an accident without the wife being involved in any way."

"You've really thought about this, haven't you, John?" she said, looking at him, her cobalt eyes intent. "Go on... so what happens?" "Suppose the husband is keen on gardening. Suppose he has a miniature pond," Anson said, his voice a little husky. "One Saturday afternoon, the wife goes down to the shops, leaving her husband working in the garden. He falls off a ladder and hits his head on the side of the pond ... his face goes into the water and when the wife returns, she finds him drowned. Of course, what really happened is the insurance salesman has knocked the husband over the head and drowned him in the pond."

Neither of them looked at each other. Anson felt rather than saw Meg suppress a shudder. She said, "But what about this man you were talking about... Maddox? The man in charge of the Claims department?"

Anson took another drink. He had nothing to worry about now, he told himself. She was ready to co-operate with him. She had abruptly brought the story back into real life by mentioning Maddox. She was ready to be rid of her husband. He was sure of that if he could convince her he could do it with safety and with profit.

"Yes: there's Maddox. We mustn't underestimate him. He's dangerous, but he does think in a groove. Man and wife: man

insures his life for fifty thousand dollars and suddenly dies. How about the wife? That's the way his mind works. It is essential to our plan that you have a cast-iron alibi. He must be absolutely convinced that you couldn't have had anything to do with your husband's death. Once he is convinced of that, he'll let the claim go through. I can convince him."

She picked up the poker and stirred the fire.

"So if I went into Pru Town while you ... you handled Phil, it would be all right?" she asked as calmly and as casually as if they were discussing a movie they had seen.

"That's the way I see it," Anson said. He finished the whisky and sat up. "Do you like the idea?"

She turned slowly and stared at him.

"Oh, yes, John, I like it. If only you knew how this drab life with him is crushing me! Fifty thousand dollars! I can't believe it ... all that money and my freedom!"

Anson felt a chill of uneasiness run through him. This was too easy, he thought. She has either been planning to murder Barlowe for months or she doesn't realize what she is getting into. It's too easy.

"The money would come to you," he said, looking intently at her. "I would have to trust you to share it with me. I need the money badly, Meg."

She got to her feet.

"Let's go upstairs."

The expression in her eyes wiped out his uneasiness.

Somewhere downstairs a clock chimed five. Through the open window, the first grey light of the dawn made light enough for Anson to look around the shabby bedroom.

He grimaced at its poverty, and then looked at Meg, lying by his side. The grey light softened her features. She looked younger and even more beautiful.

"Meg..."

She stirred, murmured something and her hand touched his naked chest.

"Asleep?"

She opened her eyes and looked blankly at him, then she smiled

"Not really ... dozing ..."

"Me too." He slid his arm around her, pulling her to him. "I've been thinking; you really want to go ahead with this thing? It's not just: something you're imagining is going to happen in one of your stories?"

"I want to go ahead with it. I can't go on living this way. I must have money ..."

"That's the way I feel, but it won't be easy. There is a lot to think about. We've only just started; we're only on the fringe of this thing."

She was now fully awake and she sat up. "I'll get some coffee. Let's talk. We may not get the chance again ... not to have a real talk."

She was right of course. After this, he knew he would have to be very careful about seeing her again. If Maddox ever found out they were lovers, the plan forming in his mind would be cooked.

He waited for her, listening to her moving around downstairs. She came back eventually with coffee and set the tray on a table by the bed.

She had on a pale green nylon nightdress that was completely transparent, but now Anson could look at her without feeling the desperate urge to possess her, for their love making had been long and satisfying.

She poured a cup of coffee and gave it to him. "If we do it ... you're sure it will work?" she asked, sitting on the edge of the bed while she poured herself a cup.

Her attitude not only made him uneasy, but it irritated him. She couldn't be so utterly cold-blooded as she sounded, he thought. She just didn't realize what they were planning.

"No, I'm not sure," he said, determined to make her realize the danger of this thing. "It will take time. I'll have to plan every move. But first I want to be absolutely certain you're really willing ... you really want to do this thing." She made an impatient movement. "Of course I do."

"Do you realize what we are planning to do?" Anson paused, then went on, speaking slowly and deliberately, "We are going to commit a murder! Do you realize that?"

He was watching her. Her expression hardened, but she didn't flinch.

"You heard me, Meg? We are going to commit murder!"

"I know." She looked at him, her mouth set in a determined line. "Does it frighten you?"

He drew in a deep breath.

"Yes ... it frightens me. Doesn't it frighten you?"

Again she made an impatient movement.

"I can't even feel sorry for him. I've had to live with him for nearly a year. I've thought for months now how happy I could be if he were dead ..."

"You could have divorced him," Anson said, staring at her.

"Where would that get me? At least I have a roof and food -no other woman but a mug like me would look at him ... and now I won't have him near me. You don't imagine he sleeps in this bed, do you? I lock him out. I've locked him out ever since our first horrible night together. You don't know ... he's vile ... he's ..." She stopped grimaced. "I'm not talking about it. Some men have these kinks ... he has ... I'll be glad when he's dead!"

Anson relaxed. Now he could understand her indifference. At last, he had found someone he could work with. This woman wouldn't let him down.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know it was as bad as that. Well, all right ... we'll use him, but you must think about it. If I make a mistake, you'll be involved. Don't kid yourself the jury will be kind to you. A woman who helps to murder her husband for gain gets a pretty rugged time." "Why should you make a mistake?" Anson smiled mirthlessly.

"Murder is a funny thing. You can plan carefully and you can be awfully smart, but you can still make a mistake and you have only to make one mistake."

"Is that what you are going to do?" She put down her cup and lit a cigarette. "I don't think so, John. I have faith in you. I

think you're clever enough not to make a mistake."

"Have you any money?" he asked abruptly. "I want three thousand dollars if I'm going to work this the way it has to be worked."

"Three thousand dollars?" She stared at him. "I haven't even twenty dollars to call my own."

He had expected that. He had thought it would be too good to be true if she had the money he needed.- "All right... forget it... I'll get it somehow." "But why do you want three thousand dollars?" she asked curiously, staring at him.

Anson felt an impulse to be dramatic. He flicked aside the sheet so she could see the horrible bruise that discoloured the skin of his stomach.

Meg caught her breath.

"What happened? That must be terribly painful ... John! What happened?"

He flicked the sheet over himself. Her concern made the encounter with Hogan now trifling.

Staring up at the ceiling he told her about Hogan and he told her about Bernstein.

"I'm in trouble," he concluded. "I must have money. For months now I have been hunting for a way out. Now I have found you. The two of us will escape together at the cost of a man's life."

"You owe this bookmaker a thousand ... why do you need three thousand?" Meg asked.

"I need two thousand to cover the first premium on a fifty thousand dollar life policy," Anson told her. "Until the first premium is paid, we can't even think about how we can get rid of your husband. So ... somehow ... I have to raise three thousand dollars." He leaned back against the pillows, looking out of the dirt grimed window at the rising sun. "I'll have to steal it." He looked at her and grinned. "One thing leads to another, doesn't it? When you get involved in murder, you go the whole way or you don't go at all."

"Steal it? What do you mean?" He put his hand on her thigh.

"Just that. I must have three thousand dollars. It shouldn't be difficult. I'm committed now. I must find some way to get it." There was a pause, then as she said nothing, but stared quizzingly at him, he went on, "What kind of man is your husband business-wise?"

She made a contemptuous movement.

"All he thinks about ... apart from sex ... is flowers."

"Suppose he has papers to sign? Would he read all the details, including the small print? Is he cautious about what he signs? Some people read every word: others sign without reading anything. This is important. Would he want to read every word of an insurance policy before he signed?"

"No, but he would never sign an insurance policy."

"Just suppose he had a policy in front of him with three or maybe four copies ... would he check them all?"

"He wouldn't. He's not like that."

Anson finished his coffee and set down the cup.

"That's all I want to know ... it'll do for a start." He leaned forward and pulled her down beside him. "You really want to go ahead with this thing, Meg? Once you're in it, there'll be no turning back."

She ran her fingers through his blond hair.

"Why do you keep doubting me?" she asked. "/ said I'll do it with you. Don't you understand? To have you and all that money, I'll take any risk."

In the silence of the bedroom with the first rays of the sun striking the dusty mirror above the dressing-table, feeling her fingers caressing through his hair and down the back of his neck, Anson was stupid enough to believe her.

It was while he was eating an under-done egg and burned toast that Anson happened to notice something in a frame, hanging on the wall opposite to where he was sitting.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing a buttery knife. "What's that on the wall?"

Meg was sipping coffee. The time was ten minutes past eight. She was now wearing a shabby green wrap that was none too clean. Her hair was tousled, but in spite of the lack of make-up, she still looked sensually and excitingly beautiful. She glanced in the direction to which he was pointing.

"Oh, that's Phil's. He's very proud of it. It's a certificate for shooting. Phil is quite a shot."

Anson pushed back his chair and crossed the room and examined the ornate certificate in its black frame. He read that the certificate had been awarded by the Pru's Town Small Arms and Target Club to Philip Barlowe for winning the first prize in the .38 revolver shooting tournament held last March.

Anson walked thoughtfully back to the table. He sat down and pushed aside his half eaten egg. His expression was so thoughtful that Meg looked enquiringly at him.

"What is it, John?"

"So he shoots," Anson said.

"Not now, but he used to. He hasn't done any shooting for nearly a year. I wish he would go to his dreary club. He would be out of my way."

"He owns a gun?" Anson asked.

"Yes," Meg said, frowning. "What's on your mind now, John?"

"Is the gun here... in the house?"

"Yes." She nodded to the ugly sideboard. "In there."

"I would like to see it."

"See it? But why?"

"May I see it?"

She shrugged, got to her feet and went to the sideboard. She pulled open a drawer and took from it a wooden box which she put on the table.

Anson opened the box to find it contained a .38 police Special, a spare clip and a box of cartridges.

He lifted the gun from the box, checked to see it was unloaded, then balanced it in his hand.

"He doesn't use it now?" he asked.

"He hasn't touched it for months. Why the interest?"

"Do you think it would be safe if I borrowed it for a night?"

She stiffened.

"But why?"

"Could I borrow it?"

"Yes ... of course, but you must tell me ... why?"

"Use your head," Anson said impatiently. He put the gun in his hip pocket. "I have to find three thousand dollars."

She sat motionless, staring at him.

He took six cartridges from the box and dropped them into his pocket.

There was a long pause, then he reached out and pulled her to him. His hands moved down her long back as he pressed his lips to hers.

Chapter 4

Sometime during the late afternoon, Anson drove into the Caltex Service Station on the Brent highway. While the attendant was filling his tank and cleaning his windshield, Anson went into the office and through to the toilet. He left the toilet door ajar and standing against the far wall, he examined the office. There was a desk, a filing cabinet and a big, old-fashioned safe. He noticed the two big windows that faced the highway.

He moved out of the toilet, satisfied he now had the geography of the office set in his mind and he returned to the car.

As he paid the attendant, he said casually, "You keep open all night, don't you?"

"That's a fact, but I go off in three hours. My sidekick does the night shift."

A few months back, Anson had talked with the manager, of the Service station about insuring the takings. He knew there was anything from three thousand to four thousand dollars in the safe. While he had been examining Barlowe's gun, it had flashed through his mind that the Service station could be a pretty easy hold-up.

He was surprised that he felt so calm about planning this robbery. The weight of the gun in his hip pocket gave him a lot of confidence. He decided around four o'clock in the morning he would walk into the Service station and force the attendant at gun point to open the safe. With any luck he would then have

enough money to pay off Joe Duncan and to pay the first premium of Barlowe's fifty thousand dollar life policy.

Back at the Marlborough hotel, Anson went up to his room. Sitting on his bed, he examined Barlowe's gun. He knew something about guns as he had served his two years of military service. He satisfied himself that the gun was in good working order, then he loaded it with the six cartridges he had in his pocket. He put the gun in his suitcase.

He then went down to the bar. After drinking two stiff whiskies, he went along to the restaurant. He ordered dinner and asked for half a bottle of claret. He seldom drank wine, but he wanted the cork from the bottle: the cork was to play a minor part in his robbery plan. His stomach still felt sore and he had no appetite. He merely picked at his food. Around nine o'clock, he signed the check. He put the cork from the wine bottle into his pocket and leaving the restaurant, he walked to the men's toilet room. There was an old Negro attendant, dozing in a chair. He peered sleepily at Anson and seeing he needed no service, he closed his eyes again.

Anson washed his hands, and while he did so, he looked in the mirror at the rows of hats and coats hanging on the rack behind him. He picked on a well worn brown and green striped overcoat; a shabby but distinctive coat, and a Swiss hat with a gay feather in it on the next peg.

After drying his hands, he looked at the dozing Negro who had begun to snore gently. Anson took the hat and coat and left the hotel by a side entrance.

Carrying the hat and coat, he walked the few yards down the street to where he had parked his car. He opened the trunk tossed in the hat and coat, closed the trunk and returned to the hotel.

Back in his room, he stretched out on his bed, lit a cigarette and went over in his mind the plan to make sure he knew exactly what he was going to do.

It seemed simple and straightforward so long as he didn't lose his nerve. He would leave the hotel by the staff entrance around three o'clock a.m. At that time he wasn't likely to run into anyone. There was a lay-by near the Service station. He would leave his car there.

He would then darken his blond eyebrows and the sides of his hair with burnt cork, put on the Swiss hat and the borrowed topcoat, tie a handkerchief over the lower part of his face and walk to the Service station. Once he had the money, he would put the telephone out of action and return to his car. If anyone tried to act like a hero ... well, he had the gun.

He got off the bed feeling restless and excited. It was only ten o'clock. He wondered what Meg was doing. She hadn't been far from his thoughts during the day. He went down to the bar, and seeing two salesmen he knew, he joined them. It was around one o'clock when he returned to his room. He was a little drunk and in a reckless mood. He took

Barlowe's gun from the suitcase and sitting on the bed, he balanced the gun in his hand. This is it, he thought. There is a time when every man worth a nickle must make up his mind what to do with his life. I've put off my decision long enough. I'll never get anywhere without money. With Meg to help me and with fifty thousand dollars to get me started, I'll reach up and take the sun out of the sky. But he knew he was kidding himself. He knew in a year, probably less, the fifty thousand dollars would be gone. He had never been able to hold onto money. He knew Meg was an exciting sexual plaything, but nothing more, and she would never help him. She was a slut: shiftless and worthless, and like him, money loving. Well, all right, he said shrugging, the money may not last long, but well have a fine time while it does last. He lay back on the pillow, nursing the gun and thinking again of Meg.

Harry Weber had been working the night shift at the Caltex Service station for the past two years. It was a soft job, and Harry liked it. He was an avid reader and the job gave him the opportunity to indulge himself. After one o'clock a.m. he considered himself busy if he had to service more than three cars up to the time he came off duty which was at seven o'clock a.m. He sometimes wondered why the Service station kept open all night, but as he could relax and read, it was no skin off his nose if they were willing to pay him good money just to sit on his backside and soak himself in the paperbacks on which he spent most of his wages.

A few minutes to four, Harry made himself a jug of coffee. Cup in hand, he settled back in his chair to continue a James Bond story when the glass door to the office swung silently open. Harry looked up, stiffened, then very slowly set down his cup of coffee on the desk. The paperback slipped out of his hand and dropped to the floor.

The man facing him was wearing an odd looking topcoat and Swiss style hat. The lower part of his face was hidden by a white handkerchief. In his right hand he held a vicious looking gun that he pointed to Harry. For a brief moment the two men stared at each other then the gunman said quietly, "Don't act like a hero! I don't want to kill you, but I will if I have to. Get that safe open and pronto!"

"Sure," Harry said, badly shaken. He got slowly and unsteadily to his feet. The gunman came into the office and crossed to the toilet, his gun still covering Harry. He pushed open the door and backed into the dark little room.

"Get the safe open!" he said, standing in the doorway. "Hurry it up!"

Harry pulled open the top drawer of the desk. Lying by the safe key was a .45 automatic supplied by the Service station for just such an emergency as this. He looked down at the gun and hesitated. Could he grab the gun and shoot before this gunman shot him?

Watching him, Anson saw his hesitation and a warning instinct told him there was a gun in the drawer. "Don't move!" he yelled. "Get back ... get your hand up!" The note in his voice frightened Harry. Cursing himself for hesitating and yet glad of it, he lifted, his hands and backed away.

Anson moved forward, reached into the drawer, took out the gun and then stepped back into the toilet. He put the gun on the floor at his feet.

"Get the safe open!" he said, a snarl in his voice. "Start, acting like a hero and I'll kill you!"

Harry took the key and opened the safe.

Anson glanced anxiously through the wide windows and out on to the dark highway.

"Get over against the wall!" he ordered. "Face the wall and don't move." Harry obeyed. Anson knelt before the safe and pulled out a large steel cash box. It was unlocked. He opened it. The pile of bills in the box made his eyes gleam. As he began stuffing the bills into his topcoat pockets, he heard the unexpected sound of an approaching motor cycle engine. His heart skipped a beat. This could only be a traffic cop coming. Would he stop or would he pass the Service station? Working frantically, Anson stuffed the rest of the bills into his pockets, threw the cash box back into the safe and slammed the safe door shut. He stepped back into the toilet.

"Sit at the desk," he said to Harry, his voice tense and vicious. "Quick! Give me away and you'll get it first!"

Harry was moving towards the desk as the beam of the motor cycle headlight flashed across the office. A moment later the sound of the motor cycle engine spluttered to silence.

A trickle of cold sweat ran down Anson's face. The cop had stopped. He would be coming in!

"If there's any shooting," Anson said, "remember, you'll get it first," and he pushed the door of the toilet so it stood ajar. He could only see part of the office now and it worried him he couldn't see Harry.

As the toilet door pushed to, Harry picked up a pencil and quickly wrote on a check pad: Hold up. Gunman in toilet. The office door swung open, and a big red faced cop walked in. He often passed at this time and Harry always had a cup of coffee ready for him.

"Hi, Harry," the cop said cheerfully. "Got any Java for your old pal?"

Anson looked around the dark little toilet for a way of escape but he saw immediately he was trapped. The window was too high and too small for him to use.

He heard Harry say, "I've just made some, Tom."

The cop pulled off his gauntlet gloves and as he dropped them on the desk, Harry who was now standing, pointed to the written message.

The cop wasn't bright. He frowned down at the message, saying "What's this? Something you want me to read?"

Hearing this, Anson knew he had been betrayed. Again he was surprised how calm he felt. Silently, he opened the door of the toilet room.

Harry saw him and went white. The cop, frowning, was staring at the written message, then he looked round and saw the masked gunman.

"Hold it!" Anson exclaimed, his voice unnaturally high. He lifted the gun so it pointed directly at the cop.

The cop's small eyes widened with shock, then he recovered and slowly he straightened. He looked enormous and threatening to Anson.

"Get back against the wall," Anson said. "Go on ... the pair of you!"

Harry hurriedly moved back until his shoulders were flat against the wall, but the cop didn't move.

"You can't get away with this, punk," he said in a hard, gritty voice. "Give me the rod. Come on ... you can't get away with it."

Anson had a sudden feeling of sensual excitement. This stupid hunk of meat was going to be brave. He watched as the cop held out an enormous hand. He heard him say again, "Hand it over ... come on!" As if he were talking to a circus dog.

Anson didn't move. His finger steadily took up the slack of the trigger. Then as the cop began a brave and slow advance, Anson became aware that there was no more slack to take up. The bang of the exploding gun and the kick of it in his hand startled him. He stepped back, drawing in a quick gasping breath. He watched the red of the cop's face suddenly drain from under the coarse weather-beaten skin and the massive legs buckle as if the bones had turned into jelly.

Anson stood motionless, the handkerchief covering the lower part of his face was wet with sweat. He watched the bulky body slide to the floor. One massive hand feebly caught the edge of the desk, spilled off it and then the cop was lying face down at Anson's feet.

Anson started towards the door, paused, grabbed the telephone and wrenched it from the wall. He threw it viciously at Harry who had his hands covering his head, his nerve broken by the shooting.

Anson ran out into the night. With the weight of the money in his pockets flapping against his legs, he fled towards his car.

The following morning, immediately after he had had breakfast, Anson went into the writing room of the hotel and wrote a cheque for \$ 1,045 in favour of Joe Duncan. He put this cheque into an envelope with a curt note saying he would no longer bet with Duncan, sealed the envelope, and then, leaving the writing room, he went to one of the telephone call boxes and telephoned Meg.

There was some delay before she answered and when she did, she sounded cross. The time was twenty minutes to nine and Anson guessed he had got her out of bed.

"I'm coming out this afternoon," he said. "I have something I borrowed to return. Will you be in?"

"Oh, it's you." She still sounded cross. "You woke me up!"

With the vision of the cop falling like a felled tree still in his mind, Anson said impatiently, "Will you be in?"

"Yes ... of course."

"Then around three," he hung up.

He left the hotel and went over to the Pru Town National bank. He paid in one thousand dollars in cash. The money, he told the teller, was to be credited immediately to his account at Brent. He then registered the letter to Duncan and posted it.

He had five calls to make. He sold a policy worth a thousand dollars to a fanner. Until lunch time he tried to convince two other prospects why they should insure with the National Fidelity but without success. He then returned to Pru Town for lunch.

He bought the lunch edition of the Pru Town Gazette and read about the robbery and the shooting at the Caltex Service Station. He learned the cop's name was Tom Sanquist. He had been shot through the lungs and his condition was so critical his wife and twelve-year-old son were at his bedside.

There was a picture of Harry Weber pointing to the toilet where the gunman had hidden. Lieutenant H. Jensen, Homicide sergeant at Brent, had been called to the scene.

Anson put down the newspaper and ordered lunch. He was pleased to find that he was hungry. The soreness of his stomach had faded and he was able to enjoy the rather heavy lunch the restaurant provided.

The waiter who served him was full of the robbery and Anson listened politely to what he had to say.

"They should never keep such sums in a place as isolated as at," the waiter said as he gave Anson his check. "It is asking for trouble."

Anson agreed and left the restaurant. In the lobby, he ran to the two salesmen he had been drinking with the previous night. They too had to discuss the robbery.

"Some thug passing through," one of them said. "It's my fault he wasn't a local man. He's miles away by now."

Anson agreed and went on to where he had parked his car. He made another call to renew a car insurance policy. As time as moving on, he drove out to the Barlowe house.

As he drove along the highway, he went over in his mind the details of the previous night. He could see no reason why the robber could possibly get on to him. Weber's description of the robber had been influenced by his shaken nerves. He said the man was heavily built and tall which Anson was not. He had described the Swiss hat accurately but he had said the top-coat had been fawn coloured. Sanquist the dying cop, was too ill to be questioned.

On his way back to Pru Town after the robbery, Anson had stopped the car by a wooded thicket and had dumped the hat and topcoat. The robbery had netted him \$3,670, more than he had hoped for.

He was still surprised that he was so calm about the whole affair: even the shooting of Sanquist left him unmoved.

As he drove onto the tarmac drive of the Barlowe houses, Meg came to the door.

He came towards her, smiling.

"Hello," he said. "Here I am again." She gave ground, standing aside. Although she returned his smile, her smile didn't reach her eyes. She looked pale and tense.

As he took off his topcoat and as she shut the front door, she said, "It was on the radio just now. The patrol officer ... the one who was shot ... he's - he's dead."

Anson walked into the sitting-room. He stood by the fire warming his cold hands. He watched her as she stood in the doorway, her cobalt blue eyes sick with fear.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" she demanded, her voice shrill. "He is dead."

Anson peered at her. Again he was surprised how calm he felt. The fool had asked for it. He could have lived but he had asked for it. Now there was no reason to turn back ... Barlowe would be next. The cop's death sealed Barlowe's fate.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"You shot him, didn't you?"

He looked around the room. She really was a slut, he thought as he saw the used breakfast things on the table. One of them: Barlowe of course, had had eggs and bacon. The yoke encrusted plate, the smear of jam on the tablecloth, the used coffee cups by her typewriter disgusted him.

She stood watching him as he opened his briefcase and took out the gun. He wiped it carefully with his handkerchief and carrying it in his handkerchief, he put it in the wooden box he took from the drawer in the sideboard. He took five cartridges from his pocket, carefully wiped each one before putting them in the box.

"You've cleaned the gun?" she asked in a tight frightened voice.

"Of course."

"But you took six cartridges."

"Do you think he will miss one?" Anson asked, turning to look at her.

She shuddered.

"So you did kill that man ..."

He took hold of her wrist and jerked her roughly to him.

"This is the beginning," he said, his hand sliding down the length of her back. She stiffened and tried to pull away from him, but he held her. "You said we would go ahead with this." His grip tightened. "Kiss me," he said urgently. "You're in this mess with me. You can't escape from it now. Kiss me."

She hesitated, then closing her eyes, she relaxed against him. As his lips met hers, he felt her shudder. Roughly he moved her round the settee, pushed her down so she lay on her back, taring up at him.

She shook her head wildly.

"No ... not now... John! No!"

Seeing his sudden change of expression, an expression that frightened her, she pressed the palms of her hands against her eyes and shudderingly yielded to him.

"Tell me about yourself, Meg," Anson said some twenty minutes later. He was now sitting before the fire in the big hairy armchair while Meg still lay upon the settee. "You shouldn't mind if I seem curious. I want you to be careful how you answer my questions. What I'm aiming to do is to make sure you don't land up in the gas chamber."

Meg moved uneasily.

"Why talk like that? You frighten me."

"It's better to be frightened by me than by Maddox," Anson lied. "When eventually you put in the claim for the insurance money, Maddox will turn a searchlight on you. Even if you have a cast iron alibi, he'll still be suspicious of you. Is there anything in your past he shouldn't know about?"

She frowned, not looking at him.

"No ... of course not!"

"You have no criminal record?"

She half sat up, her eyes angry.

"No!"

"You have never been in trouble with the police?"

She hesitated, then shrugging, she said, "Driving too fast... that's all."

"What did you do before you were married?"

"I was a receptionist at an hotel."

"What hotel?"

"The Connaught Anns in Los Angeles."

"Was it a respectable hotel? It wasn't a room by the hour and no questions asked?"

"Of course not!"

"Before that?"

Again she hesitated before saying, "I was a night club hostess."

Anson became alert.

"What did you do?"

"The usual thing; partnered men, persuaded them to buy drinks."

"Now watch this, Meg. Did you go home with them? You know what I mean."

"I didn't."

He studied her. Her eyes were now angry.

"Sure?"

"I tell you I didn't!" She was now sitting bolt upright. "Is this man going to ask me these kind of questions before he'll pay out?"

Anson shook his head.

"Oh, no. But if he doesn't like the look of your claim, he'll turn one of his smart investigators on to you. Without your knowing anything about it, he'll dig up your whole history. He'll then decide when he has your dossier in front of him if he'll fight your claim or not. If your dossier is bad, he'll fight you."

She lay back, her expression showing how worried she was.

"If I'd known it was going to be like this, I wouldn't have agreed to do it with you."

"There's still time to back out," Anson said. "You can't expect, to pick up fifty thousand dollars for nothing. You have nothing to worry about so long as you are telling the truth. What did you do before you became a night club hostess?"

"I lived with my mother," she said, not looking at him.

"You have been married nearly a year. This is vitally important, Meg. I must have the truth. While you have been Barlowe's wife, have you had a lover?"

"I've had you," Meg said and made a face at him.

"I don't mean me," Anson said, staring at her. "We've been careful, and we're going to remain careful. I mean someone else ... someone you haven't been so careful about."

"No ... there's been no one."

"Sure? If Maddox finds there has been someone, he'll go after him. There's nothing he likes better than to find out the wife of the insured husband who suddenly dies has a lover. He thrives on a situation like that."

"There's been no one."

"Would there be anyone who would know how you really feel about your husband? Anyone who might have overheard you quarrelling if you do quarrel? Anyone who might say you weren't happily married?"

She shook her head.

"No one ever comes here."

"Would your husband discuss you with anyone?"

She shook her head emphatically.

"No ... I'm sure of that."

Anson leaned back in the chair and thought for a long moment while Meg watched him.

"Okay," he said finally. "I think that covers it. You're sure you've told me the truth? You may not think so now, but all these questions are important. Once Maddox investigates you, and you can bet your life that's what he will do, you have to be above reproach. You are sure you have told me the truth?"

"Yes ... don't keep on and on! I have told you the truth!"

"Okay." He relaxed and took out a packet of cigarettes. He tossed her one and took one himself. As they lit up, he went on, "Now for the next step. Will your husband be home tomorrow night?"

"He's always home except on Mondays and Thursdays."

"I'll be here around eight thirty. Make sure you answer the door. I've got to get into this room if I'm to sell him. If he comes to the door, he may keep me on the doorstep and you don't sell insurance on a doorstep."

"Don't think you are going to have an easy time with Phil... you won't."

Anson got to his feet.

"Your job is to open the front door and let me in. I'll do the rest. Tomorrow night then."

She stood up.

"John ... I want to know ... did you shoot that policeman?"

Anson picked up his brief-case.

"I told you not to ask questions." He paused and looked directly at her. "I have the money to pay for the premium ... that's all you need know."

He made no attempt to kiss her, but went out of the house and down the drive to his car.

As soon as the sound of his car engine had died away, Meg ran to the telephone and hurriedly dialled a number. She listened to the ringing tone for a long time, but there was no answer.

The following night was warm and mild with a brilliant moon. As things turned out this was lucky for Anson.

Meg had warned him Barlowe would be difficult but he hadn't imagined he was going to be as difficult as he was. Like most weak-willed people, Barlowe was not only obstinate he was also rude.

Anson had no difficulty in getting in to the big sitting-room because Meg let him in, but when Barlowe jumped up from the armchair before the fire, an evening newspaper in his hand, Anson immediately felt the impact of hostility that came from the small ill-tempered looking man.

In spite of the hostility, Anson went smoothly into his usual sales talk, but he had scarcely begun, before Barlowe curtly cut him short.

"I'm not interested in insurance. I never have been and I never will be," he said. "You're wasting your time and mine. I'll be glad if you'll go."

Anson had smiled his friendly professional smile.

"I've come all the way from Brent, Mr. Barlowe, to see you. I would take it as a favour if you would listen to what I have to say. I..."

"I don't intend to listen!" Barlowe turned angrily to Meg who was standing in the doorway. "Why did you let him in? You know I never talk to salesmen!"

He sat down and opening his paper, he hid himself behind it.

Anson and Meg exchanged glances. She lifted her shoulders as if to say "Well, I told you, didn't I?"

To Anson this was a challenge. He was one of the top salesmen of the National Fidelity's group of salesmen. Over the years, he had often met with the complete brush-off and had survived to make a sale.

He said to the newspaper, hiding Barlowe, "Of course if I am annoying you I'll go, but I was under the impression you were interested in taking out a life policy. In fact, I was told to call on you."

Barlowe lowered the newspaper and stared suspiciously at Anson.

"Told? What do you mean? Who told you?"

Anson made an apologetic gesture.

"Mr. Hammerstein," he said naming the general manager of Framley's store. He felt safe in using Hammerstein's name. In his lowly position as salesman, Barlowe wasn't likely to have contact with a man in Hammerstein's position. "I sold him a life policy and he said it would be a good idea if I called on some members of his staff. He gave me your name." Barlowe flushed red.

"Mr. Hammerstein gave you my name?"

"That's right," Anson said and smiled. "He seems to think a lot of you."

There was a pause, then Barlowe said in a milder tone, "I'm not interested. Anyway, thanks for calling."

"That's all right," Anson said. "I'm glad to have met you. I won't disturb you any longer."

Barlowe got hastily to his feet. He was now looking embarrassed.

"I didn't mean to seem rude," he said. "I wouldn't like you to think ... I mean ... well, one does get so pestered ..."

Anson's smile widened. This ill-tempered little man was now obviously scared word might get back to his boss that he had given Anson the brush-off.

"I know ... I know," he said. "Believe it or not some optimist the other day actually tried to sell me an insurance policy," and he laughed.

Barlowe laughed too. He was now losing his hostility and he moved forward as if to show Anson to the front door.

"I'll bet he didn't sell you anything," he said.

"And you wouldn't lose," Anson returned and laughed again.

Barlowe was now in the hall. With a quick wink at Meg, Anson joined him.

"I was admiring your garden," he said. "I would very much like to see it in daylight. As I drove up, my headlights showed me some of the finest roses I have ever seen."

Barlowe was about to open the front door; now he paused.

"Are you interested in gardening?"

"I'm crazy about it, but unfortunately I live in an apartment. My father had a cottage in Carmel. He grew roses, but they weren't in the same class as yours."

"Is that a fact?" Barlowe was now completely relaxed. "Would you like to see my garden?" His ill-tempered face softened. "I'll show it to you."

He opened a cupboard by the front door and Anson saw the cupboard contained a number of electrical switches.

Barlowe flicked them all down, then he opened the front door.

Anson moved forward, then paused.

The small garden had been transformed into a fairyland. Although he could see no sign of any lamps, the garden was now artistically and beautifully floodlit. It was as if the flowers themselves were producing their own lights. Even the fountain and the fish pond were bathed in blue and yellow lights.

"Well for Pete's sake!" Anson said, catching his breath. He pushed past Barlowe and stood on the drive, staring. There was no need for him to pretend. The sight of this beauty, the gay play of the fountain, the colour and the flowers caught him by the throat.

"I did it all," Barlowe said, standing by his side. "Everything... I grew the flowers: lighted them; made the fountain ... I did everything."

"I would give five years of my life to be able to create a thing like that," Anson said and at that moment he meant it.

"I've given a lot of the years of my life learning how to do it," Barlowe said, and suddenly his face became pinched and ill-tempered again. "And where's it got me? Just a small time job with Framley's."

Here it is, Anson thought. Here's what I've been waiting for! Turning to Barlowe, a look of puzzled astonishment on his face, he said, "But why work for anyone, Mr. Barlowe, when you have such a talent? You could make a whale of a lot of money as a landscape architect."

Barlowe made an angry gesture.

"Do you think I haven't thought of that? How can I, without capital? I can't take risks. I'm married and I haven't anything behind me."

"Nothing behind you?" Anson said his voice incredulous. "That's ridiculous! You have this!" He waved dramatically towards the garden. "Any bank would advance you money if they saw this! Haven't you talked to them?"

"My bank won't advance me anything!" Barlowe said bitterly. "I've no security to offer. I have a minus credit rating. My mother cost me ... well, that's neither here nor there. I can't raise a loan. Even the house is mortgaged to the hilt!"

Anson walked away from him. He stood over the floodlit fish pond, watching the goldfish as they moved in the lighted water. He stood there for some moments before Barlowe joined him.

"This interests me," Anson said. "When I see a garden like this ... well, it excites me." He looked at Barlowe. "I see endless possibilities. How much capital would you need to start up on your own? I'm in touch with a lot of people in Brent, Lambsville and Pru Town ... wealthy people. They would be crazy to have a garden like this. I could give you a flock of introductions. How much capital do you want?"

Barlowe's face was suddenly alert and hopeful.

"What are we standing out here for?" he said, putting his hand on Alison's arm. "Let's go inside and I'll tell you about it."

As Anson re-entered the sitting-room and sat down on the settee, he gave Meg a quick furtive wink of triumph.

"I'll be working late, Anna," Anson said. "I have a policy to cope with. No need for you to hang around."

"I'll do it if you like, Mr. Anson," Anna said, "I don't expect it will take long."

"It could do. Isn't this the night you take your boy friend to the movies?"

Anna giggled.

"He takes me, you mean."

"Go on ... get off. I've nothing to do." When she had gone, Anson went to the store cupboard and took from it four policy blanks. He put them on his desk, then lighting a cigarette, he leaned back in his desk chair.

It was now five days since he had talked Barlowe into taking out a \$5,000 life insurance policy. Before the deal could be completed, Barlowe had to take the usual insurance medical examination. It would have been tough luck if he had failed it, but he hadn't. Dr. Stevens, who acted for the National Fidelity, had said Barlowe was a first class life.

It was when Anson had explained to Barlowe how he could use a life policy to raise the capital he needed to set up as a horticultural architect - a phrase Anson kept using and which obviously pleased Barlowe — that Barlowe's sales resistance had disappeared. He had become so eager to sign that Anson was worried he had oversold his prospect. He had to explain to

Barlowe that before the National Fidelity would accept him as a client he would have to pass a medical examination.

"The great advantage of this policy so far as you are concerned," Anson said hurrying over the sudden pause that followed when he had mentioned the medical examination, "is that you will be able to ask your bank manager, a year from signature, for three thousand dollars and get it without any fuss. You will only have to pay \$150 to gain this advantage."

Barlowe frowned. He picked at the dirty adhesive bandage on his hand.

"Do you mean I have to wait a year before I can raise the capital I want?" he demanded. "Why, I thought ..."

"Excuse me, Mr. Barlowe, but not so many minutes ago you told me you hadn't a hope of ever raising any kind of capital," Anson said quietly. "Now, in a year's time, because of this policy, you will be able to buy your land and start up in business."

Barlowe hesitated, then nodded.

"Yes ... all right. So what happens now?"

"As soon as I have the doctor's report, I'll come out with the policy for your signature," Anson said.

There was one final touch necessary to complete his plan.

"If you care to pay the first premium in cash, I'll be able to give you a five per cent discount. You may as well have the discount and it saves book-keeping for me."

And of course Barlowe had agreed.

Anson picked up one of the policy blanks. He inserted it into the typewriter and filled in the necessary details. This policy was for \$5,000: the beneficiary in the event of the death of the insured was to be Mrs. Philip Barlowe.

He put in another blank, duplicating what he had already done. The third and fourth policy blanks were different. These, he made out for the sum of \$50,000. If Barlowe happened to spot the difference, Anson could always say it was a typist's error.

Tomorrow night would be Thursday. Anson knew Meg would be alone. Although he was tempted to go out to the lonely house and make love to her, he knew this now would be too dangerous. He would have to wait. In six months, perhaps less, he and she

would be together for as long as he liked: he and she and fifty thousand dollars ... worth waiting for.

He called the Barlowe house. Meg answered the telephone.

"It's all fixed," he said. "I'll be coming out the night after tomorrow. I told you I'd fix it, didn't I?"

"You are sure it is going to be all right?" The note of anxiety in her voice excited him. "When he has signed what are you going to do?"

"Let's wait until he signs," Anson said. "I'm thinking of you. I wish I were with you," and he put down the receiver.

A few minutes after six o'clock a.m. Philip Barlowe came awake with a sudden start. He had been dreaming. His grey-white pillow was damp with sweat.

He came awake the way an animal comes awake: instantly alert, suspicious, slightly frightened. He lay still, listening, then when he heard no sound to alarm him, he relaxed and moved further down in the single bed, making himself more comfortable.

Thursday!

The two days that meant more to him were Monday and Thursday when he got away from the house to spend the night alone after the dreary night classes when he attempted to instil into the minds of a group of pimply youths the basic theory of horticulture.

This night, he told himself, he would go out to Jason's Glen. There, he would be sure to find a number of smoochers and

petters: young people behaving disgracefully in their secondhand cars. The thought of what he had heard and seen in the past brought beads of sweat out on his high forehead.

One of these days, he told himself, his small, well shaped hands turning in to fists, he would teach these sluts a lesson. Their feeble, immoral petting disgusted him. Sometime in the very near future, some girl would learn what it meant to go beyond a giggle, a struggle and vapid gasp of breath.

Impatiently, he tossed off the blanket and sheet and got out of bed. He crossed to the mirror above the dressing-table and stared at himself. The shock of black hair, the white drawn ill-tempered face made him grimace. He turned away and walked over to a cupboard on the wall. He hesitated, listened, then took a key from his pyjama pocket. He unlocked the cupboard and looked at the .38 automatic revolver that lay on the shelf. By the gun was a white bathing cap. He picked up the cap; stretching it, he drew it down over his head. From the shelf he took two small rubber pads. These he fitted between his gums and the inside of his cheeks ... they filled out his face, altering his appearance in a startling way. He moved over to the mirror and stared again at himself. The ill-tempered, thin-faced Barlowe had disappeared. Instead, there was a fat-faced nightmarish looking creature: the white bathing cap making him look completely bald. He picked up the gun. His fingers curled lovingly around the trigger, and he smiled. Not so far in the future, he told himself, this gun would explode into sound. Not so far into the future ... someone would die.

He put the gun back on to the shelf. He took off the bathing cap. He took the rubber pads from his mouth and replaced them on the shelf. Then he carefully locked the cupboard door. He paused for a long moment staring into space, then whistling tunelessly, he went into the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, he returned to his room. He dressed, again opened the cupboard and put the bathing cap and the rubber pads into his hip pocket. For a long moment he stared at the gun, hesitated then decided to leave it where it was. He stepped into the corridor. He paused outside Meg's bedroom door. He put his ear against the locked door panel and listened. He could hear nothing. He stood there for several moments, then with a frustrated grimace, he went down the stairs to prepare his routine breakfast of eggs and bacon.

Unaware of what had been going on, Meg continued to sleep restlessly.

Jason's Glen was a favourite place for young couples who were lucky enough to have a car, but unfortunate enough to have no room, little money, and no facilities in which to make love. No matter what the weather offered, Jason's Glen always

had at least two or three cars in which couples made desperate and natural love.

This Thursday night, rain was falling. There were only two cars parked under the trees. One of them was a small British sports car: the other a battered, aged Buick.

From under the heavy overgrown shrubs, Barlowe watched the two cars. They were separated by some fifty yards.

Suddenly a girl exclaimed: "Jeff! No! What do you think you're doing? Jeff! ... No!"

The voice came from the Buick.

Crouching like a black crab, the white bathing helmet pulled down over his thick black hair, Barlowe crept out into the rain towards the parked Buick.

The man in the sports car called out, "Don't let her take no for an answer, pal," and the girl with him gave a squeal of hysterical laughter.

Barlowe suddenly had a furious, frustrated desire to have his gun in his hand. With a gun ... he could teach these young, filthy animals a lesson.

He moved up to the Buick, unaware of the rain that was beating down on his crouched body. When the girl in the car began to moan, Barlowe suddenly fell on his knees. His hands clawed into the wet, soft soil. He remained like that, his body arched, and when the girl suddenly cried out, he dug his fingers deeper into the soil.

Anson was flicking through a pile of coupon inquiries when the telephone bell rang.

Anna picked up the receiver.

Looking across at her from his desk, Anson saw her usual placid expression change to alertness and he had a sudden feeling of danger.

"Yes ... yes, he's here. I'll put you through."

Anna looked at Anson and waved the telephone receiver warningly. Then she flicked down the key and hissed, "It's Mr. Maddox."

His face wooden, his heart suddenly thumping, Anson picked up his receiver and said, "Anson here."

A hard, curt voice barked, "I want you out here. How are you fixed for tomorrow?"

"I can manage that," Anson said, "anything special?"

"You don't imagine I'd pull you off your territory just to look at you, do you?" Maddox snapped. "Okay, then ten o'clock tomorrow," and he hung up.

Anson replaced his receiver, pushed back his chair and walked to the window so Anna couldn't see how white he had gone.

Barlowe's policy for \$50,000, signed and completed, had gone to Head Office three days ago. Why had Maddox got on to it so quickly? Anson dug his sweating hands into his trouser pockets as he wondered.

"What does he want?" Anna asked curiously.

Making an effort, Anson returned to his desk. He sat down.

"I don't know," he said, picking up another batch of coupons. "Why should I worry?"

Anna lifted her fat shoulders.

"Well, if you're not worrying, why should I?" Anson went on sorting through the coupons. There was a chill around his heart. Maddox! Even before Barlowe was dead this jinx of a man was suspicious... or was he? Anson lit a cigarette. Better now than after Barlowe was dead. If it looked too dangerous, he wouldn't go ahead with his plan. It was better now to know the worst before he was so far out on a limb he couldn't scramble back. Maddox!

Chapter 5

Patty Shaw, Maddox's secretary, was typing busily when Anson entered the small outer office. She looked up, took her hands off the keys and smiled a welcome.

"Hello, John, nice to see you again. How's it out in the back of the beyond?"

Anson returned her smile. All the National Fidelity salesmen were fond of Patty: apart from her blonde prettiness, she was

smart and helpful. She understood a salesman's difficulties and she knew how discouraging Maddox could be.

"Not so bad. What's he want?" Anson jerked his head to the door that led into Maddox's office.

"The Vodex car smash," Patty said, rolling her blue eyes. "He's trying to get out of paying the claim. He wants your angle on it."

Anson drew in a long, slow breath of relief. And he had been thinking it was the Barlowe policy Maddox was going to gripe about.

"He can't get out of paying it!" he exclaimed angrily. "What's the matter with the man? Vodex was drunker than a skunk! We've got to pay!"

"You know how he is," Patty said, lifting her shoulders. "He'll try anything to get out of paying a claim." She flicked down a key on her intercom. "Mr. Anson's here, Mr. Maddox."

A hard curt voice barked, "Shoot him right in."

"Go ahead," Patty said, waving to the door. "Remember Daniel in the lion's den. Daniel didn't give a damn for the lions, and the lions didn't give a damn for Daniel."

Anson forced a grin and then went into Maddox's office.

Maddox was sitting behind a vast desk, smothered in papers. There were papers on the floor, papers on most of the chairs and papers everywhere.

Maddox was glaring at a policy he held in his thick freckled fingers. His thinning grey hair was ruffled and his red face was screwed into a scowl. Maddox wasn't a big man although he looked big from behind the shelter of his desk. He had the shoulders of a boxer and the legs of a midget. His eyes were restless, alert and bleak. He wore his well-cut clothes anyhow. Cigarette ash rained on his sleeves, his tie and his lap. He had a habit of running his stubby fingers constantly through his hair which added to his dishevelled appearance.

He leaned back in the chair and glared at Anson.

"Well, come on in," he said. "Sit down. This sonofa bitch, Vodex ..." and as Anson sat down, Maddox launched into a steady invective against their client.

- Twenty minutes later, Maddox made a gesture of disgust and reached for another cigarette.

"Okay, so well have to pay up! Forty thousand dollars! You salesmen kill me! Couldn't you have seen this jerk was an alcoholic? All you think about is your commission! If you had a grain of insight, we'd be forty thousand dollars in pocket!"

"It's my job to sell insurance," Anson said sharply. "You don't have to beef to me. If you have any complaint take it up with Doc Stevens. He okayed Vodex. If you don't like the way I sell insurance you'd better talk to Mr. Burrows."

Burrows was the President of the National Fidelity, the only man who could talk back to Maddox.

Maddox lit another cigarette.

"Okay, okay," he said, waving his stubby hands. "Don't get your shirt out. But this kills me! Forty thousand dollars!

What's the matter with Stevens? Doesn't he know a drunk when he sees one?"

"Vodex wasn't a drunk!" Anson said patiently. "He happened to be drunk on the night of the crash. He hasn't been drunk in years."

Maddox shrugged and suddenly relaxed. His red, rubbery face contorted into a sour grin.

"Well, let's forget it. How's business Anson? How are you doing?"

Knowing his man, Anson wasn't fooled. Cautiously he said, "It's all right. This is a bad month. I have a number of prospects lined up once they have paid their rents and bills."

"You're not doing so bad," Maddox said and dived into a mass of papers on his desk. He came up with a policy which he studied, then looked at Anson with a sudden cold penetrating stare.

"What's this? This guy Barlowe? You hooked him for fifty thousand dollars?"

Anson's face was expressionless as he said, "Oh Barlowe ... yes, that was a lucky one. He sent in a coupon inquiry and I nailed him."

"Fifty thousand, huh?" Maddox stared at the policy, then dropped it on his desk. "Who is Barlowe?"

"Probably one of the best gardeners I've ever come across," Anson said. "He works in the horticultural department of Framleys' stores. I don't know if you are interested in gardening, but he has the finest small garden I've eVer seen."

"I'm not interested in anything except the work that lies under my nose and the pen I hold in my hand," Maddox misquoted sourly. "So this guy works at Framley's stores, does he? How come he can afford a policy this size?"

"He wants to use it to raise capital to buy himself a business," Anson said. "After a couple of years, he'll ask us to pay the premiums out of the policy."

"Nice for him," Maddox said scowling. "In the meantime if he happens to drop dead, we're in the hole for fifty thousand bucks."

"Stevens rates him as a first class life."

"That quack! He can't even recognize a drunk when he sees one!"

Anson didn't say anything. He watched Maddox light yet another cigarette.

"The beneficiary is Mrs. Barlowe ... that his wife?"

"Yes." Anson felt his heart give a little kick against his side.

"What's she like?" Maddox asked, staring at Anson.

"You mean what does she look like?" Anson asked, his voice casual, his expression inquiring.

"Yeah ... I like to have a picture of people in my mind," Maddox said. "When I get a policy for this amount come out of the blue and I learn the insured is just a counter clerk, I get interested. What's she like?"

"Attractive, around twenty-seven. I didn't talk to her much. I talked to Barlowe. I got the impression they were happy together," Anson said carefully.

Maddox picked up the policy and stared at it.

"How come this guy pays the first premium in cash?" he asked.

"He wanted it that way. He keeps money in his house. Anything wrong about it?"

Maddox grimaced.

"I don't know. Twelve hundred is a lot of dough to keep in your house. Hasn't he a banking account?"

"I guess so. I didn't ask him."

Maddox blew a stream of tobacco smoke down his thick nostrils. His red rubbery face was screwed up in an expression of thought.

"So he wants to use this policy to raise capital ... that it?"

"That's what he told me."

"To set up as a gardener?"

"Well, more than that... to buy land, greenhouses, machines and so on."

"How much capital does he want?"

Anson shrugged.

"I don't know. I didn't ask him. He said he wanted to insure his life and he told me why. I didn't argue with him."

"That's right," Maddox said and put the policy down on his desk, "So long as you make a sale, you don't have to worry, do you?"

"It's my job to make a sale," Anson said quietly. "That's what / get paid for." He stood up. "Is there anything else?"

"No, I guess that's about it," Maddox said, without looking at Anson.

"Then I'll get back. Will see you."

Maddox nodded absently. He still didn't look at Anson. He was staring at the Barlowe policy. He was still staring at it, lost in thought, several minutes after Anson had gone. Then, suddenly coming to life, he flicked down a key on the intercom and said, "Harmas around?"

"Yes, Mr. Maddox," Patty said. "I'll call him."

Three minutes later, Steve Harmas, Maddox's chief investigator, wandered in. He was a tall broad-shouldered man; dark around thirty-three with a deeply tanned ugly but humorous face. He had married Maddox's favourite secretary, something that Maddox had never got over, but as Harmas was by far his best investigator, Maddox had been forced to accept the fact.

"You wanted me?" Harmas asked as he folded his long lean body into the client's chair.

Maddox tossed him the Barlowe policy.

"Look at that," he said, then spilling ash over his papers he selected yet another policy and began to examine it suspiciously.

Harmas looked through the policy handed to him, then he put it on the desk.

"Nice work," he said. "Anson is a smart cookie."

Maddox bent his chair back until it creaked under the weight of his massive shoulders.

"I'm not so sure he is so smart," he said. "Take this policy. Barlowe is a ten-a-dime salesman at Framley's stores, Pru Town. What's he doing taking out a life policy for fifty thousand dollars?"

Harmas shrugged.

"I don't know you tell me."

"I'd like to," Maddox said. "If Barlowe suddenly drops dead, we're in the hole for fifty thousand bucks. The story is he has taken out this policy so he can raise enough capital to set up as a gardener. What would he want fifty thousand for to set up as a gardener?"

Harmas scratched the back of his neck. He knew Maddox. He knew Maddox wasn't asking for information. He was talking to himself.

"Go ahead ... I'm here to listen," he said.

"That's about all you're good for," Maddox said bitterly. "I have hunches. I don't like this policy. I have a hunch about it."

It gives off a smell."

Harmas grinned.

"Is there any policy that comes to you that doesn't give off a smell?"

"A few do ... but not many. Here's what you do. I want to know everything there is to know about Barlowe and his wife: repeat his wife. Get a Tracing Agency on to them and have them send everything they can dig up direct to me. Understand?"

"Okay," Harmas said, getting to his feet. "If that's what you want, that's what you'll get."

"Why didn't this guy take out a five thousand dollar insurance?" Maddox asked. "Why fifty thousand? Why did he pay the first premium in cash?"

"I wouldn't know," Harmas said, "but if you're all that interested, I guess, I'll have to find out."

Maddox nodded.

"That's it... find out," and reaching for another policy, he settled down to examine it.

Late back from his trip to San Francisco, Anson was thinking about going to bed when his door bell rang. Wondering who could be calling at this hour, he went to the door.

A woman, wearing a black coat and a green and yellow scarf over her head, hiding her face, moved quickly past him into the room.

"Shut the door!" she said sharply.

"Meg!"

Anson hurriedly shut and locked the door as Meg Barlowe took off the scarf.

"What are you doing here?" Anson asked, alarmed.

"I had to come." She took off her coat and tossed it on a chair. "I've been trying to contact you all day."

"Did anyone see you come in?" Anson asked. "Don't you realize if we are seen together..."

"I was careful. No one saw me. Anyway, even if they did see me they wouldn't recognize me." She came over to him and slid her arms around him. "Aren't you pleased to see me?"

The feel of her body as she pressed herself against him lessened Anson's alarm. He kissed her with mounting passion until she broke away.

"Where have you been?" she asked, moving away and sitting on the arm of an armchair. "I tried to telephone you."

"I've just got back from 'Frisco," Anson said. "Look, Meg, I warned you we have to be careful. You must never telephone me. Our plan stands or falls on the fact that we are practically strangers. You must understand that!"

She made an impatient movement.

"What's been happening?"

He told her about his interview with Maddox. She listened, her cobalt blue eyes worried.

"There's nothing to be worried about," he said. "Maddox won't take it further. He's satisfied."

She looked down at her hands as she asked, "When do you ... get rid of Phil?"

"Not yet. We must wait. Four or five months at least."

She stiffened.

"Four or five months!"

"Yes. If we don't wait, we'll be in trouble. Imagine how Maddox would react if your husband died within a few weeks of insuring himself. It'll be bad enough if he dies to four or five months' time, but sooner than that would be out of the question."

"How will you do it?"

The intensity of her stare began to irritate him.

"I don't know. I haven't even thought about it yet. This idea I had of him falling and drowning in the pond won't work. I couldn't be sure someone might come up the road while I was fixing it. It'll have to happen in the house."

Meg shivered.

"But how?"

"I don't know. I have to think about it. When I get the right idea, I'll tell you."

"But must we really wait all that time?"

"If we rush this, we could ruin everything. Isn't fifty thousand dollars worth waiting for?"

She hesitated, then nodded.

"Yes, of course," she paused, then went on, "so you have no idea how you'll do it?"

"Don't keep on and on," Anson said impatiently. "At least I have him now insured for fifty thousand dollars and that's something you didn't think I could fix."

"Yes ... you were clever about that." She stood up. "I must go," and she picked up her coat.

"Go?" Anson's face became tense, "but why? Now you're here ... he's not going home tonight, is he? Of course you must stay..."

"I can't." She slipped on her coat and began to put the scarf on her head. "I promised I would go to his class tonight. That's

why I'm here. He drove me down this morning. I've been trying to get you all day."

He made to take her in his arms, but she avoided him.

"No, John, I must go."

"Then when do we have a few minutes together?" he demanded, his voice edged with frustration. "Now you're here: oh, come on, Meg... I want you..."

"No! I have to go! I shouldn't have come here. I have to go!"

The sudden hardness in her eyes warned him it would be useless to attempt to persuade her to stay.

"You can kiss me, can't you?" he said angrily.

She let him kiss her, but when he became ardent, she pushed him roughly away.

"I said no!"

His face congested, his eyes sullen with frustrated anger, Anson went to the front door, opened it and looked out on to the deserted corridor.

"I'll call you," he said as she moved past him.

He listened to her heels click on the stairs as she went down the street.

A dusty 1958 Buick was parked at the end of the street in which Anson's apartment block stood.

Sailor Hogan sat at the wheel, a cigarette dangling from his lips, his big hands resting on his knees. His hard eyes moved continuously to his driving mirror to check the street behind him and then through the windshield to check the street ahead of him.

When he saw Meg come out of Anson's apartment block, he started the car engine. As Meg reached the car, he leaned across the bench seat and swung open the door. Meg slid in, slammed the door as Hogan shot the car away from the kerb.

"Well? What did he say?" Hogan demanded.

"At least four or five months," Meg told him and flinched away from the explosion she knew would follow.

"Months?" Hogan's voice shot up. "You crazy? You mean weeks, don't you?"

"He said months. He says they'll be suspicious, if he does it before."

"I don't give a damn what he says!" Hogan snarled. "It's got to happen before then! I can't wait that long! I must have the money by the end of the month!"

"If you think you can do better than me ... then you talk to him," said Meg sullenly.

Hogan gave her a quick vicious glance.

"Okay, baby," he said. "We'll see about this."

He shoved his foot down on the gas pedal and the car surged forward.

Neither of them spoke until they reached the Barlowe house. Meg got out of the car and opened the double gates.

Hogan drove the car into the garage. He joined Meg as she unlocked the front door. They walked side by side into the dark house and into the sitting-room.

When Meg had lowered the blinds, she turned on the lights.

Hogan stood over the fire, his big hands thrust into his pockets while he watched Meg get a bottle of whisky and glasses from the cupboard.

Hogan was above middle- height with the wide muscular shoulders of a boxer. He wore his wavy, dark hair cut short. He was handsome in a brutish way. During his professional fighting career his nose had been flattened. There were scar tissues along the ridge of his eyebrows, but this added to rather than detracted from his animal glamour.

"Listen, doll," he said, "you've got to do better than this." He took the glass half full of whisky Meg handed to him. "I've got to have this money by the end of the month! You've got to talk this guy into doing his stuff by then or you and me will fall out."

Meg sat on the settee. She was pale and her eyes were anxious.

"It's no use, Jerry," she said. "You don't know him the way I do. He scares me." She shivered. "I can't handle him. I wish I hadn't listened to you! I wish..."

"Aw, shut up!" Hogan snarled. "You do what I tell you or I'll give you something to remember me by!" Meg looked at him.

"That policeman who was shot at the Caltex hold-up ... Anson did it."

Hogan stiffened.

"Anson? You're lying, you rotten little..."

"He did it!" Meg exclaimed, jumping to her feet and backing away as Hogan, his hands now out of his pockets began to move threateningly towards her. "He killed him with Phil's gun!"

Hogan paused, then he rubbed his jaw with a sweating hand.

"So that's how he raised the money!" he said startled. "Joe and me wondered how he had got it. Well! what do you know ... a cop killer!"

"It didn't mean a thing to him!" Meg exclaimed. "He's dangerous, Jerry. I'm warning you! Those eyes of his! He scares me. I wish you hadn't picked on him."

"I picked on the right guy," Hogan said. He finished the whisky and set down the glass. "It was your idea to get Barlowe insured, wasn't it? How else could we have worked it without having some punk in the insurance racket to fix it? Well, Anson's fixed it, hasn't he. He had to: I saw to that. With the money owing to Sam Bernstein and me to put pressure on him, he was a natural." He sat down beside her. "Get me another drink. Phew! A cop killer!" As Meg came back with another glass half full of neat whisky, he asked, "Has he still got the gun?"

"No. He brought it back the next day. I've been trying to get you for days but you're never in."

Hogan made an impatient movement.

"If I'd known he was that tough, I'd been more careful how I handled him... a cop killer!" He drank some of the whisky and blew out his cheeks. "Well, what are we going to do? I must have the money by the end of the month. This is a chance in a lifetime. Joe told me this morning he couldn't wait. There's another punk waiting to put up the money, but

Joe wants me to be his partner. It's cheap at the price ... twenty-five grand and Joe won't ask questions."

"It's no good, Jerry. You'll have to wait."

Hogan stared into the fire for a long moment while Meg watched him anxiously.

"What's wrong with me knocking Phil off?" he asked suddenly. "He's insured now ... that was the tricky part. I could fix him and then we'd have the dough without having to wait for this junk Anson to make up his mind."

"No!" Meg's voice went shrill. "I won't let you! You must keep clear of this, Jerry! You must have a cast iron alibi, same as me! That's the whole trick in my plan to keep us both in the clear and let Anson take the blame if anything goes wrong. You must keep out of this!"

"Well, we've got to do something!" Hogan snarled, suddenly angry again. "Stir yourself. I can't wait five months!"

"I'll think of something," Meg said desperately.

Hogan got to his feet.

"You'd better or I'll look elsewhere for the dough." He caught hold of her by the arms and shook her. "Listen, I'm getting sick of this! This was your great idea! Okay! ... make it work or you and me will part company! We've parted company before. You've got nothing another woman can't give me! Hear me! If we part this time ... we part for good*!"

"I'll fix it!" Meg said desperately. "Honestly, Jerry ... I'll fix it!"

"You'd better!" He started towards the door, paused and glared at her. "And fix it fast!"

"You're not leaving, Jerry?" She looked pleadingly at him. "I haven't seen you for so long. He won't be back tonight..."

Hogan's battered face twisted into a contemptuous sneer.

"You imagine you've got something to keep me here?" he asked. "I've things to do. You fix Anson!"

She came to him, but he shoved her roughly away.

"Keep your paws off me! You use your head instead of your body for a change! I want the dough by the end of the month ... or you and me are through for good!"

He left the house, slamming the front door.

Meg stood motionless. It was not until the sound of his car had died away that she moved stiffly to the settee. She sat

* for good- (3d.) HaBceraa

down. A convulsive sob shook her, but she quickly controlled herself. She picked up the bottle of whisky and poured herself a stiff shot. She had thought she had lost Hogan before, but he had come back. This time she could lose him for good if she didn't do something. The thought of losing him made her feel sick and weak. She drank the whisky and with a sudden desperate gesture, she threw the glass into the fire.

It was when the whisky began to move through her body relaxing her, that Meg thought back to the time when she had first met Jerry Hogan. It seemed a long time to her, but it was only three years much had happened to her during these three years.

Then she had been a waitress in a small Hollywood restaurant. Hogan had come in with a short, fat elderly man named Benny Hirsch who she learned later was Hogan's fight manager.

Hogan had just lost his Californian light-heavy weight title. He had been knocked out with a sucker punch in the first two minutes of the first round. Apart from an aching jaw, he was unscarred. Meg had no idea who he was. She had come to the table, her order pad in her hand and had looked indifferently at the two men.

Hogan had been in a vicious, frightened mood. His career, long threatened by his sexual excesses and his heavy drinking, had now blown up in his face. He could see Hirsch was no longer interested to him. There were plenty of young keen fighters who could keep Hirsch in the money without him having to bother with a beat-up, womanizer like Hogan, and Hogan knew it.

"A coffee," Hirsch said without looking at Hogan.

Hogan stared at him.

"A coffee? What the hell? Aren't you hungry? I want a steak."

Hirsch shifted around and looked him over, dislike and contempt on his fat face.

"Yeah ... you sure need a steak," he said bitterly. "I don't even need a coffee. The sight of you makes me sick to my stomach. Steak! Some fighter! You do your best fighting in

bed with a bottle." He got to his feet. "I don't know why I even came here with you. You're through, Hogan. As far as I am concerned, you're yesterday's smell of boiled cabbage!"

Startled and shocked, Meg watched Hirsch walk out of the restaurant. She then looked at Hogan who sat limply in his chair, sweat beads on his face, and at that moment, seeing him in defeat, she was stupid enough to fall in love with him.

When the restaurant closed, Hogan went with her to her small bedroom above an unsuccessful dry-cleaning establishment. His fierce, brutal, selfish love making was something Meg had never experienced. That first sordid act of so-called love chained her to this man, excusing his viciousness, his cowardice, his cheating and his drinking.

Early the following morning, Hogan came awake and looked at Meg, sleeping at his side. Here, he told himself was a meal ticket. He knew he was through with fighting. He had to live somehow, and this dish, with her looks, could at least keep him in food, drink and cigarettes.

It took him a few days to convince Meg that if she really wanted to have him as her lover, she would have to give up her job as a waitress and start hustling. Hogan made it easy for her. He went round to a couple of pimps who controlled a certain, profitable beat and told them his girl was moving in. They regarded him thoughtfully, remembered that he was an ex-light-heavy weight, and decided it would be wise to offer no opposition.

For the next year, Meg worked the streets, giving her earnings willingly to Hogan who used the money either for backing horses or to finance himself in all-night poker games he and his fellow pimps arranged.

Then Meg began to realize the poker game was a blind. While she was working, Hogan was chasing other girls. The money she made he now was spending on any woman he happened to run into during the night hours Meg tramped her beat.

One night, returning drunk, with lipstick on his shirt, Hogan told her that they were parting company. Meg listened to his drunken slurring contempt, with fear clutching at her heart.

Life without Hogan, no matter how he behaved, was unthinkable to her.

"You're chick-feed," Hogan had sneered. "I'm going to look for a girl who can earn big money ... not a run-down street floosie like you. You and me are through!"

The following afternoon, Meg was in the ladies' room of a smart hotel. She was about to go up to the fourth floor where a middle-aged business man was impatiently waiting for her. By one of the toilet basins she saw an expensive lizard-skin bag. She stared at it, hesitated, then moving quickly, she opened it. The bag was stuffed with fifty-dollar bills. For a long moment she stared at the money, then grabbing the bills, she transferred them to her own handbag. Her one thought was that with this money, Hogan would remain with her.

As she moved to the door, the door opened. A woman and the hotel detective came in.

Hogan wasn't at the trial. Meg went away for three months, and when she came out, Hogan had vanished. She had no money, no protection and the police pestered her.

Finally, in desperation, she left Los Angeles and headed for San Francisco. Her money ran out when she got as far as Pru Town on a Greyhound bus. She managed to rent a small room on the top floor of an office block. It was her bad luck to strike the worst winter for the past fifty years. The newspapers made headlines about the frost, snow and cold. She had no pimp to protect her and she had no regular beat. It was when she was ill, frozen and defeated not caring what happened to her, using her last few dollars on cheap whisky, that she met Phil Barlowe.

She would always remember that moment when he came furtively out of the darkness. She was standing under a street lamp, wet snow falling on her, her feet frozen, aware that the cold had turned her face into a stiff white mask.

Barlowe, wearing a black, slouch hat and a dark topcoat, had paused and they looked at each other.

"Are you looking for a naughty girl?" Meg asked, her lips so stiff with the cold she had trouble in speaking.

"How naughty?"

The pale brown eyes scared her. The thin, ill-tempered face warned her this man could be a sadist, but she was beyond caring. She had to have money. If this mean looking creature had money, then she would take a chance with him.

They had gone together to her room. Barlowe had sat on one of the chairs making no attempt to take off his topcoat.

Meg had sat listlessly on the bed, shivering.

"Come on, honey," she said impatiently, "don't just sit there."

"I only want to talk to you," Barlowe said. "I've got no one I can talk to."

She was so used to nuts, perverts and queers, that she wasn't surprised.

"Look, honey," she said. "It'll cost you either way. Let's have your present."

He fumblingly produced his wallet and gave her three ten dollar bills. Meg, who had been working for practically nothing, couldn't believe her eyes.

The room was heated by a small paraffin stove. It was enough only to keep out the frost. Cold, shivering, and feeling she was now running a temperature, Meg pulled the blankets over her and settled down in the bed, fully dressed.

She half listened to Barlowe talking. She vaguely gathered his mother had just died and he was lonely. He talked on and on and on. She had an idea he told her he had money, a cottage and a lovely garden. She gathered sleepily that he had a good job in some store. Warmth at last began to steal over her and she fell asleep.

She woke the next morning to find the stove out, the window covered with white frost and her head aching wildly.

Barlowe had gone. She sat up in panic and opened her handbag, but the thirty dollars was still there. She remained in bed, too ill to move, and at one time she thought she might be dying.

Sometime during the evening, as the shadows lengthened and the cold sordid little room began to dissolve into darkness, she heard a tapping on the door.

By then she was too ill to bother. She became aware vaguely that Barlowe was standing over her, his bitter distressed face

close to hers. She tried to say something ... to tell him to go away, but the effort was too much for her. She grimaced and closed her eyes, sinking into a feverish, frightening oblivion.

Later, she was vaguely aware of being carried down the narrow stairs in a kind of hammock ... the stairs being so narrow and difficult a stretcher was impossible. She found herself in a hospital bed and she was in the quiet ward for ten days. Each day Barlowe came and sat by her side. He just stared at her and said nothing. She was so ill and weak she accepted him ... a nut ... but she was grateful for what he had done for her. During these ten days she constantly thought of Jerry Hogan, wondering where he was, who he was sleeping with, how he was making money enough to live.

Then suddenly, one morning, she woke up and she knew she was well again. Her one thought was to get out of the hospital, but she shrank from returning to that sordid room with its inadequate stove and the bitter wind that whistled under the door and through the cracks of the ill-fitting windows.

Barlowe came in the evening. They talked. "I've been pretty ill," she said. "I don't know anything about you ... why have you been so kind?"

"It's not kindness," he said quietly, his pale brown eyes moving over her in a way that made her uneasy. "You and I are lonely people. I have a cottage: a garden: a good job. I've lost my mother. I'd like to marry you. Will you marry me?" Right at that moment, thinking of the life that lay before her if she continued to try to battle along on her own, Meg

didn't hesitate. She regarded marriage as a convenience. If it didn't work out, you could always get a divorce, so she accepted his offer.

They were married by a special licence a week after Meg had left hospital. She had been at first intrigued and pleased with the isolated house and the garden. She believed that she would be able to find some kind of happiness here, but she was quickly disillusioned.

She now never wanted to remember their first and only night together. It ended by Meg locking herself in the spare room while Barlowe scratched on the door as he knelt outside in the

passage. She realized bitterly that she had married one of those sick minded men whom she had had to cope with so often during the time she had walked her beat in Hollywood.

But she knew herself to be hard and ruthless enough to control this poor, sick little man. They lived their individual lives. Then, some months later, as she was shopping in Brent, she came face to face with Sailor Hogan.

The sight of his reckless, handsome face sent a knife stab into her heart. Less than an hour later, they were lying on his bed in his small two-room apartment and she was telling him about Barlowe.

They met frequently, and during the weeks, while they talked, after Hogan had made brutal love with her, the idea that Barlowe could bring them the money they craved for began to evolve.

Hogan knew an insurance agent. Meg thought of the idea of insuring Barlowe's life. Between the two of them they concocted the murder plan.

But now, as Meg, slightly drunk, sat on the settee staring into the fire, she realized that unless she came up with some bright idea, she would again lose Hogan. She sat there, her fists clenched between her knees, her mind active, her heart pounding with the sick thought of once again facing life without her brutal, vicious pimp.

Chapter 6

Barlowe stood by his bedroom door, listening. The time was just after nine thirty. It was Sunday night. Downstairs, Meg was watching a television programme. He had told her he was tired and was going to bed early. She had shrugged indifferently.

Satisfied she was occupied with some pop-singer who sounded to Barlowe like a banshee, he unlocked the cupboard on the wall, took from it the white bathing cap and the cheek pads, and with a fixed grin on his face, he picked up the .38 automatic, checked to see it was loaded, then dropped it into his overcoat pocket.

Moving stealthily, he left his bedroom, locking the door. He crept down the stairs, paused outside the sitting-room door to listen to the strident singing of the pop singer, then let himself out into the hot, still night.

He was afraid to use his car for he knew Meg would, hear him drive away, so he set out for the long walk across country to Glyn Hill, yet another quiet, favourite place where the young made love in their cars.

He arrived at the open space that overlooked Pru Town a little after ten-fifteen. Moving like a black, sinister crab, he edged his way through the shrubs.

There was one lone car parked under the trees. It was early yet. In another hour, there would be several cars. From the lone car, came the faint sound of dance music on the radio. Satisfied there was no one on this plateau except the two in the car, Barlowe took off his hat and pulled the white bathing cap down over his head. He then replaced his hat. He put the cheek pads into place, then taking the gun from his pocket, he began to move silently and swiftly towards the car. His heart hammered, his breath came in short, snorting gasps ... this time, he was no longer going to be a mere onlooker; a mere peeping Tom.

On the following Monday morning as Anson was preparing to go to Pru Town, the telephone bell rang.

Anna answered the call, said, "Yes, he's here: who is it please?" Then to Anson, "A Mrs. Thomson wants you," and she flicked down the key.

Impatiently, Anson scooped up his receiver.

"Yes? This is John Anson."

"John ... it is me."

With a feeling of shock, Anson recognized Meg's voice. He looked furtively across at Anna who was threading paper into her typewriter. Alarmed that Meg had been reckless enough to call him at his office, but excited to hear her voice again, he said "Yes, Mrs. Thomson?"

"I must see you tonight. Something has happened."

Guardedly, Anson said, "I'll be able to manage that. Thank you for calling," and he hung up.

As Anna showed no interest in the call, Anson didn't bother to lie to her. He hurriedly completed his preparations.

Telling Anna he would be back the following morning, he went down to his car.

During the day he kept thinking of Meg and wondering what had happened to make her call him. On his way to lunch at the Marlborough he stopped off at a drug store for some after-shave lotion. As he was paying for his purchase a woman who had come in after him, said, "Hello Johnny ... long time no see."

Turning sharply, he found Fay Lawley, the girl he used to go around with before he had dropped her for Meg, standing by his side...

Fay's coarse prettiness and her enthusiastic wantonness had once attracted Anson; but looking at her now, he marvelled that he had ever found her interesting.

"Hello, Fay," he said in a cold, flat voice. "Excuse me ... I'm pressed for time."

"See you tonight, Johnny?" Fay asked, staring at him, her eyes hard and challenging.

He forced a smile.

"I'm afraid not... not tonight. I'll call you the next time in town."

Side stepping her, he made a move to the door, but she caught hold of his arm.

"Remember me?" Her eyes now granite hard, scared him. "You and me met once a week... remember?" He steeled himself and shook her off. "Take it easy, Fay ... I just happen to be busy." He pushed past her and walked to his car. He was aware sweat was on his face and there was a hollow feeling of alarm around his heart.

He drove to the Marlborough, and parking his car, he entered the restaurant where he was joined by Harry Davis, an oil and gas salesman whom he often met on the road.

Davis was a fat, middle-aged man who had the happy knack of getting along with anyone. But with this puzzle of what Meg had said on his mind, Anson would have preferred to have eaten alone.

After they had ordered the lunch, Davis asked Anson how business was. The two men discussed business conditions while they ate the excellent pea soup, then as the waiter brought them the fried chicken, Davis said, "I don't know what this town is coming to! Two shootings in ten days! We want a smarter

police chief! We've got to stamp out this kind of violence and at once!" Anson looked up sharply. "Two shootings!

What's this?" "Haven't you seen this morning's newspaper?" "No. What's all this?" Happily, Davis relaxed back in his chair. "A real juicy murder-cum-sex crime! A young couple were necking out at Glyn Hill last night when some maniac crept up on them with a gun. He shot the man and raped the girl. I knew the murdered man ... he had been going steady with the girl for the past six months. It's a hell of a thing! The girl was horribly used. Of course, the police haven't a clue. At least they have a description of the killer. This, and the Caltex murder must be making Jensen spin like a top."

"He's got nowhere with the Caltex shooting, has he?"

Anson said, cutting into his chicken.

"Well, no. I guess we can't blame him for that. Some passing thug, but this other thing is something else besides."

David chewed thoughtfully for a long moment, then went on, "I have a teenage daughter ... you never know; once a swine like that rapes a girl, he wants to rape another."

"Yeah," Anson said, but he wasn't interested. His mind, went back to Meg. Something has happened. He only half listened to Davis as he talked on and on.

As Meg opened the front door, Anson said, "You're worrying me. I told you never to telephone me at the office."

"I had to see you," Meg said, leading the way into the sitting-room.

He took off his top coat and joined her by the fire. "What is it?" "Sit down."

Impatiently, he sat on the settee and she sat on the floor at his feet.

"John ... this now isn't going to world. We're leaving here." Anson stiffened. A cold void began to form inside him.

"Leaving? What do you mean?"

"Just that. Phil told me last night. We are going to Florida at the end of the month."

"Florida?" Anson stared at her. "Meg! What are you telling me?"

She gave a hopeless shrug.

"That's what he told me. Some man ... his name is Herman Schuman ... has a big horticultural set-up in Florida. He happened to be in Framley's stores a couple of days ago. He saw what Phil could do. He's offered him a partnership. Phil is wild with excitement. It's exactly what he wants and no risks."

Anson sagged back against the cushions of the settee.

"At the end of this month?"

"Yes. Phil's giving in his notice at the end of the week. And there's something else. He intends to cancel the insurance policy. He doesn't need the capital now."

"You'll go with him?" Anson asked.

"What else can I do?" Meg suddenly gripped his hands. "Oh! John! I want you so much! What can we do?"

He pulled her to him. His mind tried to cope with what she had told him.

Florida! She would be miles away from him! The thought of losing all that money that he had counted on, had dreamed about, sent a stab of frustration through him.

Meg pulled away from him and got to her feet. She began to move restlessly around the room.

"You see now? I had to telephone you! Can't we get rid of him before he leaves? That's our only hope, John. If we can get rid of him before the end of the month..."

"Yes ... let me think," Anson said, pressing his hands to his head. "How long have we ... eighteen days before the end of the month?"

"Yes."

Anson felt a sudden chill of apprehension.

"There's Maddox!"

"Oh damn Maddox!" Meg exclaimed. "If we don't do it before the end of the month, we'll never do it! John! I'm willing to take a risk ... are you?"

"But how?" Anson asked, wavering. "I imagined I had five months to get this fixed ... now I have only eighteen days!"

Meg drew in a quick, sharp breath. She had him hooked! For the past days and nights she had thought and thought how she could persuade him to kill her husband before she lost Sailor Hogan. It had come to her suddenly to tell Anson that Phil would be leaving the district at the end of the month. She knew she would be safe telling him this. He would never

think to check.

Anson was now facing her.

"This is something I must think about," he said. "Meg, may I stay the night?"

With him on the hook, she could afford to be generous. After all, in the past she had slept with dozens of less savoury men than Anson.

"Of course ..."

She came to him and putting her arms around him, she pressed herself against him, trying to control the shudder of revulsion that went through her at the touch of his hands.

For the past hour, Anson had been lying on the bed, sleepless. The time was after three o'clock a.m. The white light of the moon fell across the bed, lighting the hollows and the curves of Meg's naked body as she lay sleeping by his side. Suddenly Anson's mind became alert. For no reason at all, he thought of Harry Davis and the conversation they had had together over lunch. He remembered what Davis had said: / have a teenage daughter ... you never know, once a swine like that rapes a girl, he wants to rape another.

He sat up abruptly.

"Meg!"

Meg's quick, light breathing faltered. She stirred and became awake.

"Meg!" Anson gripped her arm, "Wake up! I want to talk to you!"

She moaned, then half sat up.

"What is it?"

"Have you yesterday's newspaper?"

She stared at him as if she thought he had gone crazy.

"Newspaper? Yes ... it's downstairs."

"Get it! Make some coffee! Come on, Meg, wake up! I have an idea ... get moving!"

Still dazed with sleep, but urged on by his tone, Meg slid out of bed and put on her wrap. She walked unsteadily to the door.

"Hurry!" Anson exclaimed.

He turned on the light and pulling the sheet over him, waited impatiently for her return.

After some minutes, she came back into the room, the newspaper under her arm, carrying a tray with the coffee things.

Anson snatched the newspaper from her and read the headlines as she poured two cups of coffee.

"What is it?" she asked.

When he waved her to silence, she shrugged and sat on the foot of the bed, sipping her coffee and watching him.

After some minutes, Anson let the paper drop and took the cup of coffee she handed to him.

"I think I've got it!" he said. "See this?" He pushed the newspaper towards her, pointing to the headlines.

Still dazed, Meg stared at the paper, then at Anson.

"I don't understand!"

Impatiently, Anson pointed to the headlines.

Maniac Kills Youth: Girl Companion Assaulted.

"A nut like that always strikes again," Anson said. "We're going to make use of him. He's going to kill Barlowe and attack you! Even Maddox will have to accept a situation like that!"

Meg stared at him as if she thought he had gone out of his mind.

"What are you saying ... attack me?"

Anson finished his coffee and set down the cup.

"It says here the police are warning all courting couples that this man might strike again. This means the police expect him to strike again! Can't you see this is just the set-up we are looking for?" He threw the paper aside. "The girl has given the

police a description of the man. She says he is short with a fat face and staring eyes. He was wearing a black top coat and a black slouch hat. When she was struggling with him, his hat fell off: he was as bald as an egg. What a description! This is the man who is going to murder Barlowe! You will give the police his description! They are waiting for him to kill and rape again! They'll accept what you say without question! This is the foolproof way to get rid of your husband and get the money!"

Meg remained motionless, her mind slowly grasping what he was saying.

"Didn't you say your wedding anniversary was coming up towards the end of the month?" Anson asked. "When is it exactly?"

Bewildered, Meg said, "Next Friday... what has that to do with it?"

"Four days' time! It's exactly right! It has everything to do with it! You must persuade Barlowe to take you out to dinner, then after dinner, you must persuade him to drive out to some lonely spot ... Jason's Glen would do fine. I'll be there ... waiting."

Meg's eyes opened wide.

"And then ...?"

Anson pointed to the paper.

"That happens again."

Meg flinched.

"You mean ... you'll shoot Phil?"

"That's what I mean ... and attack you. Look, Meg, you can't expect to pick up fifty thousand dollars for nothing. You'll have to be found in such a state the police, and more important, Maddox, will have no doubt you were attacked by this maniac. You'll give them a description of the man who attacked you ... they won't suspect you ... they can't suspect me ... it's the perfect set-up!"

"But John..."

"Don't argue about it!" Anson said impatiently. "This is the foolproof way we can do it in the time we have left. I'm certain Maddox won't be suspicious but if I tried some other way to get rid of Barlowe, Maddox would be suspicious. The trick with this set-up is the police expecting it to happen again! We have four days in which to work this out. Well..."

"John!" Meg's voice rose a note. "You must listen to me! I see it's a good idea, but you haven't thought enough about it. Suppose it rains? Phil wouldn't go out to Jason's Glen if it was pouring with rain." v

Anson, impressed, nodded.

"You're right. We must hope it doesn't rain, but if it does, then I'll have to do it here. Your story will be you heard someone prowling around the house: Barlowe went to see who it was: you heard a shot: then this maniac came in and attacked you. It's better if we do it up at Jason's Glen, but if we can't, then we'll do it here."

"But suppose this man is arrested before Friday night? Suppose we don't know he has been arrested?" Meg said. "I'd look a fool giving the police a description of a man who is already in jail, wouldn't I?"

Anson stared at her for a long moment, then he nodded. "You're using your head," he said. "I missed out on that one, and it's important. I have yet to work out the details. This is just the outline of the plan. We can get over that snag. You will be in such a state of shock after you've been attacked, you won't be able to be questioned for two or three days. In the meantime I'll have found out if this man has been arrested or not. Because you are the wife of one of my clients, I can send flowers to you. If this man has been arrested, I'll send you carnations. If he is still at large, I'll send you roses. You won't say a word to the police until you get flowers from me." "What happens if he is caught?"

"We'll think up a description of some other man. It often happens that after an attack like this some other maniac gets inspired and does the same thing, but if we can give a description of the original killer we're in a much safer position."

There was something obviously worrying Meg and Anson, staring at her, sharply asked her what it was.

"I don't understand what you mean ... I'll, be in such a state of shock ... what does that mean?"

Anson picked up the newspaper and tossed it to her.

"The girl was chased through a wood, knocked down, beaten up and then raped. She was in a hell of a state! Read it... see for yourself! That's what has got to happen to you! This won't be play acting, Meg! Maddox will want the doctor's report. He has got to be convinced. It's up to you ... you either are ready to take it or you don't do it."

Meg walked over to the window. She lifted aside the blind and looked out into the dark night. A feeling of cold, sick fear was growing inside her. She thought of Hogan. / want that money by the end of the month or you and me are through! The thought of never seeing Hogan again, never feeling his hard, muscular arms around her, never hearing him cursing as he made love to her was something Meg couldn't contemplate.

She dropped the blind, turned and forced a smile.

"Of course, John ... anything you say ... anything you want me to do... I'll do it."

Anson relaxed back on the pillow.

"Fine," he said. "I'll come out here next Thursday. I'll have everything fixed by then. Friday, we'll do it. Are you sure you can get your husband to take you out on Friday?"

"He'll take me out," Meg said. "You don't have to worry about that."

Anson held out his hand.

"Come here. In five days we'll be worth fifty thousand dollars! Imagine! Fifty thousand dollars."

Reluctantly, Meg crossed the room and let him pull her down beside him on the bed.

Jud Jones, the fat, sprawling night guard of Anson's office block, waddled out of his tiny office as Anson came from the elevator.

"Evening, Mr. Anson," Jones said cheerfully. "You intend to work late tonight?"

"I guess so," Anson said pausing, "but don't bother about me. I'm just going out for a bite to eat, but I'll be back. I'll be through by eleven. Don't think it's a burglar if you see my light on."

Jones's fat face split into a leering grin.

"I know your habits by now, Mr. Anson. I won't disturb you ... you sure must be busy."

Anson had made it his business to keep friendly with Jones. There had been times when Anson had taken a girl up to his office because he had been so short of money he couldn't afford a hotel. Jones had turned a blind eye when there was a light on in Anson's office after midnight. At Christmas, Anson had somehow found the money to tip Jones liberally.

Jones knew all about Anson's girls and envied him his sexual prowess.

"Busy? I guess I am," Anson said. "Jud ..." He took out his wallet and selected a five dollar bill. "I hate that shirt you're wearing ... buy yourself another." His grin told Jones he was fooling, but he wasn't fooling about the five dollar bill.

"Sure will, Mr. Anson, and thanks."

Jones's thick fingers closed over the bill.

"You won on something good, Mr. Anson?"

"Got onto a fifty to one beauty," Anson lied, then nodding, he went out into the street. The time was half past eight. He walked over to Luigi's restaurant. While he ate the set dinner, he went over in his mind the plan he had concocted. He was satisfied that it would work. Meg would be in the clear. Now he had to be sure that he himself would also be in the

clear.

His meal finished, Anson returned to his office.

He knew Jones's routine. At ten o'clock, Jones began his patrol of the building. He rode up in the elevator to each floor, made his patrol along the corridors and then returned to his cubby-hole of an office at eleven thirty. At one fifteen he made a second patrol.

Anson sat at his desk. He switched on his tape recorder, put on a new reel of tape and placed the microphone close to his typewriter. He fed paper into the typewriter then pressed down the start and record buttons on the recorder. He began to type meaningless words for the next hour, recording the busy clicking sounds of the typewriter keys.

A few minutes past ten o'clock, he heard the whine of the elevator and he listened to Jones' heavy tread going past his office

door. Anson kept on typing. When he heard the elevator whine again, taking Jones to the next floor, he switched off the recorder, put the reel of tape into one of his desk drawers, turned off the light and after locking up his office, he went down to the street.

Fay Lawley sat alone in the bar of the Cha-Cha Club nursing a whisky and soda. She was disgruntled. She had been sitting alone now for the past hour and no man had as yet approached her. She wasn't pleased when she saw Beryl Horsey, wearing a mink stole and diamond ear-rings come in, look around, spot her and with a wave of her hand come over.

Beryl was Joe Duncan's girl friend and she had known Fay longer than Fay cared to remember.

"Hello there ... all alone?" Beryl asked.

"Waiting for someone," Fay said shortly. "How's tricks? Have one with me?"

"Can't stop. I'm expecting Joe." Beryl looked at Fay, screwing up, her large violet coloured eyes. "Don't see you around with Johnny Anson any more. You two fallen out or something?"

Fay grimaced. "Who wants to go around with a cheap punk like him?" she said shrugging. "Can't even afford these days to buy a girl a drink."

Beryl lifted her painted eyebrows.

"Hey! Hey! Who's been kidding you? He's come into money, darling. He paid Joe all his debts ... a thousand and something. He's in the money." She smiled. "Maybe he's found someone else. I've got to fly."

She flicked painted nails along her mink stole, smiled and was gone.

Fay sat sipping her drink, a sudden vicious expression on her over-painted, coarse face.

A thousand dollars! Where could Anson have raised that land of money? He never did have any money!

Fay finished her drink and stood up.

He'd had his fun with her. Now, if he had money, she was suddenly determined to have some of it. If he thought he could brush her off that easy, he had another think coming.

She left the bar and started down the street towards the nearest taxi rank.

A fat, elderly man moved into her path.

"Hello, baby," he said and closed one eyelid. "I'm looking for a naughty girl. Have I found one?"

Fay hesitated, then she flashed on her hard, brilliant smile. There was time to fix that rat Anson: a bird in the hand, she thought as she said, "Hello sweetheart. You and I must have the same ideas."

Sailor Hogan woke with a start. The telephone bell was ringing. Cursing, he half sat up on his big double bed. By his side was a redheaded, over developed teenager whom Hogan had picked up at the afternoon dance at the Blue Slipper club. She too had come awake and was staring owlshly at Hogan as he snatched up the receiver.

"Yeah? Who is it?"

"Jerry ... it's Meg."

His battle-scarred face showed angry impatience.

"You woke me up ... what's the fire about?" he snarled.

"He's going to fix it," Meg said breathlessly. "I must see you, Jerry."

Hogan suddenly became fully awake.

"He's really got it fixed?" he asked, sitting bolt upright. "For when?"

"This is Friday. He'll be here with the final plan on Thursday night. I must see you before then."

"You'll see me," Hogan said. "I'll be along tomorrow," and he hung up.

The redhead said peevishly, "Who's she? Who are you seeing?"

Hogan flopped back on his pillow. Although he had plenty of stamina, he was surprised to find that this teenager had exhausted him.

"That was my mother," he said. "What's eating you? A guy has to see his mother once in a while, doesn't he?" He reached out and grabbed her.

"I didn't know you had a mother," she said, her fingers digging into the thick muscles of his back.

"That's a nice thing to say," Hogan said, grinning. "How do you think I got here without a mother?"

The girl suddenly cried out and her long nailed fingers began to scar Hogan's back.

Patty Shaw came into Maddox's office. She paused in the doorway when she saw Maddox was glaring at a policy he was holding in his hands.

"If you're busy, I'll come back," she said.

Maddox dropped the policy on his desk, made a grimace of disgust, then reached for a cigarette.

"What is it?"

"Here's the Barlowe report from the Tracing Agency," Patty said. "Do you want to look at it now?"
"Barlowe?" Maddox frowned, then his face cleared. "Yeah ... the gardener. Sure I want to look at it now. You looked at it?"
"It'll interest you," Patty said and laid the file on his desk. "Not the husband ... he's just the run of the mill, but the wife ... oh, la! la!"
Maddox picked up the file.
"What does that mean ... oh, la! la! ?"
"You'll see," Patty said, and swished her way out of the room.
Maddox lit another cigarette, pushed back his chair and began to read the neatly typed dossier.

Chapter 7

On Thursday morning, Anson called in at an electrical store in Lambsville and bought a time switch clock. He asked the salesman to show him how it worked.

"This is designed," the salesman explained, "to turn on any piece of electrical equipment at any required time. It also turns the equipment off at any required time. For example, if you want a radio programme that comes on at ten o'clock, you set the hand of the clock to ten and the radio will automatically come on at this time."

Anson said he wanted the clock to boil water for his morning coffee.

"It's the perfect thing," the salesman said, "I use one myself."

At lunch time, Anson went to the Marlborough restaurant. As he entered the bar, he ran into Jeff Frisbee, a reporter on the Pru Town Gazette.

"Hi, John," Frisbee said. "Have one with me?"

Anson said he would have a Scotch. While they were waiting for the drinks to be set up, Anson asked Frisbee if he was lunching.

"I haven't the time," Frisbee said. "I have two murders in my hair and the old man expects me to write something about them every day. I'm running myself ragged trying to find something to write about."

"The Chief of Police doesn't seem to be getting anywhere," Anson said, saluting Frisbee with his glass before drinking.

"This maniac ... still no trace of him?"

"No, but the Chief is a wily bird. He may not be giving any secrets away. He told me that he/is convinced the heistman who killed Patrol Officer Sanquist was an out-of-towner, but he's convinced this maniac is a local man."

"What makes him think that?" Anson asked.

"He figures no one but a local man would know Glyn Hill. It's way off the beaten track. No passing motorist would ever find it."

"A man as bald as an egg shouldn't be so hard to find."

"That's a fact, but the Chief isn't a hundred per cent sure the girl was right when she said the guy was bald. She was in a hell of a panic. Could be he had white hair or very fair hair and he looked bald to her in the moonlight."

"Well, I guess it isn't too tough to check every blond or white headed man in the district and find out what he was doing at the time of the lolling," Anson said.

Frisbee, whose hair was as black as a raven's wing, looked at Anson's blond hair and grinned.

"Just what were you doing at the time?"

Anson forced a laugh.

"In the sack with my local homework," he said and winked. "Anyway, according to the girl, this guy was in his fifties and fat ... that's something you aren't," Frisbee said. "I guess she was lucky to come out of it alive."

When Frisbee had left, Anson went into the restaurant. So far then, he told himself, the maniac hadn't been found, but there were still lots of hours to get through before he killed Barlowe, and during those hours the maniac could be arrested. After lunch, Anson continued his routine calls. Around seven thirty, he drove out to the Barlowe house, and put his car in the garage. He rang the front door bell and the door was immediately opened by Meg.

He followed her into the sitting-room. In the light of the shaded lamp, he saw she looked pale and there were dark smudges under her eyes. She looked as if she had been sleeping badly.

"What's wrong?" he asked, taking her in his arms. "You look tired. What's the matter?" She pushed him away.

"Wrong? You ask what's the matter?" She faced him angrily. "This thing is on my mind! I can't sleep. How would you like to sleep in the same house with someone you are planning to murder? You ask what's wrong? Are you that insensitive?" Anson lifted his shoulders.

"You made your mind up to go ahead," he said. "You should have no regrets."

She sat on the settee, her clenched fists resting on her knees. "I can't believe it is going to happen tomorrow night!" "It depends on you," Anson said, sitting beside her. "Can you get him out to Jason's Glen? The forecast is good ... it won't rain. If you can get him out there, then it's fixed." Meg moved uneasily.

"Yes ... I'll get him out there," she said. "We are going to have dinner at the Court roadhouse. After, I'll make him take me to Jason's Glen."

"I was out there last night," Anson said. "There's a telephone call box on the highway about half a mile from the glen. I'll be waiting there. I want you to call me and let me know for

certain if you are coming. If something goes wrong, and he insists on returning home, I must know."

He took from his wallet a scrap of paper which he gave to her. "That's the number of the call box. I'll be waiting from ten o'clock onwards."

She nodded, putting the paper in her bag.

"When you get to the glen," Anson went on, "stay in the car, but keep the windows down."

Meg shuddered.

"I understand."

"When I've got rid of him," Anson said, staring into the fire, "I'll have to work on you." He reached out and put his hand over hers. At his touch she closed her eyes. "You're going to get hurt, Meg. We daren't take any chances. You'll have to be brave about this ... you understand? You mustn't blame me. What I do to you will convince Maddox and the police you are in the clear. The doctor must be convinced that this isn't a faked attack."

She felt a chill creep up her spine, but thinking of Sailor Hogan, she nodded.

"It's all right... I understand."

"From the glen to the highway is about a quarter of a mile," Anson said. "You'll have to get down to the highway. He'll be in the driving seat. You won't be able to use the car. It may take some time before passing motorists see you. You must fake you're unconscious. Remember, you say nothing until you get flowers from me. If you get carnations, you'll know the maniac has been caught. If you get roses, you'll know he's still at large." He took a folded paper from his wallet. "Here is a description of a man I have made up. You'll use this if the maniac has been arrested. You understand all this?"

"Yes."

"That's about it," Anson said. "Don't let them rattle you and don't say a word until you see my flowers. The doctor won't let the police worry you until he is sure you are good and ready."

She looked at him, her eyes dark ringed and scared.

"You are sure this is going to work?" she asked. "You're sure we'll get the money?"

"We'll get it," Anson said. "With this set-up we can't go wrong. You'll have the public's sympathy and Maddox will know if he tries to block your claim, it'll be bad publicity and he hates that. I'll work on the reporters. Yes ... we'll get the money all right."

Meg, still thinking of Hogan, said, "I can't believe it's going to happen."

"In a couple of weeks^ you'll be worth fifty thousand dollars!" Anson said. "We'll go away together! You, me and fifty thousand dollars!" He put his arm around her. "Together with that kind of money, we'll take the sun out of the sky!"

"Yes."

Meg broke away and went over to the fire.

Anson stood up.

"I mustn't forget the gun," he said and crossed to the sideboard and took the wooden box from the drawer. From it, he took the gun and six cartridges.

Watching him with growing horror, Meg said, "You'll have to leave now, John." She felt she couldn't bear to have this cold-blooded planner of murder any longer in the room. "Phil is coming back. He said he would be back by nine."

Anson turned and stared at her; a surge of angry disappointment ran through him.

"I thought we were going to spend the night together. Why is he coming back?"

"He has given up his classes now he is going to Florida," Meg lied. "He is seeing this man he's doing the deal with, then he's coming home. You really must go, John. He mustn't see you as you go down the lane."

A sudden cold suspicious expression came into Anson's eyes.

"You're not falling out of love with me, are you?"

"Of course not... but you take all this so calmly. I'm frightened. I'll do it with you, but I can't be so, so coldblooded about it as you are."

"This man is nothing," Anson said. "Fifty thousand dollars will mean everything to us. I'm not being cold-blooded ... it is a matter of how much you want the money."

"You must go ... look at the time."

"I'll be waiting for your telephone call," Anson said. "Remember what I've told you. If it works." He picked up the gun and put it in his pocket. "Come here, Meg..."

She forced herself to go to him. His kisses made her feel physically ill and the feel of his hands as they moved down her back made her cringe.

She pushed away.

"You must go!"

He looked at her for a long moment, then nodded and went out to his car.

She sank onto the settee, her hands to her face, shuddering.

Sailor Hogan came out of the kitchen where he had been listening to everything that had been said.

"Well, you nearly balled up everything," he said, coming into the room. "What's the matter with you? Why didn't you love the guy a little? He was wanting it. Now you've sent him away with a bee in his workbox."

"I hate him!" Meg said. "He terrifies me."

"What's the matter with you? He's smart and he means business. He's quite a boy with his talk of taking the sun out of the sky ... I dig for that."

Meg jumped up and put her arms around Hogan's thick muscular shoulders.

"Love me, Jerry," she said, her lips lightly touching his thick coarse skin. "Please love me."

With a bored grimace, Hogan swung her down onto the settee.

At half past five on Friday evening, Anna Garvin pushed aside her typewriter, collected the papers on her desk and put them in one of her desk drawers.

"Time to go home, Mr. Anson," she said as she got to her feet.

Anson regarded her as he leaned back in his desk chair. His desk was covered with papers which he had deliberately laid out to create an impression that he was busy.

"You run along, Anna," he said. "I've still a few things to clear up.

"Can't I help?"

"No ... I'm just killing time. This is nothing urgent. I just don't happen to be in a rush to get home."

When Anna had gone, Anson scooped up all the papers on his desk and pushed them into a file. He then took from his desk drawer the time switch clock he had bought the previous day. He read the instructions again, then plugged the gadget in to the mains socket. To the lead from it, he plugged in a two-way adapter to his tape recorder and his desk lamp.

He then set the switch to operate in five minutes and he sat back, lit a cigarette and waited. After five minutes tiad crawled by his desk lamp suddenly came on and the tape recorder started up, playing back the tape he had made of his typing. He turned up the volume until he was satisfied the sound of the typing could be heard in the corridor. He waited another five minutes, then he watched the desk lamp go out and the recorder stop.

He then reset the time switch to come into operation at nine thirty. He set the turn offhand of the clock to eleven.

Satisfied the gadget worked, he locked up his office and rode down in the elevator to the ground floor.

He found Jud Jones reading the evening newspaper in his office.

"Jud ... I'll be working late tonight. Don't think I have a burglar in my office."

Jones grinned and winked.

"That's okay, Mr. Anson. I won't disturb you."

"This is work, Jud, so take that leer off your face," Anson said grinning. "I'm going out to supper, then I'll be back."

"Okay, Mr. Anson, have you your key?"

"Yeah ... see you," Anson nodded and went out into the street.

He had a light supper and then drove to his apartment. He cleaned and loaded Barlowe's gun. Putting the gun in his top coat pocket, he went down to his car.

The time was now eight o'clock. He drove back to his office. Parking his car some way from the entrance to the block, he entered the block. He walked to Jones's office.

"I'm back," he said. "I'll be working to around eleven." Jones shook his head.

"You watch out, Mr. Anson ... the way you work, you could get an ulcer."

"I'll watch it," Anson said, and he went over to the elevator and rode up to his floor. He waited a few moments, then silently walked down the stairs and left the office block. He got in his car and drove fast to the Brent-Pru Town highway.

When he was in sight of the telephone call box, he pulled off the highway onto a lay-by, turned off the car's lights and lit a cigarette. He had a long wait ahead of him.

He relaxed in the driving seat, aware of the weight of the gun in his pocket, his mind probing the plan he had made. He could find no flaw in it.

At twenty minutes to ten, he left the car and walked to the call box. He sat on the dry earth behind the box out of sight of the passing motorist and waited. Again he had a long wait. The minutes crawled by and he was beginning to wonder if something had gone wrong when the telephone bell in the call box began to ring. He opened the door to the call box and picked up the receiver.

Barlowe was startled when Meg had suggested they should go to the Court road house to celebrate their wedding anniversary.

Meg had appeared while he was eating his breakfast. She had on her soiled green wrap and her hair was tousled. She leaned against the doorway, a cigarette between her full lips and Barlowe, looking at her, felt faint desire stir in him.

"We haven't been out for months," Meg said. "I'm sick of hanging around this dump. If you don't want to take me, say so, I'll go alone."

Barlowe said, "A place like that costs money ..."

"Well spend some money for a change," Meg said. "I want to get drunk tonight." She stared at him. "There are other things I want to do tonight as well."

They looked at each other for a long moment, then she turned and went upstairs to her room.

Barlowe pushed aside his half eaten breakfast and leaned back in his chair. Meg would have been surprised and shocked if she knew what was going on in his sick mind. He was no longer interested in her. That moment when he had laid hands on the screaming, terrified girl had been the most exciting and sensational thing that had happened to him in his life.

The living and the dead, he thought and got to his feet. The man rolling out of the car, shot through the head, and the girl struggling and screaming. Meg was poor stuff to such an experience, but if she wanted to be taken out, he'd better take her out. He was now nervous that anyone should suspect that he had done this thing. He had put the gun, the white bathing cap and the cheek pads under the floorboards in his room. He wanted to have the chance of doing this act of violence many times ... he had no intention of being caught.

Tomorrow night, he intended to go out again on the prowl. He would try Jason's Glen this time. He might be lucky to find two young people up there alone.

It startled him when they had finished a good, but expensive dinner and had returned to the bar for another drink that Meg should say she wanted to go out to Jason's Glen.

"What for?" Barlowe asked, slightly fuddled by the drinks he had taken. "I want to go to bed now." He stared at her, frowning. "I've had enough of this."

"Well, I haven't," Meg said. "What's the matter with you? Don't you want to be romantic?"

"With you?" Barlowe grimaced. "After all this time? What's come over you ... you're drunk!"

"All right, so I'm drunk," she said. "I'm sick of living like a nun. Even a drip like you is better than nothing the way I feel. Let's go!"

Barlowe shook his head.

"I'm not going, I'm going home." He thought of tomorrow night; the anticipation of the excitement and the violence made him break out into a sweat. "That place is for courting couples, not for people like you and me."

She leaned close to him. He could smell the gin on her breath. "You're coming with me. You'd better! If you don't, I'll go out there alone and find someone."

"I'm not going!" Barlowe said and became aware that the negro bartender was listening and staring. He lowered his voice. "I've had enough of this. I'm going home."

"Then I'll take the car and you can walk home," Meg said. "I'm going! You do what you like."

Barlowe hesitated. After all, he thought, it might be an idea to go out there. He hadn't been to Jason's Glen for months. By going out there now, he would get an idea of how many cars were there ... the lay of the ground.

"All right ... have it your way," he said, shrugging. "Then well go."

"I'll get my things," Meg said, and leaving him, she went into the ladies' room.

She paused, aware that her heart was hammering and she was breathing unsteadily. For a long moment she stood undecided, then with an effort, she went to the telephone booth and shut herself in.

Anson, the telephone receiver hard against his ear, said, "Yes?"

There was a pause, then he heard a woman's voice say, "Go ahead please," then Meg came on the line.

"Hello?" He recognized her voice. "Hello?"

"We are leaving now."

He realized how tense she was from the hysterical shrillness of her voice.

"It'll be all right," he said and hung up.

He returned to his car and drove up the narrow dirt road that led to Jason's Glen. He was a little uneasy. There was a remote chance some other couple might be in the glen. He arrived at the top of the steep road and then drove into the glen. There was plenty of room for cars to be parked and he drove his car between two, overgrown shrubs and turned off the car's lights. He got out of the car and walked onto the open plateau that gave onto a wide and fine view of the lights of the town below.

Usually, at this time of night, the plateau was crowded with cars, but this night it was deserted. Courting couples, neckers and smoochers were staying clear of such spots. The police warning that the sex killer might strike again had made an impression.

Anson looked around, then he selected a clump of shrubs that offered concealment. He pushed his way into them and sat down on the sandy, dry ground. He took out the gun and slid back the safety catch. While he waited, he thought with satisfaction that the time switch clock in the office was creating a fool-proof alibi for him. Light would now be showing through the frosted panel of his office door and when Jud Jones passed on his patrol, he would hear the busy clack of the typewriter from the tape recorder.

It would take Barlowe and Meg some thirty minutes to get from the roadhouse to the glen. Anson didn't expect them to arrive before ten thirty.

As he waited for them to arrive, he fingered the gun, his mind preparing himself for the moment when his finger would take up the slack of the trigger, when the gun would go off and when Barlowe would slump forward, a dead man.

Anson was again surprised by his own calmness and his feeling of complete indifference. He was now experiencing the same feeling that had come to him when he had shot the patrol officer. The death of the big, red-faced cop had meant nothing to him as the death of Barlowe would mean nothing to him when it happened.

A little after ten thirty, he heard the distant sound of an approaching car.

His fingers tightened on the butt of the gun. He half stood up, crouching in the shrubs as he listened. Then he saw the approaching lights of the car.

He watched the shabby Lincoln pull up within twenty feet or so from where he was concealed. Before the head lights went out, he saw the outlined heads of Meg and Barlowe.

In the silent stillness, he heard Barlowe say, "Well, here we are. There's no one here... ."

Anson moved silently out of his hiding place and started across the open space towards the car.

"Well, here we are," Barlowe repeated, his pale brown eyes roving around. He noted there were no cars except his own.

A sudden, cold murderous thought dropped into his mind. Why not get rid of Meg? They were alone together. He could do what he liked with her in this loneliness. Then reason made him hesitate. Careful, he told himself, You can't do a thing like that... they'd know you had killed her and they would then know you had done the other thing.

By now Anson had reached the car. He saw the driver's window was down. He could see Barlowe clearly in the moonlight.

Meg said, her voice unsteady, "Don't you want to make love to me?" Then suddenly, her nerve cracked, and she put her hands to her face. She screamed; "No! Don't do it, John...don't do it!"

As Barlowe turned towards her in startled surprise, Anson lifted the gun and gently squeezed the trigger. Meg was still screaming hysterically as the gun went off. Barlowe slumped forward; blood sprayed over the windshield. Anson dropped the gun into his pocket, then he walked around the car and opened the off-side door. Meg threw up her hands to ward him off.

She was screaming hysterically as he dragged her out of the car.

Part Two

Chapter 8

Steve Harmas walked into the office, put his hat on the peg behind the door, then lowered his long frame into his desk chair.

He and his wife, Helen, had been to a party the previous night which had turned out to be a marathon drinking spree and Hannas was now suffering from a hangover.

He rubbed his forehead, grimaced, then looked with glazed eyes at the mail neatly laid out on his blotter. There didn't seem to be anything that needed his immediate attention and he relaxed back and closed his eyes. He thought enviously of his wife still asleep.

The sudden sound of the intercom buzzer made him wince. He flicked down a key, said, "Harmas. Yeah?"

"I want you."

There was no mistaking Maddox's voice.

"I'm on my way," Hannas said, flicked up the key, pushed himself out of his chair and started the long tramp down the corridor to Maddox's office.

Patty greeted him with a bright smile that made Harmas wince.

"You're looking like a man with a hangover," she said. "Do you feel that way?"

"Yeah." Harmas held his head. "What's he want?"

"I don't know. I took the newspaper into him about five minutes ago. There was an explosion, then I heard him yelling for you."

"I have an idea that this isn't going to be my favourite day," Harmas said entering Maddox's office.

Maddox was smoking furiously. Although it was only a quarter after nine a.m., from the state of his desk and floor, he might have been working throughout the night.

"Look at this," he said and tossed the newspaper at Harmas.

Harmas sank into a chair and read the banner headlines.

Maniac Strikes Again: Carbon Copy Murder and Assault.

He glanced at Maddox who was watching him, then he began to read the small type under the headline. Suddenly, he stiffened.

"Philip Barlowe? He's a client of ours, isn't he? Isn't he the one...?"

"He was our client!" Maddox said, a snarl in his voice. "He was insured for fifty thousand dollars ... now he's dead!"

"Shot through the back of his head ... his wife raped!" Harmas looked shocked. "It's time they caught this nut. She sounds in a bad way."

"I can read," Maddox said, "Steve, I don't like this. There's a smell to it. This guy took out a life coverage ten days ago ... now he's dead. I don't like it."

"I guess she doesn't like it either," Hannas said a little impatiently. "It's one of those things." He looked sharply at Maddox. "You don't think he was killed for the insurance money?"

"I don't know, but when a two bit salesman insures his life for fifty thousand dollars and then he dies before the ink's scarcely dry on the policy, I don't like it."

"It says here she was raped and is suffering from a dislocated jaw. She gets the money, doesn't she? Don't tell me...."

"For fifty thousand dollars I'd be raped and have my jaw dislocated," Maddox said grimly. "I'm a head start on you. You haven't seen the dossier the Tracing Agency turned me on this woman ... I have. It's some story. A woman life that could do anything."

"Where's the dossier? Let me see it, then I can look and act as clever as you," Harmas said.

"Never mind about the dossier. We've got to move fast. I want you to go to Brent right away. See lieutenant Jenson. Tell him I don't like the set-up and that I want you to work with him. He'll be glad to have you. I want you to be there when Jenson talks to this woman. Keep your eyes and ears open. See Anson. Warn him I'm going to fight her claim when she puts it in. I don't want him shooting his mouth off to the press. Go to Jason's Glen or whatever it's called and look around." He stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. "And Steve, while she's in hospital, go out to her house and look around. Don't tell Jenson you're going".

"What am I supposed to be looking for?" Harmas asked. "I don't know. Get the feel of the place. You might find something. Get out there and look."

"Well, okay," Harmas got to his feet. "I'll see Jenson first." "Get the doctor's report about this woman. I want to be satisfied she was raped and attacked."

"It says so here, doesn't it?" Harmas pointed to the newspaper.

"Do you believe everything you read in papers?" Maddox snapped. "Get the doctor's report!"

A few minutes to nine o'clock, Anna Garvin arrived at the office. She was surprised to find Anson already at his desk.

"You're early," she said, then looked at her watch. "Or am I late?"

Anson had arrived some thirty minutes ago. He had come to the office early to disconnect the time switch clock and remove the tape on the recorder before Anna arrived.

"I'm early," he said. "Seen the paper? Barlowe's dead ... you remember ... the guy I sold that big policy to." "Yes, I saw it. It's awful, isn't it, Mr. Anson? I'm scared to go out at night." Anson dailed the Pru Town Gazette. He asked to speak to Jeff Frisdee.

When the reporter came on the line, Anson said, "This guy Barlowe ... I sold him a fifty thousand dollar life coverage only a few days ago. I thought you might want that bit of news."

"Why, sure", Frisbee said. "Thanks a lot. Fifty thousand, huh? That's quite a hunk of dough. Well, his wife will welcome it. I'm glad you told me."

"There's been no arrest yet?" Anson asked.

"No. Jenson's going round like a zombie ... he hasn't a clue."

"How's Mrs. Barlowe?"

"Pretty bad. The doctor won't let anyone talk to her."

"If you hear anything, let me know. I'm interested as Barlowe was my client."

"Sure will. How soon will your people pay the claim?"

"Shouldn't take long."

"Let me know when they do. It's news. I'll let you know anything of interest from my end."

Anson said he would and hung up.

"How is she?" Anna asked.

"Pretty bad. This is a horrible thing. I think the least I can do is to send her some flowers. Call up Devons and tell them to send a dozen roses right away to the hospital, will you, Anna?"

Lieutenant Fred Jenson of the Brent homicide squad was a chunky, fair man with alert grey eyes and a brisk manner. He wasn't much of a policeman, but he did try and sometimes, but not often, his efforts were rewarded.

He was flicking through a file when Harmas walked in.

"Hello," he said. "What do you want?"

He had worked with Harmas in the past and the two men got along well together. Harmas sat astride a straight back chair.

"Maddox sent me down," he said. "Barlowe ... we have him covered for fifty thousand and Maddox is laying a square egg."

Jenson who knew Maddox grinned.

"Fifty thousand! I'll say the egg's square! So what? Don't tell me he's trying to make a mystery out of this one! It happened five days ago ... it's happened again. We have a sex killer in the district: it's as simple as that. Catching a punk like this isn't easy. I'm planning to plant a police officer and a girl out at Glyn Hill in the hope of trapping him."

"Maddox thinks this is a lot more complicated than that," Harmas said. "He's even thinking Mrs. Barlowe shot her husband and raped herself to collect the fifty thousand."

Jenson moved impatiently.

"Maddox is crazy!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean this seriously, do you?"

Harmas shrugged.

"When can you talk to Mrs. Barlowe?"

"Doctor Henry at the hospital said I could call him around six o'clock. He thought she might be ready to be interviewed by then."

"I'd like to come along. I won't be in the way. Maddox wants me to be around and help where I can. Fifty grand is lots of folding money."

"Okay. You help me ... I'll help you, but Maddox is just shooting at the moon."

"Yeah ... I've said time and time again that he's shooting at the moon, then what happens? The sonofabitch hits the moon!"

Jenson looked sharply at him.

"You don't really think Mrs. Barlowe is involved in this killing?"

"I'll tell you after I have talked to her," Harmas said "I'll be happier too, when I have talked to Doctor Henry."

"This is wasting time. This killer hit her so hard that he dislocated her jaw. Don't tell me..."

Harmas lifted his shoulders.

"Maddox says for fifty thousand bucks, he would let anyone dislocate his jaw."

Jenson stubbed out his cigarette.

"Maddox! The fact is he doesn't want to meet Mrs. Barlowe's claim! That's the long and short of it! He'd believe any story so long as he doesn't have to pay out and you know it."

"I guess you're right," Harmas said. "Well, I'll get along. I'll look in again around six o'clock. I want to be there when you talk to Mrs. Barlowe."

Leaving police headquarters, Harmas drove over to Anson's office.

He had met Anson once before, but had only a vague recollection of him. He knew him to be a smart salesman but that was about all he did know about him.

He found Anson at his desk. As soon as he saw him, he remembered him: a man of middle height, blond, slimly built with grey, rather staring eyes.

"Remember me?" he said, offering his hand. "Why, sure," Anson said. "It's Steve Harmas, isn't it?" He got up and shook hands, "Glad to see you. You've come about this shocking murder of Barlowe?"

Harmas was aware of the fat, homely looking girl at the other desk who was staring and listening.

"That's it," he said. "Look friend, I've just arrived from "Frisco". How's about you and me going some place for a cup of coffee?"

"Why, sure," Anson said, "There's a place right across the road." To Anna he went on, "I'll be back in about an hour ... if anyone wants me."

A few minutes later, seated in a quiet corner in a cafe, Anson said, "Maddox on the warpath?" Harmas grinned. "That's an understatement. He thinks Mrs. Barlowe shot her husband and raped herself!"

Anson dropped a lump of sugar into his coffee. "The man's pathological. Well, he'll have to pass this claim! What's fifty thousand dollars to the National Fidelity? The press know about it. If he tried to block payment, he's going to get some rank publicity."

Harmas stroked his nose. He looked thoughtfully at Anson. "How come the press know about it? Did you tell them?"

"Why not?" Anson asked and sat back looking at Harmas, his grey eyes mildly inquiring. "Here we have a front page murder. Everyone in the district knows me. I sold Barlowe the policy. It's great publicity not only for me but also for the Company. It is this kind of publicity, providing the claim is paid, that sells policies."

"Maddox didn't want you to talk to the press," Harmas said.

"Why not?"

"He thinks the set-up stinks." Anson smiled as he stirred the coffee.

"You work for him," he said. "I work for the Company. If I worked the way he wants a salesman to work, the Company would go broke. Come on ... you know that's right. Maddox should have retired years ago. He never gives a salesman a chance."

"When you turned in that policy," Harmas said, "Maddox didn't like it. He got a Tracing Agency to dig up some facts about Barlowe and his wife. He has a dossier on them both. I haven't seen it, but from what he tells me the wife hasn't anything to shout about. He told me a woman of her reputation could be capable of anything."

Anson suddenly stopped his coffee. He put down the cup and looked at Harmas, the grey of his eyes darkening.

"What's this dossier?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen it yet; that's what he says. He thinks she is capable of anything."

"He's crazy!" There was sudden doubt in Anson's voice. "This woman was attacked and raped! Hasn't he any feelings?"

"Jenson thinks the way you do," Harmas said quietly, "but I've worked with Maddox now for ten years. He has never been wrong when he claims a policy is off colour ..."

"What do you think you're doing?" Anson asked. Harmas winked. "You know, Maddox is something very special. He told me to come out here and look around. He had no idea what I was to look for and nor did I, but he told me to get the feel of the place." He tapped his pocket. "Believe it, or not, here is an outline for a short story of a woman who swindles an insurance company. She and her lover ... he is a ticket officer of an airline company ... it's a nice idea. Maddox will love it. If she wrote it, it shows she has had the idea of swindling an insurance company and when she puts in the claim, we can use this story to show the state of mind she's in."

"Look this is ridiculous," Anson said angrily. "Plenty of people write stories about ..." He stopped as he saw Harmas wasn't listening. Harmas had got to his feet and was now wandering around the room, whistling under his breath. He paused and peered at something hanging on the wall. "Well, seen this?" he said. "Barlowe was a pistol shot champion. He won first prize at the Pru Town Small Arms and Target Club."

"So what?" Anson said, an edge to his voice. "We'd look a couple of jerks if someone found us here."

"Relax," Harmas said. "Who's likely to come? Now a guy who is interested in pistol target shooting is likely to have a gun. I wonder if he did own a gun?"

"What does it matter if he did?" Anson said. Harmas began moving around the room. He paused to open cupboards and drawers and finally he came to the ugly heavy, sideboard. He pulled open a drawer.

"Here we are ... a gun box." He took the wooden box from the drawer and opened it. For a long moment there was a heavy silence, then he said "Cartridges, cleaning material, but no gun, and yet here's a place for the gun. Where's the gun?" "Are you asking me or are you talking to yourself?" Anson demanded. Harmas grinned at him.

"I was talking to myself. Look, why not go and admire the garden. I'm going to be here quite some time. This place fascinates me."

Anson went over to the settee and sat down.. "I'll stay here. If there is anything I can do ..." Harmas, humming under his breath, wasn't listening. He walked from the room and Anson listened to him climb the stairs.

An hour and a half later, Harmas and Anson drove away from Barlowe's house and towards Pru Town. Harmas was silent, for some time during the drive, then as they approached the outskirts of Pru Town, he began to talk. "Maddox may seem to you to be a deadbeat always looking for trouble," he said, "but he's far from that. He's practically clairvoyant, and I'm not kidding. Here we have a situation: a man working as a small time clerk, insures himself for fifty thousand dollars. Maddox was right to raise his eyebrows. Now I've seen this guy's home, I also ask myself why he should have insured himself for such a sum."

Anson hunched his shoulders.

"He wanted the policy to raise capital so he could start up on his own as a horticulturist," he said tonelessly. "I've already explained all this to Maddox. I didn't persuade Barlowe one way or the other if that worries you at all."

"He must have been planning something big," Harmas said, noting the irritation in Anson's voice. "Fifty grand is a hunk of dough for a little man like Barlowe."

"You've seen his garden," Anson said. "Why shouldn't he have big ideas? He was able to pay the first premium, so why should I worry?" "He paid in cash?"

"Yes." "

"From the look of the house, you wouldn't have thought he had that much money in cash." Anson shrugged impatiently. "Okay ... go ahead: make a mystery of it. He had the money: he gave it to me: do I have to get worried about a man giving me cash?"

Harmas glanced thoughtfully at the small, blond man at his side and then looked away.

"You're right," he said soothingly. "Tell me about Mrs. Barlowe. What kind of woman is she?"

"I don't know," Anson said curtly. "I only saw her once ... she's good looking, youngish. I didn't pay her much attention."

"Did they get along together?"

"Yes, they did," Anson said. "They got along very well together."

"Is that a fact? What makes you say that?"

Anson suddenly stiffened. Careful, he told himself, this guy isn't flapping with his mouth for the sake of making noises. He is the top investigator and Maddox's stooge.

"I don't know ... an impression I got. The way Barlowe spoke about her."

"He must have been smart to fool you," Harmas said, putting a cigarette between his lips. "You been upstairs and looked the set-up over?"

Anson's hands tightened on the steering-wheel.

"Fool me? What do you mean?"

"They didn't sleep together. You should have seen his room. The sheets hadn't been changed in months." Harmas grimaced. "Our little pal was a pervert. I found some books in his room that would make your hair stand on end. There were other things too. Those two didn't live as husband and wife. I'm ready to bet a hundred bucks."

"Well, that's as it may be," Anson said tonelessly. "I had the impression that they were happy together."

"She kept the house like a pig sty. If a woman really loves her husband, she makes an effort to keep his home decent."

"That your idea?" Anson said indifferently. "It doesn't mean that to me. It just means she doesn't know how to run a house ... some women just can't."

"Well, we'll see. I just can't wait to read her dossier," Harmas said, lighting his cigarette.

"Just what is this dossier?" Anson asked, his voice sharpening.

"I haven't seen it yet, but Maddox is worked up about it." "I'd like to see it," Anson said.

"You don't have to worry your head about all this. It's your job to sell insurance and you do it damn well. It's my job to make sure the policy is okay."

Some five minutes later, Anson pulled up outside the Marlborough hotel.

"I'll leave you here," he said. "I have still a lot of work to do."

"Fine," Harmas said, getting out of the car. "I have to see Jenson at six. We're calling on Mrs. Barlowe. I'll let you know how it goes."

"Yes," Anson said, and waving his hand, he drove away.

Fay Lawley watched Harmas get out of Anson's car and walk over to the Marlborough hotel. She watched Anson drive away. She waited a moment, then crossing the street, she entered the hotel in time to see Harmas pick up his key from the desk and cross the lobby to the elevator.

She walked over to the desk where Tom Nodley, the clerk in charge, was busy sorting mail.

"Hi, Tom," she said and gave him her wide professional smile.

"Hello, baby," Nodley said, letting his eyes run over her lush body. "What do you want?"

"Who is the handsome Romeo who just picked up his key?" she asked, taking a dollar bill from her bag.

Nodley eyed the bill and grinned.

"He's no good to you baby," he said and accepted the bill. "He's Steve Harmas: chief investigator National Fidelity Insurance."

Fay lifted her plucked eyebrows.

"Chief Investigator? Does that mean he is a cop?"

"Along those lines. He's checking on the Barlowe murder."

"But he is a cop?"

"You could call him that."

Fay smiled.

"Thanks ... be seeing you."

Nodley watched her duck-tail walk to the exit with an appreciative stare.

Dr. Henry, the house surgeon of the Pru Town hospital received Lieutenant Jenson and Harmas in his office. He waved them to chairs.

"This is Mr. Harmas of the National Fidelity Insurance Corporation," Jenson explained. "Barlowe was insured by his company. He ..."

"Just a moment," Harmas broke in. He didn't want the doctor to get a wrong impression. "I'm an investigator and I'm working with the Lieutenant. My job is to check all claims made on our company. So far no claim has been made regarding Barlowe. There hasn't been time, but we want to be prepared when it is made. Barlowe was covered for fifty thousand dollars. He took out the policy about ten days ago. The circumstances are exceptional, but naturally, with such a sum involved, we don't want to pay it out if there is any doubt about the genuineness of the claim."

Dr. Henry, a tall, balding man, lifted pale eyebrows.

"What exactly do you mean by that and what has it to do with me?"

"We will need to be convinced that Mrs. Barlowe was really attacked and raped," Harmas said. "We will need a certificate and details from you."

"I'll be happy to give you a certificate," Henry said. "The woman was most certainly attacked ... her jaw was dislocated, and there is no doubt she was brutally raped. I can give you details that must satisfy your people that she has been through a horrible and harrowing experience."

Harmas and Jenson exchanged glances. Harmas shrugged.

"Thanks, doctor, that's all we'll need. Can we talk to her now?"

"Yes. I'll take you to her." Henry looked at Jenson. "Make it as short as you can. She really is in a bad way, and she is still suffering from severe shock."

"Sure." Jenson got to his feet. "All I want at this stage is a description of the attacker. The rest of it can come later."

The two men followed the doctor up to the first floor. They entered a room in which was a bed and the usual hospital equipment. In the bed was a woman with auburn hair.

Motioning them to stay where they were, Henry went over to the woman.

"Mrs. Barlowe, Lieutenant Jenson would like to talk to you. I've asked him not to bother you too much. Do you feel you can talk to him?"

While he was speaking, both Harmas and Jenson were looking curiously at the woman. Harmas was shocked to see that the left side of her face was heavily bruised and her left eye was half closed and swelling. There was split skin near her mouth. It was obvious she had taken a violent blow on the side of her face ... there was no fake about that ... In spite of this disfigurement, Harmas saw that this woman was sensationally handsome ... beautiful he decided wasn't the right word.

"I'm all right," she said in a shaky whisper. "Yes, of course I'll talk to him."

Jenson came forward.

"You're not all right, Mrs. Barlowe," he said. "I'm sorry to have to bother you at this time, but I want a description of the man that attacked you. Can you help me?"

Meg closed her eyes for a long moment, then opened them. On the table by the window was a vase holding a dozen blood red roses.

If you get roses, you will know our man hasn't been arrested, Anson had said.

"He was short and thickset," she said, "and he was completely bald."

"That's the punk!" Jenson exclaimed, looking at Harmas. "The same one who ..." He paused, controlling his excitement.

To Meg, he went on, "How do you know he was bald, Mrs. Barlowe?"

She closed her eyes. There was a pause, then she said "In the struggle ... his hat fell off... he had no hair at all."

"Can you remember what he was wearing?" "A black coat and a black slouch hat." Jenson nodded, satisfied.

"Okay, Mrs. Barlowe, you take it easy. I won't worry you again for a while. You just relax."

Moving forward, Harmas asked, "Mrs. Barlowe, there's just one thing that could help us. Why did you and your husband go out to Jason's Glen?"

The cobalt blue eyes suddenly snapped open. Meg looked intently at Harmas.

"Why? Why ... Phil wanted to ... it was our wedding anniversary. He took me to the Court roadhouse ... he was in a romantic mood..." She broke off and hid her face in her hands.

Dr. Henry said, "That'll do for now, gentlemen. I want Mrs. Barlowe to rest."

He shepherded Jenson and Harmas to the door. Harmas paused at the door and looked back at Meg. She lay motionless, her hands hiding her face.

As they walked down the corridor, Jenson said, "It's the same guy. The hell of it is he could be anywhere, and he could do this again."

"Let's take a look at Mr. Philip Barlowe," Harmas said. "At least we won't be disturbing him." "What do you want to look at him for?" "I want to look at the man who managed to persuade that lush dish to marry him ... he should be quite a guy," Harmas said.

The morgue attendant, a burly Negro, flicked back the sheet.

"Here he is mister... ain't much to look at."

Jenson, who had seen the body before, remained where he was, away from "the table, his hand cupping a cigarette, his

face showing impatience and irritation.

Harmas, his hat at the back of his head, surveyed what remained of Philip Barlowe. He stared for a long moment, then he nodded to the Negro and turned to Jenson.

"Got a report on the slug that killed him?"

Jenson squinted at him.

"Not yet... why?"

"How long will it be?"

"Could be ready now."

"I have a hunch," Harmas said. "Let's find out if it is ready."

They walked to the Coroner's office and Jenson put a call through to the Ballistics department. While he was waiting, Harmas said thoughtfully, "What magic did a little punk like Barlowe have to persuade a sexy piece like that woman to marry him?"

"Women do odd things," Jenson said, then as the connection came through he waved Harmas to silence. He asked for the report on the bullet. There was a pause, then some talk, then Jenson said, "Okay, Ted. Thanks. I'll be right over," and he hung up. He stared at Harmas, his eyes puzzled. "Now what do you know? The two men were both shot with .38's, but the guns are different. The slugs don't match. How did you know?"

"I didn't," Harmas said. "I told you ... it was a hunch." He stood up. "It needn't mean a thing. Our bald headed pal could own two .38 automatics ... but somehow I don't think he does."

A little after six o'clock, Anson completed his list of calls and then drove back to the Marlborough hotel. Right at this moment, he was thinking as he locked the car, Jenson and Harmas were seeing Meg. He would have given a lot to have been there. He had to trust her to keep her nerve. He wished he could call her later and find out what had been said, but that was far too dangerous.

This dossier, Harmas had spoken about... what could be in it? Had Meg lied to him when she said she hadn't a record: nothing to hide? Had Maddox found out that she had had lovers? The more Anson thought about Meg, the more sure he was she couldn't have lived with Barlowe without having a lover. He had made a slip telling Harmas Meg and Barlowe had been happy together. He had forgotten they had had separate rooms.

"Hello, Johnny ..."

Anson started and looked round.

Fay Lawley stood by his side. She smiled at him, her eyes hard and glittering.

"Hello," Anson said curtly. He wasn't in the mood to be bothered with this overblown tart. "Excuse me. I have a business date ... I'm late already."

She caught hold of his arm.

"Skip it. Don't give me that line. I'm expecting you to take me out tonight and to spend some of your new-found money on me. It's time you unbuttoned your wallet."

Anson shook her hand off his arm.

"Beat it!" he said viciously. "Go, peddle it elsewhere," and pushing past her, he crossed the street and entered the hotel. Fay stood motionless watching him disappear into the hotel, then with a hard little smile on her over-painted mouth, she started down the sidewalk to the nearest bar.

Maddox shoved aside a pile of papers that fell on to the floor. He lit another cigarette, ran his fingers through his hair and picked up yet another insurance policy from his in-tray. Patty Shaw looked in. "Steve's here," she announced.

Maddox said nothing for several seconds, then he put the policy down and stared at Patty. For some moments he didn't seem to register her, then his eyes became alert. "Steve? Sure ... shoot him in."

Patty said to Harmas, "The Maestro is coming out of his trance. He'll see you."

Harmas entered the office and sat down in the client's chair. The time was nine fifteen a.m. He had driven through the night back to San Francisco and he was feeling jaded. Maddox pushed back his chair. "What's cooking?"

"Plenty," Harmas said, "but I haven't had the time yet to get it all straightened out. I thought I'd better come back here and talk it over with you. For a start: Barlowe and his wife didn't live as man and wife. They had separate rooms. He was a queer: a sick man. You should have seen the muck I found in his room: sadist stuff... really rotten. Mrs. Barlowe was attacked and raped. I have the doctor's certificate. Here are all the sordid details." He dropped a paper on the desk. "There's no fake about that. I've seen her. She's certainly been beaten up. I went over the house. She keeps it the way a self-respecting pig

would hate. I've seen Barlowe. He's a shrimp of a man ... I can't think why she ever married him."

Maddox relaxed back in his chair. His red rubbery face creased into a benign grin.

"Go on ... keep talking."

"She writes short stories. Awful stuff, but one of them deals with an insurance swindle." Harmas took more papers from his pocket and dropped them on the desk. "Have a look at this when you have time. She has an idea."

Maddox nodded.

"Barlowe was a champion revolver shot," Harmas continued. "He owned a gun: a .38, but the gun is missing. Barlowe was shot with a .38. The other guy was also shot with a .38, but the slugs don't match. Mrs. Barlowe gave out a description of the killer: a word for word description that appeared in the newspapers of the guy who attacked the other couple."

Maddox was practically purring. He opened his desk drawer, took out a file and pushed it towards Harmas.

"There it is, Steve. Take it away and read it. Then come back and we'll talk again ... you are doing fine."

Harmas picked up the file.

"There's one other thing," he said, getting to his feet. "Anson has already alerted the press that this woman is going to make a claim. If we block the claim without good reason, we're in for a lot of rank publicity. She has the sympathy of the public."

Maddox grinned wolfishly.

"You read that dossier. We can't get bad publicity once that dossier becomes public reading. This is a phony claim. I knew it was as soon as it came to my desk. You keep going ... you're doing fine!"

Joe Duncan, a large man with a great sagging belly and a whisky complexion put down one of his six telephone receivers and looked questioningly at Sailor Hogan as he came into the office.

"Park your butt," Duncan said. "Have you any idea what the date is?"

Hogan settled himself in the big arm-chair opposite Duncans desk. He struck a match to light a cigarette.

"Why should I care?"

"In five days you come across with twenty-five grand or you and me part company," Duncan said. He leaned his gross body back into his chair, reached thick fingers for a cigar, nipped off the end with his small yellow teeth and spat the end into the trash basket. "How's it coming? I want the dough ..."

Hogan grinned at him.

"You'll get it, even if I have to borrow it."

Duncan sneered.

"Who's going to lend you money?"

"You'd be surprised," Hogan said and winked. He was feeling very confident. "I'm a guy with prospects now."

Duncan tapped a copy of the Pru Town-Gazette lying on his desk.

"From this rag, your meal ticket has been raped. Are you telling me you can still find twenty-five grand?"

Hogan's grin widened.

"Read it again. Who cares if she was raped? Her husband is dead and he was insured for fifty grand. Now put that in your gizzard and chew it over." He lounged to his feet. "Be seeing you, Joe. Relax. It's working out fine for me ... just relax."

When he had gone, Duncan scratched the back of his thick neck, shrugged and reached for the telephone.

Chapter 10

Harmas arrived back in Pru Town late the following evening. He had spent all the morning with Maddox, and now briefed, was ready for action.

He dumped his bag at the hotel, then drove out to the Court roadhouse.

The roadhouse was situated a few miles outside Pru Town. It was one of those showy, neon covered places that attracted the car trade and the young in search of a reasonably good dinner with a reasonably good band at a not too exorbitant price.

He walked into the bar, which, at that time, was nearly empty. He asked the barman, a big, jolly looking Negro, if he could have a table in the restaurant. The Negro said he would fix it. In the meantime, how's about a drink?

Harmas said he would have a large Scotch on the rocks and he sat at one of the high stools at the bar. He asked for the evening newspaper.

The Negro got him the drink and the paper and then went to the far end of the bar to phone the restaurant. The front page of the Pru Town Gazette was given up to the Barlowe murder.

The barman came back to say a table would be ready in ten minutes.

"That's a horrible thing," he went on seeing Harmas was reading about the murder. "These two were out here a couple of hours before it happened."

Harmas put down the newspaper.

"Is that right? It surprises me they went out to Jason's Glen. After the first murder you would have thought they would have kept clear of such a lonely place."

The barman rolled his eyes.

"That's just what he said. He didn't want to go. They argued about it for nearly twenty minutes, but she wanted it. Man! When a dame like that wants something, she gets it!"

"So he didn't want to go out there?"

"That's a fact. They came in here for a final drink. It was around half past nine. At one time I thought they would blow up, they got so heated. Finally, he said the hell with it: if she wanted to go that bad, then he would take her. Then she went to the Ladies' Room and kept him waiting for more than ten minutes. I saw he didn't go for that either!"

"Too bad she didn't take his advice," Harmas said, his mind busy. He finished his drink. "I guess I'll go and eat," and tipping the barman generously, he went in towards the restaurant.

He crossed the lobby and paused outside the ladies' room.

The doorman glanced at him, then stiffened to attention as Harmas beckoned to him.

"Would there be a telephone in there?" Harmas asked and took out his wallet. From it he selected a five dollar bill.

The doorman eyed the bill the way a gun dog eyes a falling grouse.

"Yes, sir."

"Automatic or does it go through a switchboard?" "A switchboard, sir."

"I'd like to talk to the operator," Harmas said. He took out his card and let the doorman examine it. Then as he took the card back, he handed over the five dollar bill.

"I can fix that," the doorman said. "Come this way." He took Harmas to a small office where there was a switchboard and a blonde thumping a typewriter. The blonde was young and pretty and she looked at Harmas as the doorman said, "This gentleman wants a little help." He winked. "You help him... he'll help you." To Harmas, he said, "You go right ahead, sir. You'll find May ready to help helpful gentlemen," and he went away. Harmas sat on the edge of the desk. "Is that right, beautiful?" he asked and took out his wallet. He felt this was the right time to be extravagant. He knew Maddox would willingly meet any expense to save the company paying a phony claim.

The blonde, snugly curved, with big baby blue eyes looked with alert interest as Harmas fished out a five dollar bill.

"For that, handsome," she said, "you could go a very long way."

"That's good news," Harmas said, grinning, "but right now all I want is a little information. Do you keep a record of the out-going calls you handle?"

"Yep." She looked him over. "Are you a private eye?" "I'm private," Harmas said. "I'm trying to trace a call made from here on September 30th around half past nine ... made by a woman."

The blonde got to her feet and swung her neat hips over to the switchboard. She consulted a notebook.

"Here we are ... must be the one I can't remember if it was made by a woman, but on that night I wasn't busy. I had only four calls. Three of them between seven and half past eight ... the other was around nine forty. Elmwood 68009."

"Could I have the other numbers?"

She gave him the numbers and he wrote them down, then he thanked her and passed over the five dollar bill.

She smiled happily as she tucked the bill away. She was pretty, pert and sexy and for a brief moment Harmas regretted he was married, then he waved away such thoughts and went into the restaurant.

Later, he called police headquarters. The desk sergeant told him Lieutenant Jenson was still out.

"You could help me," Harmas said and introduced himself. "I want to know who operates on Elmwood 68009."

The desk sergeant told him to hold on. After a delay he came back on the line.

"That's a public call booth on highway 57. If you have a Survey map of the district, the call box is in zone A.3." Harmas thanked him, and hung up.

Around ten o'clock the same evening, Harmas walked down the long corridor that led to Jenson's office through the usual smell of disinfectant and sweat of a cop house.

Jenson, looking dirty and tired, was talking to someone on the telephone. When he saw Harmas, he said, "Well, keep after it... yeah ... yeah ... call me back," and he hung up. He frowned at Harmas who was now sitting astride one of the hard backed chairs. "What do you want?"

"I'm just back from seeing Maddox. He sends his love. How are you making out?"

Jenson rubbed the back of his neck. He looked like a man who had been under pressure for more hours than he likes to remember.

"One of my men was shot to death by a hold-up thug who cleaned out the Caltex cash box on the Brent highway a few days back. The same gun that shot my man, killed Barlowe."

Harmas drew in a long, slow breath.

"So what now?"

"We're checking on every bald-headed man in the district. We're hunting for the gun," Jenson said, his expression grim.

"I have every man I can spare on the job."

"How much did the hold-up thug get away with?"

"A little over three thousand."

"Did you get a description of the guy?"

"Yeah ... not the same guy who shot Barlowe. This one was tall," Jenson leaned back into his chair, took a cigar from his desk drawer and lit it. "Here's something odd. We had a report from the Marlborough hotel that a hat and coat were stolen on the night of the robbery. The hat was Swiss style with a cord and feather ... the gunman had the same kind of hat. Could mean something. I had an idea that the gunman was passing through, but now I am beginning to wonder if he wasn't a local man."

"Who gave you a description of this guy?"

"The gas attendant."

"Could be he was in such a panic he has the description wrong. Could be the gunman is our sex killer."

Jenson blew smoke to the ceiling.

"I guess."

Harmas brooded for a long moment, then said, "I'd appreciate it if you'd take me out to Jason's Glen tomorrow morning. I have an idea ... I could be wasting your time, but I don't think I am."

Jenson wiped his sweating face.

"I want to go out there myself. Okay, I'll pick you up. What's your idea?"

Harmas got to his feet.

"It'll keep ... then see you tomorrow," and he made for the door.

As Jenson was about to pull into the lay-by at the bottom of the dirt road leading to Jason's Glen, Harmas said sharply,

"Hold it!"

Jenson trod on the brake and brought his car to a standstill. "Before you muck up the ground," Harmas said, "let's take a look."

He and Jenson went over to the lay-by. On a patch of soft ground they came upon a deep impression of a tyre track. Harmas stared at it.

"This could be too good to be true," he said. "If we find the same track at Jason's Glen, I'd say my hunch is paying off. Take a look at this ... see how the tyre is worn on the left side. It is as good as a finger print. If you saw it again would you recognize it?"

Jenson examined the track for a long moment, then he nodded.

"Yeah... so what?"

"We'll go up to the glen and see if we can find the same impression there."

Jenson shrugged and returned to the car. With Harmas at his side, he drove up the narrow road that led to the glen. It took the two men more than an hour of patient searching before Jenson came across the tyre track.

"Here it is," he called to Harmas who was on the far side of the glen.

Harmas joined him. The track was clear in the sandy soil. The two men squatted beside it.

"That's it!" Harmas's expression showed his excitement. "Who says I'm not one hell of a detective!" He moved back.

"This guy drove his car between these two shrubs. The car would be out of sight... yeah, that's it!"

"Will you quit talking to yourself and make with some explanations?" Jenson said. "You think this could be the killer's car?"

As they walked back to the car, Harmas said, "That's my bet. Remember I asked Mrs. Barlowe why she and her husband came out here and she said he was in a romantic mood and wanted to?" "Yeah ... go on."

"She let drop that they had gone to the Court road-house. I went out there last night and got talking to the barman. He says Barlowe didn't want to come out here and they almost had a stand-up fight before Barlowe finally agreed to bring her here. She went to the ladies' room and kept him waiting some minutes. I wondered if she had used the telephone. There's a record of all out-going calls, and at the time she was in the ladies' room, there's a record of a call to Elmwood 68009. I checked and it's the number of the call box we've just looked at. I think Maddox is right as usual." Harmas shrugged. "He's always right. I think she and a boy friend murdered Barlowe. The boy friend was waiting for her to call, alerting him they were on their way. He then drove up there, hid his car and when they arrived, he shot Barlowe." Jenson looked worried.

"Are you suggesting the boy friend then attacked and raped her? To hell with that for an idea!"

"I'll quote Maddox. He said he would be happy to be attacked and raped for fifty grand."

"That's what Maddox says. A woman wouldn't..."

"But we are one jump ahead of you," Harmas said. "We've turned a Tracing Agency onto this woman and they've come up with quite a dossier. She has not only been in jail for stealing she was also a prostitute before she married Barlowe. I think Maddox is right. A woman like that wouldn't flinch from rough treatment if it gave her an alibi and earned her fifty thousand dollars."

"You think this sex killer is her boy friend?"

"No. I think her boy friend did the Caltex job, and he duplicated the sex killing as a front. The fact your patrol officer and Barlowe were killed by the same gun, points to it."

"If these two were going to horn in on a fifty thousand dollar insurance," Jenson said, "why should he risk his neck for a three thousand dollar hold-up?"

Harmas stared at him for a long moment.

"Yeah ... that's a point. Look, let's keep an open mind on this. The Barlowe woman has already lied once. Let's go and talk to her ... maybe she'll lie again."

Meg Barlowe was sitting up in bed as the nurse led Jenson and Harmas into her room. Although her left eye was still badly bruised, Harmas was again aware of her sensual handsomeness.

"I have to worry you again, Mrs. Barlowe," Jenson said.

"I'm told you'll be leaving here in a couple of days."

Meg looked from Jenson to Harmas and then back to Jenson again. "Yes."

Harmas had an idea she was nervous. He stood back and watched her.

"I understand you and your husband spent the evening at the Court road house and he then persuaded you to go with him to Jason's Glen: Is that correct?" Jenson asked. Meg nodded. "Yes."

"Did you want to go with him?"

"Not particularly. In fact I told him it mightn't be safe, but he laughed at me. I guess he was a little high ... I guess I was too."

"It was his idea to go out there ... not yours?" She stared at him for a long moment before saying, "That's right."

"When you reached Jason's Glen, did you see anyone up there ... any parked car?"

"No. I - I thought we had the place to ourselves." "How long were you there before the attack started?" "About five minutes ... a little more." "What happened exactly?"

"We were talking. Then suddenly I saw a flash and heard a bang. Phil ... fell forward. I looked around and there was this

man. He pointed the gun at me and told me to get out of the car. I got out and started to run. Although he was short and fat, he was very quick. He caught up with me and jerked me around, I struck him and his hat fell off. I saw he was completely bald." "You are sure of that?" Jenson asked. "He couldn't have been very fair or even white haired, and in the moonlight, you thought he was bald?"

Harmas grinned at him.

"Maddox would love that remark. If you go on making those bright deductions, you'll finish up as Chief of Police." As he got into the car beside Jenson, he went on, "Hey! Here's an idea! If she has a boy friend, guess which room in Barlowe's house he is most likely to visit?" Jenson started the car. "Go on ... I can guess."

"The way she keeps that house, never cleaning it, you might find his finger prints. Why not send your boys out there and go-over the bedroom before she leaves hospital? You could do it nice and quiet without anyone knowing. If she has a record, he might too and then we could find him a lot faster than waiting for him to come out from under the wraps. And another thing ... finger print the gun box. You might get a surprise there."

Jenson drove in silence to the hotel, frowning, then as he pulled up outside the hotel he said, "Yeah, you've got something. Okay, I'll send the boys out there this afternoon."

"Who runs the Pru Town Small Arms Club?" Harmas asked as he got out of the car, "and where do I find him?"

"Harry Seamore. You'll probably find him at the club on Sycamore Street. Why?"

"I want to talk to him," Harmas said. "Stick around, I'll get the^dossier."

Harry Seamore, a heavy built, red-faced man in his early forties, shook hands with Harmas after Harmas had introduced himself.

"I'm interested in Barlowe's gun," Harmas said. "I've been told he gave the gun away about nine months ago. Do you know who he gave it to?"

Seamore, settling in his chair, looked puzzled.

"I think you have made a mistake. Phil wouldn't ever give his guns away. I know for a fact he had one of them last week. I happened to have borrowed it from him."

Harmas leaned forward.

"Guns? Did he have more than one?"

Seamore grinned.

"He had a pair and they were beauties. I ought to know. I got them for him: they were a matched pair: about the best .38's I've ever handled."

Harmas ran his fingers through his hair as he frowned at Seamore.

"You just said you borrowed one of his guns?"

"That's right. A friend of mine from Miami was staying with me. He reckons he is a pretty good shot." Seamore's pleasant face creased again into a smile. "We had a wager. I use a .45, but my friend is used to a .38 and he hadn't his gun with him. So I called Phil and asked him if he'd lend me one of his guns. My friend and I had this match ... he using Phil's gun. I returned the gun to Phil three days before the poor guy was killed."

Harmas leaned back in his chair until the chair back creaked.

"Where did this match take place, Mr. Seamore?"

"Right here," Seamore said, jerking his thumb towards the window through which Harmas could see a shooting alley.

"We set up two target boxes and we both fired fifteen rounds. I pipped my friend by an inner."

"What are the chances of getting the spent bullets from both guns, Mr. Seamore?" Harmas asked.

"Easiest thing in the world. There's been no shooting for the past week. The slugs are in the boxes right now."

"You know which box your friend shot into?"

"Of course."

"Could I use your telephone?"

"Go right ahead."

Smiling happily, Harmas dialled police headquarters.

Chapter 11

Anson had two likely prospects to call on in Pru Town. He then planned to spend the night at the Marlborough hotel before returning to Brent.

As he drove along the busy highway, he wondered what was happening to Meg. She would soon be discharged from hospital. He had already warned her to destroy the insurance policy he had given to Barlowe. This he was sure she had done. He had sent the policy for a claim of \$50,000, signed by Barlowe to Jack Jameson, a young but alert lawyer who was now acting for Meg.

Not for one moment had Anson any misgivings that his plans weren't foolproof. The police would be hunting for the bald headed, sex maniac. The press was sympathetic towards Meg. Jameson would put in the claim and Maddox would have to meet it. There was, however, one slight uneasiness in Anson's mind ... this dossier Harmas had mentioned. Anson kept asking himself what could be in it.

His two calls successfully completed, he drove back to the hotel. It was after he had finished his lunch and was walking towards the exit when he ran into Harmas.

"There you are," Harmas said. "I was hoping to see you. I want to talk to you."

Anson looked sharply at him, then followed him into the deserted lounge. They sat in a far corner.

"What is it?" Anson said, waving to the waiter to bring coffee.

"The Barlowe affair," Harmas said. "Maddox is right. That man kills me! He is always right. The claim is phony."

Anson took from his pocket a pack of cigarettes. He offered it and the two men lit up.

"Go on ... tell me," he said, his voice steady and wooden.

The waiter brought them coffee. When he had gone, Harmas said, "I'm sure as I'm sitting here this woman, with the help of a boy friend, murdered her husband. They used the sex killer as a front."

Anson stared at the burning end of his cigarette. Don't panic, he told himself. What has he found out? What have I done wrong? He remembered with a feeling of relief that he had an unbreakable alibi.

"You don't really expect me to believe this, do you?" he said. "Isn't this something Maddox has cooked up to get out of settling the claim?"

"No," Harmas said quietly. "I have seen her dossier ... you haven't. She is capable of anything. I'm sure Maddox is right as he always is."

Anson's mouth became too dry for smoking. He crushed out his cigarette. "What's in this dossier, then?"

"The woman has a jail record," Harmas said. "She has been a prostitute. The Tracing Agency says she became infatuated with a man who lived with her. They don't know who this guy is, but she turned thief to keep him and got a three months' sentence. When she came out of jail, her pimp had disappeared. She met Barlowe. It's an odd thing how someone like Barlowe ... a mean-tempered, middle-aged man ... does fall for a tart. He fell for her, and they married. It's my guess she met her pimp again, and together they cooked up this idea of getting Barlowe to insure himself and then the two of them knocked him off."

His face expressionless, Anson said, "Can you prove any of this?"

"I have some proof. Okay, I admit it wouldn't stand up in court, but it is enough to make Maddox fight every inch of the way before we pay her claim." Anson leaned back in his chair.

"She is a client of mine. You don't seem to realize how tricky this is for me. The word gets around Mrs. Barlowe is front page news. People are sorry for her. The newspapers have made a big play about her being raped and her husband being killed. If Maddox fights her claim, where do I stand? Don't you see the situation I'm in? Every time I call on a prospect to try to sell him a life policy, he'll say, 'What's the use? If anything happens to me, your people won't settle ... look at the Barlowe case.' Can't you see that?"

"Sure," Harmas said, "but you're not suggesting that we pay out on a phony claim, are you?"

"Is it phony? Just because you've found out this woman has a police record, does that make her a murderess. What proof have you got?"

"I've caught her out in two lies," Harmas said. "It was she who persuaded Barlowe to go out to Jason's Glen and I have a witness who'll swear to it, but she claims it was Barlowe who wanted to go ... to be romantic. I have proof they slept alone. Barlowe wasn't the romantic type ... he was a pervert. It's my bet that her boy friend was waiting at the Glen for them. There's a telephone record at the road-house where they spent the evening that a call was put through to a call box near the glen. I can't prove she actually made the call, but it certainly looks as if she did. I think she was alerting her boy friend that she and Barlowe were on the way to the glen."

"Pretty circumstantial, isn't it?" Anson asked, staring at Harmas.

"Oh sure, but it turns on the red light. There's an impression of a car tyre by the call box and we found the same impression up at the Glen. If we find her boy friend has a tyre that matched the impression, he'll have a lot of explaining to do."

Anson kept his face expressionless, but there was a sudden chill around his heart.

"The impression could have been made any time, couldn't it? What else have you got?"

Harmas sat forward.

"This is the topper," he said. "Barlowe was a crack pistol shot: he owned two guns; .38's. Both these guns are missing. Mrs. Barlowe told us Barlowe had given one gun away, but Harry Seamore, the secretary of the Target Club, is certain, Barlowe would never have parted with these guns. Now there's something ... Barlowe was shot with his own gun. We have been able to check the slugs. And here's something really sensational; the same guy that killed Barlowe, killed the cop in the Caltex hold-up. How do you like that?"

"You've certainly been busy," Anson said as he bent to adjust his shoe string. He felt he had lost colour and he cursed himself for using Barlowe's gun. At the time it had seemed so easy and convenient ... what blind spot had led him into making such a stupid, dangerous mistake? He straightened. "What does Lieutenant Jenson think ... does he think Barlowe did that holdup? Could explain how he got hold of the money to pay for his premium. Come to think of it, it could be the answer. He was

desperate to start up on his own. He probably hadn't the money to pay for the premium and staged this hold-up. Could explain why he paid up in cash."

Harmas stroked his nose.

"Yeah; you have an idea. All the same, I'm still convinced Mrs. Barlowe has a boy friend and he and she cooked up Barlowe's murder."

"Just who is this boy friend you keep talking about?" Anson demanded.

"We're looking for him. He shouldn't be all that hard to turn up." Harmas finished his coffee. "Well, that puts you in the picture. I'm alerting Maddox. He'll love it! I don't think Mrs. Barlowe is going to get paid. She could end up in the gas

chamber."

Anson got to his feet.

"You have still to prove it," he said. "Until you do prove it, I'm going along with my client. This kind of situation could put me right out of business here. See you," and he walked out of the lounge.

Harmas watched him go, a sudden, puzzled expression in his alert grey eyes.

Harmas had just finished breakfast and had moved into the lounge of the hotel to read the newspapers when Jenson came striding in.

"That finger print idea of yours has paid off," Jenson said. "I think we're on to her boy friend. There are two sets of men's prints in her bedroom. One set we have no record of, but the other belongs to a guy named Sailor Hogan. He was one time light-heavy weight champion of California and he lived in Los Angeles. He works now in Brent for Joe Duncan, a bookmaker. As Hogan lived in L.A. and Mrs. Barlowe worked there as a prostitute could be he was her pimp."

"Get any prints from the gun-box?" Harmas asked.

"Yeah, but they aren't Hogan's; they belong to the other guy," Jenson told him. "I'm going to talk to Hogan now. Do you want to come?"

Harmas climbed to his feet.

"I'd like to see you stop me," he said.

Sailor Hogan lounged back in his chair, a sneering grin on his battle scarred face.

"Look, fellows, snap it up," he said. "I have things to do. What's biting you?"

"Where were you on the night of September 21st?" Jenson demanded.

Hogan's grin widened.

"What's this? What am I supposed to have been doing?"

"What were you doing and where were you?"

"I don't know," Hogan said, shrugging. "That's over two weeks ago, isn't it?"

"Think about it," Jenson said with his cop voice. "You could be in trouble. Better think hard."

"Well, if it's like that," Hogan said still grinning, "maybe I can do something about it." He took from his pocket a slim red diary and began to flick through the pages "September 21 st?"

"You heard me!" Jenson snapped.

"Well, now yeah ... just as well I keep a diary, isn't it?" Hogan looked at Harmas and winked. "I've been in a spot of trouble in the past, now I always keep a record. Comes in useful when the law gets nosy."

"Come on, Hogan!" Jenson barked. "What were you doing?"

"I was in Lambsville ... I had a job to do for Joe Duncan ... any particular time bothering you?"

"Three to four o'clock in the morning."

"Well, for Pete's sake. I was in bed! Where else would I be?"

"Can you prove it?"

Hogan leered.

"Easiest thing in the world, Lieutenant. I don't often sleep alone. I get scared of the dark. I had a babe to look after me."

His sneering grin widened. "She has a reason to remember. You ask her ... Kit Litman. She works at the Casino Club."

"What were you doing on the night of September 30th?"

Hogan again winked at Harmas as he flicked pages in his diary.

"Time?" he asked. "Between nine and eleven p.m."

"That's an easy one," Hogan said. "I was playing poker with four of my pals. We played from eight to midnight at Sam's bar. Check if you don't believe me. I was with Joe Gershwin, Ted Macklin, Frankie Stewart and Jack Hammond." He lolled at ease in his chair. "They'll tell you. We started play at eight and finished at around two o'clock. Is that all? I have work to do. You can't pin anything on me, Lieutenant. I keep my nose clean."

Jenson asked abruptly, "You know Mrs. Barlowe? Hogan was waiting for this question. "I can't say I do ... have I missed anything?" "You know Philip Barlowe?" "The guy who was knocked off? No ... what's all this in aid of?"

"Have you ever been to the Barlowe house?" Hogan's smile began to fade. He didn't like the cold, hard stare Jenson was giving him. "Is it likely?"

"How does it happen then your fingerprints were found in the Barlowe house?" Jenson demanded, leaning forward. For a moment Hogan gaped at him, then he forced a rueful grin.

"You coppers! You been out there getting fingerprints?" "We have yours Hogan," Jenson said. "Let's start again; do you know Meg Barlowe?" Hogan shrugged.

"Oh, sure. What's it matter now Barlowe's dead? She and I used to go around together before she married Barlowe. We met again and she invited me out there from time to time. Barlowe hadn't what it takes!" He had recovered his nerve and he winked at Harmas as he went on, "I was just protecting the lady's honour. But since you know, well, there it is. Anything else you want to know?"

"There's another set of prints in the house," Jenson said. "A man ... know who it could be?"

Hogan picked a tooth with a dirty fingernail.

"You surprise me," he said. "I thought I was the only one. I wouldn't know ... why not ask her?"

Jenson looked at Harmas and shrugged. This gesture was an admission of defeat.

"Where's your car?" Jenson asked. "Outside ... the blue Buick."

The two men left the apartment, and as they shut the door, Hogan gave a sneering little laugh.

It took Jenson only a few minutes to satisfy himself that Hogan's car hadn't made the tyre track at Jason's Glen. He looked in disgust at Harmas.

"Well that's it," he said. "There's another boy friend. Hogan couldn't have done it. I'll check his alibi, but I know him... his alibis stick." "So we start looking for the other boy friend," Harmas said.

"That's it," Jenson said. "I'll turn the screws on this woman".

"Not yet," Harmas said. "I have an idea I'd like to work on first. When we do start working on her, we want enough facts to crack her."

Anson drove his car into the Shell Service station on the Brent highway.

The manager of the Station, Jack Hornby, came out to shake hands.

"Jack," Anson said, "I'm worried about my tyres. I don't like them. I want Firestone fitted. Will you fix it?" "Happy to do it, Mr. Anson," Hornby said. He walked around Anson's car. "I don't see why you should be worried about this lot. Could run another 8,000 miles."

"A pal of mine had a burst with one of these. Fit me with Firestone".

"O'okay; I can give you discount on your old tyres if you like?"

"Thanks, but I'll take them. Put them in the trunk. I'll wait. How long will it take?" "Best part of an hour", Hornby said, looking puzzled. "I can lend you a car, Mr. Anson and I'll send ..."

"I'll wait," Anson said curtly.

Edwin Merryweather, the manager of the Pru Town National Bank, was short, fat and fussily old-fashioned. He wore a neat, well pressed blue suit and a polka dot bow tie. As Harmas shook hands with him, Harmas thought he looked like a character out of a novel by Sinclair Lewis.

"I understand Mr. Philip Barlowe was a client of yours?" Harmas said after he had introduced himself. "We are expecting a claim to be made against us. Mr. Barlowe took out a life coverage with us a few days before he died. We have to check on certain points before we meet the claim."

Merryweather lifted his eyebrows.

"Yes?"

"Did Mr. Barlowe consult you about this policy?"

Merryweather regarded his nicely polished fingernails before saying, "As it happens ... he did."

"I understand he took out the policy as security for a bank loan. Is that correct?"

"Those were his intentions."

"Did he tell you how much he planned to borrow?"

"Three thousand dollars. We would have been happy to have advanced him that amount if he had lodged his policy with us."

Harmas became alert.

"I understand Mr. Barlowe wanted a much larger sum than three thousand dollars."

Merryweather looked prim.

"We couldn't advance him any more than that sum on a five thousand dollar policy."

"Five thousand? Barlowe was insured for fifty thousand dollars!"

Merryweather looked startled.

"Surely not. Are you sure there isn't a mistake?" Looking at Harmas's set expression, he frowned and paused to adjust his bow tie. "No, obviously you would know. Mr. Barlowe told me he was arranging to insure his life for five thousand dollars and as your company offered a five per cent discount for cash, he wanted to pay the first premium in cash. He drew out practically all the money he had in his account to meet the premium."

Harmas felt a prickle of excitement run up his spine. Now he really was on to something, he told himself.

Quietly, he said, "I don't understand. We don't give discount for cash ... what made him say that?"

"Mr. Barlowe told me that your representative gave him this information ... someone ... I think ... it's Mr. Anson, isn't it?"

"He's our representative," Harmas said slowly. "But there is obviously some mistake here. How much did Barlowe draw out of his account?"

"A hundred and fifty dollars."

Harmas rubbed the back of his neck; the amount needed to cover a five thousand dollar life policy.

"There's something odd about all this, Barlowe took out a fifty thousand dollar coverage and he paid the first premium in cash! One thousand odd dollars."

"I can't imagine where he got that amount from, Mr. Harmas. He was often overdrawn."

Harmas thought for a long moment, then he got to his feet.

"Well, thanks for your time."

Merryweather made a gesture with his fat hands.

"Only too happy to be of service," he said.

As Harmas picked up his key at the reception desk, Tom Nodley said, "There's a woman wanting to talk to you, Mr. Harmas. She's been waiting some time in the bar."

The smirking expression on Nodley's face made Harmas stare sharply at him.

"Who is she?"

"Her name is Fay Lawley," Nodley leaned forward, lowering his voice. "She's one of the girls." He winked. "I can get

rid of her for you, Mr. Harmas, if you don't want to see her."

"I always see everyone," Harmas said and walked across the lobby to the bar.

He spotted Fay sitting in a corner, nursing a whisky and water, and he joined her.

She smiled at him.

"Come and sit down. I've been trying to contact you for days."

"Is that a fact," Harmas said. He signalled to the waiter, then sat down opposite her. "I've been busy. You know me ... I don't know you."

The waiter came over and Harmas ordered a Scotch on the rocks.

"I'm Fay Lawley," she said. "I live around here." Her painted lips twisted into a hard little smile. "You're with National Fidelity, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"Well, I thought you'd like some information."

The waiter came over with Harmas's drink.

"I thrive on information," Harmas said when the waiter had gone away. He offered cigarettes. They both lit up. "What is this ... some kind of deal?"

Fay shook her head.

"I'm just paying off a grudge. Treat me nice and I'm lovely. Treat me rough and I'm the original stinker. I'll do anything for a man who is decent, but the jerk who tries to shove me around gets his throat cut."

"Should this interest me?" Harmas asked, looking at her intently.

"I don't know ... you're an insurance cop, aren't you?"

"That's it."

"Would you be interested in the way your salesmen act?"

Harmas sipped his drink.

"Why, sure ... any particular salesman?"

"A little runt... Johnny Anson."

Harmas put down his drink. He kept his face expressionless.

"What about him?"

Her face suddenly vicious, her eyes glittering, Fay leaned forward and began to talk.

Chapter 12

It was Harmas's idea, and as soon as he put it to Jenson, the Lieutenant agreed.

"Mrs. Barlowe will be returning home tomorrow," Harmas said, "this is our last chance. Let's go cut there and really look the place over. Okay, your fingerprint boys have gone over the place, but now let us go over it together?"

"Just what are we looking for?" Jenson asked as he got into his car.

"The guns. They could be hidden somewhere in the house. They bother me."

Arriving at the house soon after midday, Harmas and Jenson got out of the car and surveyed the garden.

"You know, Barlowe had genius," Harmas said "It's odd, isn't it, how this land of talent and artistic ability can go hand in hand with rottenness."

Jenson wasn't interested. He grunted and then walked over to the front door. He had no difficulty in slipping the lock.

The two men wandered into the lobby. The stale smell of stuffiness and dirt made them wrinkle their noses.

"Let's go and look at Barlowe's bedroom first," Harmas said and led the way up the stairs.

Systematically, the two men searched the room. It was while Jenson was grimacing with disgust at a pack of photographs he had unearthed, that Harmas, pushing aside the bed, found one of the floorboards loose.

Taking out his pocket knife, he carefully lifted the board and shot his flashlight beam into the cavity.

"Here it is," he said, "and what the devil's this?"

Jenson peered over his shoulder at the .38 automatic that lay on the plaster. Harmas fished out a white bathing cap and two rubber cheek pads. Jenson inserted a pencil into the barrel of the gun and lifted it carefully from its hiding place.

Harmas was staring with interest at the bathing cap.

"The bald-headed man," he said and looked at Jenson. "It jells. All this muck ... now this ... I'll bet a hundred bucks that this is the Glyn Hill murder weapon."

Jenson stroked his thick nose.

"Yeah? I never throw money away. Well, come on, now we're here, let's look at the rest of this hole."

They remained in the stuffy little house all the afternoon, but they didn't find the other gun. Jenson had called police headquarters and a couple of cars, loaded with technical men, had arrived. Two of them had taken the .38 down to the Ballistics department at Brent. By the time Jenson and Harmas had returned to Brent, the experts were able to tell them that the gun was the Glyn Hill murder weapon.

Anson was sensitive to atmosphere.

When Harmas walked into the office soon after six o'clock and just when Anson was preparing to go home he was immediately aware that Harmas was hostile.

Harmas came abruptly to the reason of his visit. He described his interview with Merryweather, his grey, steady eyes

probing and suspicious.

When Harmas had finished talking, Anson said, "I can't imagine what he means. I never offered Barlowe a five per cent discount. Why should I? Are you sure Merryweather has his facts right?"

"I'm not sure about anything," Harmas said in a tone that belied his words. "Barlowe told him you told Barlowe if he paid the first premium in cash, we would give him a five per cent discount. What's more, he drew out one hundred and fifty dollars from his account to cover his first premium ... nearly every dollar he owned."

Anson picked up a pencil and began to draw aimless designs on his blotter.

"The premium was twelve twenty two," he said, without looking at Harmas. "Some mistake here."

"Originally, Barlowe intended to take out a five thousand dollar policy," Harmas said. "Merryweather is certain of that. Barlowe only wanted to borrow three thousand dollars."

Anson shifted uneasily. He paused for a moment while he lit a cigarette.

"All I can tell you," he said finally, "is that Barlowe filled in one of your coupon inquiries. When I called on him, he asked for a fifty thousand dollar policy ... you've seen the policy ... it was signed by him! He might have talked the deal over with Merryweather before he saw me. When he got home and thought about it, he must have decided to go for the bigger policy."

"Ten times as big?" Harmas said quietly, "where did the money come from to pay for such a premium?"

"He had the money ... he gave it to me," Anson said.

"Could I see the inquiry form?" Harmas asked. "I would like to be sure we have proof that Barlowe talked to Merryweather before he saw you."

Anson stiffened. The ash from his cigarette fell into his lap.

"I destroyed it," he said.

Harmas now paused to light a cigarette. He stared prob-ingly at Anson who forced himself to stare back.

"Do you usually destroy your coupons?" Harmas asked.

"Only when I have made a sale. As I sold Barlowe a policy there was no point in keeping the coupon."

Harmas considered this, then shrugged.

"Yeah ... I see that." He let smoke drift from his nostrils for a long moment, then suddenly leaning forward, he asked,

"Just for the record ... where were you on the night of September 30th?"

Anson felt a sudden cold stab of fear go through him.

"What do you mean?"

Harmas smiled.

"You know Maddox. He loves alibis. He wants to know where everyone was, remotely connected with Barlowe on the night of his death," Harmas's smile broadened. "It wouldn't surprise me if he doesn't ask me for an alibi as well. It doesn't mean a thing and if I'm treading on thin ice say so and we'll skip it."

"Of course not."

Anson opened a drawer in his desk and took out an engagement diary.

"I was working late, right here," he said in a cold, flat voice. "I didn't leave here until eleven. The janitor downstairs will tell you if you want to check."

"Relax," Harmas said, waving his hands. "I don't want to check." He leaned back in his chair. "You know, I've been thinking about this case. I'm inclined to agree with you. Even if this woman isn't on the level, it might be wiser to pay her. As you say, in this district, we might easily lose a lot of business by fighting her claim. Maddox is coming here this evening I'm going to try to talk him into paying up."

Anson stiffened and leaned forward. "Maddox is coming here?"

"Yeah. He wants to talk to Jenson. I'll let you know if I persuade him to meet the claim. Will you be home tonight?"

Anson nodded.

"Up to around nine o'clock but I know Maddox; he won't pay up."

"He could do. Old man Burrows doesn't like bad publicity. The newspapers could have a go at us. I'll see what I can do." Harmas pushed back his chair. "Getting away from business, do you know anything about that antique shop at the corner of the block? I picked up a paperweight there. They swore it was a genuine antique." He took from his pocket a plastic bag and slid out an ornate glass paperweight. He pushed it across the desk towards Anson. "Helen is nuts about antiques, but I am now wondering, if it is a fake ... could be Japanese, 1960!"

Without thinking, Anson picked up the paperweight and examined it, then he shrugged.

"I don't know; looks nice. If you tell her it's a hundred years old, she'll be happy."

He handed the paperweight back and Harmas carefully returned it to its plastic bag.

"Yeah: you have something there." He stood up. "If I can talk Maddox into paying up, I'll call you. So long for now."

When Harmas had gone, Anson lit a cigarette and stared thoughtfully at the opposite wall. He had an uneasy feeling that this murder plan of his was slowly coming unstuck at the seams.

He tried to assure himself that although the situation was tricky, it wasn't dangerous. Not for one moment did he believe that Maddox would pay up now. He was sure that the insurance money was as good as lost. What he had to be careful about was not to be involved. It was Meg's fault, of course. If she hadn't told him all those lies about her past life, he wouldn't be in this spot now.

He was still sitting at his desk, probing the situation, still wondering if he had made some fatal mistake, when some thirty minutes later, there came a gentle tap on his door.

"Come on in," he called.

The door opened and Jud Jones, the night guard wandered in.

Surprised, Anson stared at him.

"Hello, Jud," he said. "I was just going home. Is there something I can do for you?"

Jones moved his fat body further into the office. He closed the door. There was an uneasy, smirking expression on his face Anson hadn't seen before and which he didn't like.

"I wanted a word with you, Mr. Anson," he said.

"Can't it wait?" Anson said a little impatiently. "I want to get home."

Jones shook his head.

"I guess not, Mr. Anson. This is important... to you as well as to me."

Anson moved over to the window so his back was to the fading light.

"Go ahead ... what is it?"

"This guy Harmas ... you know him?"

Anson's hands turned into fists.

"Yes ... what about him?"

"He has been asking questions about you, Mr. Anson."

With an effort, Anson kept his face expressionless. So Harmas had checked his alibi. Well, that would get him nowhere.

Forcing his voice to sound natural Anson said, "I know all about that. It's to do with this murder case. The police want to check everyone's alibi; everyone remotely connected with

Barlowe. I happened to have sold Barlowe an insurance policy so I'm involved. It's just routine. Don't let it worry you."

Jones took a half smoked cigarette from behind his ear, stuck it on his lower lip and set fire to it.

"It's not worrying me, Mr. Anson. I thought it might be worrying you. You see, I told him you were right here in this office between nine and eleven. I told him you were using the typewriter."

There was a sneering tone in his voice that made Anson's eyes move intently over the fat, sly face.

"That's right," he said. "I told him the same thing. Just as well I didn't have company that night, isn't it?" He forced a smile.

"Yeah," Jones said without returning Anson's smile. "Well, I told him you were here, but he's only a private dick. What if the cops should ask me?"

"You tell them the same thing, Jud," Anson said, his voice sharpening.

"You can't expect me to tell lies to the cops, Mr. Anson," Jones said, shaking his head. "I can't afford to get into trouble ... they could make me an accessory ..."

Anson felt a chill growing around his heart.

"What do you mean? Accessory? What are you talking about?"

"You weren't in your office that night, Mr. Anson."

Anson sat abruptly on the edge of his desk. His legs felt as if they wouldn't support him.

"What makes you say that?" he asked, his voice husky.

Jones dropped his cigarette butt on the floor and trod on it.

"I had run out of cigarettes," he said. "I thought I might borrow a couple from you. I knocked on the door. No one answered, but the typewriter kept going. I knocked again, then I thought something must be wrong. I opened the door with my pass key. You weren't there, Mr. Anson. There was a tape recorder playing back the sound of a typewriter working and very realistic it sounded ... it had me completely fooled "

Anson felt cold sweat run from his armpits down his ribs.

Sunk! he thought, now what am I going to do?

His immediate impulse was to take Barlowe's gun from the locked drawer in his desk and murder Jones. The thought was scarcely in his mind before he dismissed it. He would never have the strength to move this great hulk of a body from his office once Jones was dead. He had to gain time to think.

"That's right, Jud," he said. "I wasn't in my office but I had nothing to do with the murder ... nothing at all."

Jones, who had been watching Anson closely, smirked. Anson could smell the sweat of excitement and fear coming from the fat man.

"I'm sure, Mr. Anson ... never crossed my mind you did have anything to do with it. I just thought I'd better let you know if the cops asked me. I'll have to tell them the truth." He cocked his head on one side, and went on, "it wouldn't do any harm, would it, Mr. Anson?" Anson said slowly, "Well, Jud, it might." Jones managed to look sad.

"I wouldn't like that. You've always been good to me. What sort of harm would it do?"

"I could lose my job," Anson said. "I set up this alibi because I was fooling around with a married woman and her husband is on to me. I wanted to prove I was right here instead of being with her." Even to him, this sounded pretty feeble, but he had no time to think up something better.

"Is that right?" Jud said and leered. "You were always sharp with girls." He paused to scratch the back of his fat neck.

"Well, maybe I could forget it if that's all it is. Maybe I could ... I'll have to think about it."

Anson smelling blackmail, said quickly ... too quickly, "If a hundred dollars would be of any use to you, Jud ... after all, although I have nothing to do with it, this is a murder inquiry. How about a hundred bucks and you keep me in the clear?"

Jones lolled his massive frame against the wall. "Well, I don't know, Mr. Anson. It worries me. To tell the truth, my wife is far from well. The doc says she should go away. The climate here doesn't seem to agree with her. Moving is an expensive business. You couldn't run to a thousand, could you? For

that I'll forget everything and you will be doing us a good turn."

Anson suddenly became calm. He realized the situation. He told himself he would have to kill this fat, hulking blackmailer, but he would have to stall him until he got him where he could kill him in safety.

"A thousand!" he exclaimed. "For Pete's sake, Jud! Where do you imagine I'd find that kind of money? Two hundred is the best I could do."

Jones shook his head. His expression became more sorrowful. "I'd like to help you, Mr. Anson, but suppose the cops found out I had lied to them? What would happen to my wife? They could put me away for a couple of years. Two hundred bucks is no good to me."

Anson stared at the fat, sweating blackmailer for a long moment, then he said, "Give me a little time; two or three days. I might manage to find five hundred, but that would be the top. How about that?"

"I hate to press a guy as nice as you, Mr. Anson," Jones said and Anson was quick to detect a hardening in the expression of his eyes. "It'll have to be a thousand or nothing. I will give you a couple of days to decide."

Anson watched him heave his bulk away from the wall and over to the door. As Jones opened the door, he paused and leered at Anson.

"My wife knows," he said. "I never keep anything from her, but she can keep her mouth shut as well as I can. Good night, Mr. Anson."

He went out into the corridor and closed the door after him.

On his way back to his apartment, Anson stopped off at the Shell Service Station. Hornby shook hands with him and asked him how he liked his new tyres.

"They're fine," Anson said. "I looked in to settle the account."

"Thanks, Mr. Anson. Come into the office and I'll give you a receipt."

As Hornby began to write out the receipt, he said casually, "The police have been asking about your old set of tyres, Mr. Anson."

Anson was looking at a tyre pressure chart, hanging on the wall. His back was to Hornby. He felt the shock of Hornby's words like a physical blow.

Without turning, he asked, "The police? Why?"

"Something to do with the Barlowe murder," Hornby said. "It seems the killer left an imprint of his tyres on the murder spot. The police are checking on everyone who has changed his tyres recently. I told them that you had changed your tyres and that you took your old set away."

Now the first shock was over, Anson turned.

"That's okay," he said. "I'll see Lieutenant Jenson. He's a good friend of mine... I wouldn't like him to think I had anything to do with the murder," and he forced a laugh.

"I just thought I'd mention it," Hornby said, giving Anson the receipt.

"Sure ... I'll see the Lieutenant."

As Anson drove away from the garage, he had a feeling he was in a trap. How many more mistakes was he going to make? He had been so eager to get the insurance money, he had rushed into this thing. He had been crazy to have used Barlowe's gun. He had been even more crazy to have been so damned careless as to get a garage that knew him to change his tyres. Then there was Harmas asking about the coupon inquiry form and worse still, he now had no falibi for the night when Barlowe died!

Could this bright idea of his be slowly but surely collapsing? He mustn't lose his nerve, he told himself. So long as his alibi stood up, he was in the clear. What was he to do about Jones? His hands turned damp as he gripped the steering-wheel. Would he have to murder both Jones and his wife? Somehow he would have to silence them. He was sure, even if he did manage to find one thousand dollars, Jones would come back for more. This tyre business ... he had dumped his old set in a breakdown yard among hundreds of other used tyres. No one had seen him do it. Suppose Jones did betray him? Could the police prove he murdered Barlowe? He didn't think they could ... unless 'Meg's nerve broke. If they worked on her, she might involve him.

She would be back the following night and alone in the sordid dirty, little house. He would go out there late and talk to her.

Maddox flicked cigarette ash off his tie.

"I never liked Anson," he said. "There has always been something queer about him. He looks sexually starved and when a man looks like that, I don't like him."

Lieutenant Jenson sat behind his desk. Astride a chair, Harmas kept his eyes on Maddox. They had spent the past hour going over the details that Jenson and Harmas had collected covering Anson's connection with Barlowe's murder.

"Let's take another look at it," Maddox said, dropping his cigarette butt on the floor and lighting another cigarette. "We know Anson has been in this woman's bedroom. We know also he has handled Barlowe's gun-box. You have his fingerprints in the bedroom and on the gun-box. We know this because you got his prints on the glass paperweight." He looked approvingly at Harmas. "That was smart." He drew in a lungful of smoke and let it drift down his thick nostrils.

"We know from this woman, Fay Lawley, that Anson has been losing money on horses and has been chasing women. We know he has been living far beyond his income. We also know on the morning following the Caltex holdup, Anson suddenly pays into his bank a thousand dollars. We know the gun that killed the officer in the hold-up belonged to Barlowe. We also know that the gun killed Barlowe. We can assume the woman gave Anson the gun. He hadn't the money to pay for the premium so it looks as if he were forced to fake the Caltex hold-up to get the money and to pay off his debts to this bookmaker. We know he changed his car tyres after he was alerted by you ..." here Maddox scowled at

Harmas, "that a tyre track was found on the murder spot. We also know that he has a cast iron alibi." Maddox leaned back in his chair "What is a cast iron alibi? Who is this night guard who tells us Anson was working until eleven on the night Barlowe died?"

"He wouldn't stand Up for three minutes under cross examination," Jenson said. "He copped a five year stretch for blackmail ten years ago. He'd lie his mother's life away if he could earn a dollar."

Maddox ran his fingers through his hair, his red, rubbery face set in a scowl.

"Then it looks like Anson." He turned on Harmas. "What do you think? Can we nail him?"

"I don't think so," Harmas said. "We have nothing against him that a smart attorney couldn't shoot to bits. I think as you do ... I think he is our boy, but proving it is something else besides."

"Well, this is your job," Maddox said, glaring at Harmas. "So what do we do?"

Harmas smiled his slow, lazy smile.

"I think we should settle the claim. Give Mrs. Barlowe fifty thousand dollars."

Maddox's face turned purple.

"Pay her! You're trying to be funny! She'll never get a dime out of me!"

Harmas glanced at his watch. It was twenty minutes to nine and he was hungry.

"I told Anson I'd persuade you to settle the claim. Just to get the right atmosphere, I think we should call her lawyer and tell him the same thing. As soon as they know the money is going to be paid out, things will start happening."

Maddox suddenly relaxed.

"Go on ... keep talking ..."

"This woman is an ex-prostitute; there is no greedier animal," Harmas said. "She won't part with any of the loot. She and Anson could have a quarrel. She'll be leaving hospital tomorrow. I thought it would be an idea to tap the telephone and plant microphones, hooked to a tape recorder around the house. It's my bet Anson will go out there as soon as he knows the money is going to be paid. We could get quite a conversation on tape."

Maddox rubbed the back of his neck as he looked at Jenson. "The boy's smart," he said. "I won't say I can't do without him, but he makes my life a little easier than if I didn't have him." To Harmas, he said, "Go ahead ... call her lawyer and call Anson."

Anson paced up and down in his sitting-room. Every now and then, he looked impatiently at the clock on the sideboard. It was five minutes to nine o'clock. Then suddenly the telephone bell rang.

For a moment he hesitated, then picked up the receiver. It was Harmas.

"I've fixed it!" Harmas exclaimed. "Phew! I'm pretty near a wreck! Maddox has agreed to settle the claim. You have yourself to thank for it! If you hadn't been selling so much insurance in the district, Maddox would never have agreed, but even he can see that he would only be spoiling your territory if we fought the claim."

"You really mean ... there's no trick in this?"

Anson was stiff with suspicion. The idea of Maddox parting with fifty thousand dollars with the evidence he had against Meg seemed impossible.

"Don't imagine Maddox likes it," Harmas said and laughed. "He talked first on the telephone with old man Burrows. He's sure the woman fixed her husband, but he isn't sure he can prove it... so, well, he's letting her get away with it. I've called her lawyer. He'll get the cheque tomorrow."

"Well, I'm glad," Anson said. "Thanks for calling me."

"That's okay. I thought you'd like to know. See you sometime," and Harmas hung up.

Anson slowly replaced the receiver.

Meg Barlowe stirred the fire into a blaze.

The big, dusty room gave her a feeling of security. Having Hogan, his heavy body stretched out on the settee, gave her a feeling of relaxation even though Hogan seemed in a vile mood.

The time was a few minutes after eleven p.m. Meg had left the hospital during the afternoon. As soon as she had got back to the house, she had attempted to call Hogan, but it was some hours before he answered her repeated ringing. She had asked him to come out right away, but Hogan was busy. He said he would be around about nine o'clock, but he hadn't arrived before a few minutes after ten.

As soon as he had settled himself and had had a drink, he wanted to know when Meg was going to get the money.

"I don't know," she said helplessly. "This guy Jameson is supposed to be smart. He's put in the claim, but I haven't heard anything."

"You get after him tomorrow," Hogan snarled. "Chase him! I know lawyers. If you don't keep after them, they sit on their tails and do nothing."

Meg nodded.

"I'll get after him. What are we going to do about Anson?"

Hogan scowled at her.

"Nothing ... you give him the brush-off. What can he do? As soon as we get the money you give it to me to handle. You give him the air. You understand?"

Meg stared at him.

"I'll give you the money Jerry, but I'll also give you Anson to handle. He still has Phil's gun."

Hogan half sat up; his eyes alert. "What are you talking about?"

"I have already warned you about Anson," Meg said. "There's something about him that scares me. He's coldblooded. It's fine for you to tell me to give him the brush off. What about me? He could do anything ... he could kill me!"

"Yeah? He can't do a damn thing!" Hogan snarled. "Can't you see, you dope, that unless he wants to stick himself into the gas chamber, he can't do a thing? We have him over a barrel. You get the money, tell him to go to hell, and give me the money ... it's as simple as that."

"I wish it was," Meg said, clenching her fists. "You don't know him the way I do. He's ruthless. His mind is set on getting money."

Hogan swung his legs off the settee and sat up. His thick fingers closed around the buckle of his belt. With a quick movement he released the buckle and whipped the thin leather belt from around his waist.

"Okay, baby," he said, getting to his feet, "it's time you had a hiding. You're getting too big for your pants. A beating..." He paused as the front door bell rang. They looked at each other.

"Who's that?" Hogan said, the belt swinging idly, his eyes uneasy.

"Go and find out," Meg said. "But maybe you would like to beat me first!"

The front door bell rang, loudly and persistently.

Anson got out of his car, opened the double gates and drove the car onto the tarmac drive.

The headlights of the car lit up the garden. Before he turned off the car's headlights he saw the garden had already lost its magic neatness without Barlowe's care and discipline.

The time was half past eleven. There was a light on in the sitting-room. He paused for a moment, his hand going into his top coat pocket. His fingers touched the cold butt of Barlowe's gun, then he walked to the front door and rang the bell.

There was no answer to his ring. He waited, aware of a cold mounting rage inside him, then he put his finger on the bell and held it there.

After a further wait, the front door was suddenly jerked open. The moonlight fell directly on Meg.

Anson remembered the first time he had seen her; in exactly the same position in which she was now standing, but now, of course, it was different. The bruise on her jaw and her slightly swollen eye marred the sensual quality she had.

At the sight of Anson, she drew in a quick, alarmed breath.

"What do you want?" she demanded. "I don't want you here ... go away!"

"Hello, Meg," Anson said with a deceptively mild smile. "We have things to talk about"

"You're not coming in!" Meg set herself to slam the door. "I have nothing to say to you!"

Anson made a quick move forward. He put his hand on her shoulder and gave her a hard shove that sent her staggering back. He entered the hall, shut the front door and then walked past her into the sitting-room.

A log fire burned cheerfully in the grate. Anson was quick to notice two half empty glasses of whisky standing on the occasional table. So she had company, he thought, and his hand slid into his pocket and touched the butt of Barlowe's gun.

As Meg followed him into the room, leaving the door open, a sudden gust of wind blew a shower of rain against the windows.

Anson moved to the fire. He looked around the room. The burning logs, the settee and the two glasses of whisky sent his mind back to the exciting moment of their first meeting. It seemed a long time ago.

"What do you want?" Meg demanded.

Anson looked searchingly at her. His eyes moved over her body. He thought: you meet a woman and she starts a chemical reaction in you. You think there is no one like her in the world, then something happens, and it is finished. She means less to me now than the used plate after a good meal, and how little can that be?

"So you had to lie to me," he said. "If you had told me you had been a tart and you had been a thief and you had been in jail, I wouldn't have gone ahead with this thing, but you had to live in a dream world and lie. You hadn't the guts to tell the truth. I'm sorry for you. To me now, you are just something I find on my shoe and scrape off."

Meg hunched her shoulders. Her face was hard and her eyes bleak and indifferent. Anson knew he had no power to hurt her. Her past life had armoured her against contempt.

"Do you imagine I care what you say about me?" she said. "Get out!"

"Not just yet ... I have news for you, Meg. In spite of your record, in spite of your lies, they are going to pay the claim. You'll get the money tomorrow."

Meg stiffened, staring at him. Blood rushed to her face, then receded, leaving her pale with excitement.

"You mean that?" she demanded huskily. "You really mean they are going to pay?"

Anson waved to the telephone.

"Call Jameson. They've even told him. I talked to him before I came out here. He said he would be coming out himself tomorrow as soon as he got the cheque."

Meg drew in a long, slow breath. Watching her Anson's face showed amused cynicism.

"We made a bargain ... remember?" he said, "I was to insure your husband and murder him and you were to share the insurance money and yourself with me. We were going away together and we were going to have a whale of a time spending fifty thousand dollars." His smile became crooked. "But now I've changed my mind. I have known too many whores to trust any of them and that now includes you. So I'll settle for half the money. Tomorrow, you will get a cheque for fifty thousand dollars. I want a cheque right now from you for twenty-five thousand dollars, and we part and I hope I never see you again."

Meg was aware that Hogan was just outside the room, listening to what was being said. His presence gave her the courage to say, "You get nothing! You can't force me to give you anything ... get out!"

"Don't be stupid, Meg," Anson said, his eyes bleak. "I can force you to give me my share ... make no mistake about that."

You will do what I tell you or..."

A slight movement at the door made him jerk round. His heart skipped a beat at the sight of Sailor Hogan who grinned sneeringly at him.

"Hello palsy ... you threaten me, not her. I'm more your size."

As he moved into the room, Meg backed away.

Completely taken by surprise, Anson looked blankly from Hogan to Meg and then to Hogan again. Then his quick mind realized why Hogan was here. He saw suddenly the whole fabric of the plot he had blindly walked into.

"So ... that's how it is. You and she. So you are the boy friend the police think murdered Barlowe," he said softly. "You are the pimp from Los Angeles who they talk about."

Hogan's sneering grin widened.

"Don't get sore about it, palsy," he said, leaning his broad, fighter's shoulders against the wall. "We're all suckers at one time in our lives. The cops thought I had knocked him off, but I convinced them I didn't. I had an alibi. For your sake, I hope you have one too for they are certainly sniffing around."

"I am having half the money," Anson said, his face white, his eyes glittering. "You and your whore can have the other half, but I fixed this; I took all the risks ... so I get a half share."

Hogan laughed, slapping his thigh.

"You don't get a dime, sucker. You killed him. When Meg put up the idea, I knew we had to find a sucker in the insurance racket and so I picked you. I picked on you because I knew you were in trouble and panting for dough. I gave you the treatment, and boy, did that punch in the belly soften you up. It was that simple. All she had to do was to write that letter about insuring her jewellery and then turn the heat on." He looked over at Meg and grinned, "If she knows anything, she knows how to make a sucker out of a guy with hot pants. So you've pulled the nuts out of the fire, but don't kid yourself ... you don't get a dime. There's nothing you can do about it. You start bleating and you'll bleat yourself into the gas chamber. Get it?" Hogan winked. He jerked a thick thumb to the door. "Now, beat it. Me and my girl friend want to be alone."

Anson remained before the fire. His eyes were intent, his mouth a thin line.

"Are you telling me it was your idea to trap me into insuring Barlowe and then murdering him?" he asked.

Hogan laughed.

"Not my idea ... she dreamed it up. You would be surprised how smart she is for a tart. I worked it, but she invented it."

Meg, listening and watching, said sharply, "You're talking too much Jerry ... shut up!"

"Let him know how it is," Hogan said, enjoying himself. "After all, he's made us fifty thousand bucks. He's entitled to know. Well, that's it palsy ... on your way. When we meet again, I'll buy you a cigar."

Still not moving, Anson asked, "How did the police get on to you, Hogan? Why did they ever imagine you killed Barlowe?"

"Because they were smart enough to come out here and fingerprint the bedroom," Hogan said. "They found my prints: maybe they have found yours, but I have a cast iron alibi and I bet you haven't been sucker enough yourself not to have a cast iron alibi."

Anson stood staring at Hogan, cold blood crawling up his spine. "They fingerprinted the bedroom?"

He thought of Jud Jones, and his sneering blackmailing smile.

"They sure did," Hogan said. "Stood me on my ear when Jenson told me."

Anson suddenly felt defeated. He thought of that odd moment when Harmas had produced the glass paperweight. He had been vaguely uneasy about why Harmas had suddenly dropped his probing questions and had produced the paperweight. His heart gave a lurch. He had fallen for one of the oldest police tricks in the world. They now had his fingerprints. They would have found by now plenty of his prints in the dirty, sordid bedroom made during those nights when he had slept with Meg. They now would know that he had been Meg's lover; that, plus Merryweather's evidence, plus the fact he had changed his car tyres could cook him ... anyway, they were enough facts for Maddox to swing into action against him!

Maddox!

Anson stood for a long moment, his brain racing, his face turning livid.

Harmas had said Maddox had agreed to pay the claim. So what had he done? He had rushed out there to be sure of his share! Maddox would know he would do just that very thing. What a stupid fool he was! He had walked into a trap.

Slowly, he looked around the room. He knew Maddox's methods. He lifted his hands in a gesture of despair.

Puzzled, Hogan and Meg were watching him, shocked by the sudden change that had come over him.

"Look, palsy..." Hogan began, then stopped as Anson motioned him to silence.

The two of them watched him move around the room. He pulled aside the sideboard and looked behind it. He began a slow, systematic search of the room. The whiteness of his face and his despairing expression made both Hogan and Meg remain motionless and silent. Finally, Anson discovered the microphone. It was concealed behind the radiator; its wire lead going out of the window and into the darkness of the garden.

Anson stared at the microphone, furious with himself for falling for such a trick.

And I was crazy enough to think I could outwit this devil, Maddox, he thought. Between the three of us, we have now talked ourselves into the gas chamber.

"What the hell's going on?" Hogan demanded, unnerved by the way Anson was acting. "What is it?"

Again Anson motioned him to silence and then he beckoned. Moving cautiously, Hogan approached and Anson pointed to the microphone. He put his hand on Hogan's arm motioning him to say nothing.

Hogan stared at the microphone as if it was a deadly snake. Sweat burst out on his battle scarred face. Meg moved forward. When she saw the microphone, she stifled a scream.

Hogan turned on her viciously and slapped her across the face, sending her reeling back.

"You smart, stupid bitch!" he yelled at her. "Look at that! So you thought you could fix it!"

"Stop it," Anson said. He walked heavily over to the fire and bending down he thrust his hands towards the flames. He felt

cold and sick, "Well, it didn't come off," he went on, staring into the fire. "At least, it wasn't a bad try. If this stupid woman had only told me the truth ... if she had admitted she had a record, I'd never have gone ahead with this thing. As soon as Maddox know what she was, he set this trap and we've walked into it. He never intended to pay the claim. This was his trick to get me out here and set us all talking. We're on tape! We have talked ourselves into the gas chamber!" "Not me!" Hogan snarled, wiping his sweating face. "I have an alibi! They can't touch me! To hell with you two! I'm in the clear!"

Meg turned on him; her face white and terrified. "Jerry! I did this for you! You were going to have the money! You agreed! You can't walk out on me now. I love you! We've got to face this together!"

Hogan's face was now a frightened, white mask. "Love? You? Do you imagine I ever wanted anything to do with you, you cheap whore, except what I could get out of you? I was planning to take the money and then I would have ditched you! I have all the women I want without getting snarled up with a dead-beat floosie like you. You and your sucker can go to hell!"

"Keep talking," Anson said in a cold, flat voice. "It's all being recorded. Just keep talking."

Neither Hogan nor Meg bothered to listen to what he said. Meg had run over to Hogan and had caught hold of him. He threw her off.

"Get away from me!" Hogan snarled, and he started for the door.

Anson's hand closed around the butt of Barlowe's gun. He pulled it from his pocket and offered it to Meg.

"Kill him," he said. "He isn't fit to live!"

Hogan whirled round as Meg, gripping the gun, lifted it and pointed it at him. His face went slack with fright as he stared at the gun in Meg's hand.

"No! Don't do it!" he exclaimed, his voice shooting up. "Meg!"

"Your yellow boy friend," Anson said softly and reaching forward, he took the gun from Meg's shaking hand. The sight of the terror on Hogan's face did much to repay that moment in the garage when Hogan had terrified him.

Hogan backed away, sweat running down his face, his breath coming in heavy gasps. As he moved unsteadily into the lobby, the front door bell rang.

Anson said quietly, "Here they are; Jenson, Harmas and the rest of them."

Hogan came back into the sitting-room. He looked wildly around.

"Let them in," Anson said, smiling at him. He was now very quiet and calm. "Then try to talk yourself out of all this.

You won't! Nor will she! You both have said enough to put you in the gas chamber ... go ahead ... let them in!"

As the front door bell rang again, Anson put the barrel of the gun into his mouth, and still smiling at Hogan, pulled the trigger.

The Whiff Of Money

by James Hadley Chase

One

On this brilliantly sunny May morning, Paris was looking at its best.

From his large office window, John Dorey, head of the French division of the Central Intelligence Agency, surveyed the trees with their fresh green foliage, the young girls in their new spring outfits and the Place de la Concorde, besieged as usual by traffic. He felt it was good to be alive. He glanced at the few files on his desk and was glad there was nothing for his immediate attention. Relaxing back in his executive chair, he contemplated the view through the window with a benign smile.

With thirty-nine years' service in Intelligence behind him, Dorey, aged sixty-six had good reason to be pleased with himself. Not only did he hold the exalted rank of Divisional Director (Paris), but he also had been practically begged to remain in office beyond the usual retiring age. This was unassailable proof that his work had been and was still beyond reproach and that he could consider himself indispensable.

Dorey was a small, bird-like man, wearing rimless spectacles. He looked more like a successful banker than what he was: the shrewd, ruthless Director of an extremely efficient organisation whose secret machinations and wealth were so vast that few people realised just how powerful it was.

As Dorey was thinking that the girl, waiting to cross the street and who was wearing a gay micro-mini dress, was the perfect picture of a spring morning, his telephone bell buzzed.

Dorey frowned. The telephone was the bane of his life. One moment he had peace and quiet: the next moment the telephone would shatter the atmosphere as nothing else could.

Lifting the receiver, he said, 'Yes?'

Mavis Paul, his secretary, announced, 'Captain O'Halloran on the line, sir. Shall I put him through?'

Captain Tim O'Halloran was in charge of all the CIA agents in Europe. He was not only Dorey's right hand man, but also a close friend.

Dorey sighed. Whenever O'Halloran telephoned, there was usually trouble.

'Yes... I'll talk to him.' When the line clicked, Dorey went on, 'Is that you, Tim?'

'Good morning, sir.' O'Halloran's gravelly voice was curt. 'Would you scramble, please?'

Trouble! Dorey thought as he pressed down the scrambler button. 'Okay, Tim... what is it?'

'I've had a report phoned in by Alec Hammer... he covers Orly airport. He tells me that Henry Sherman has just arrived off the overnight flight from New York. Sherman is wearing a disguise and travelling on a false passport.'

Dorey blinked. He wondered if his hearing was failing. When you reach the age of sixty-six.

'Who did you say?'

'Henry Sherman. The Henry Sherman.'

Dorey felt a rush of blood to his head.

'Is this a joke?' he demanded, his voice sharp. 'What the hell are you talking about?'

'Henry Sherman has just left Orly airport, heading for central Paris, wearing a disguise and with a false passport,'

O'Halloran repeated woodenly.

I don't believe it! There must be a mistake! Sherman is in Washington! L..'

I know where he is supposed to be, sir, but right now he is on his way to the centre of Paris. Hammer is sure of this.

You may remember Hammer was Sherman's bodyguard for four years before he was transferred to us. Hammer says Sherman's walk, the way he swings his arms and jerks his head are unmistakable. This man, wearing a moustache and dark glasses travelled tourist class from New York. Hammer says this man is Henry Sherman. Hammer is one of my best men. He doesn't make mistakes.'

'But Sherman is guarded night and day by the F.B.I.! He couldn't possibly have left Washington without them knowing and we would have been alerted. Hammer must be mistaken!'

'No, sir.' There was now a note of impatience in O'Halloran's voice. 'And another thing: this man is travelling on Jack Cain's passport. You will remember Cain looks very much like Sherman and was used two or three times last year as a decoy to get the Press away from Sherman. Since then Cain has grown a moustache'

'Are you sure this man isn't Cain?'

'I'm sure. I've been checking. Right now, Cain is in hospital with a fractured leg from a car accident. Sherman is supposed to be in bed at his residence with flu. Only his wife sees him. No one else goes into his room. Somehow, Sherman has evaded his guards while his wife is pretending he is still in bed. I am convinced that Hammer is right: Henry Sherman is footloose in Paris.'

'Do you know where he is staying?'

'No sir. Hammer lost him when Sherman took the only taxi from Orly airport. Hammer has the number of the taxi. He's waiting at Orly to see if the taxi returns so he can get a line on Sherman, but it's a long shot. Do you want me to check all the hotels?'

Dorey hesitated, his mind working swiftly. Finally, he said, 'No. Did Sherman have any luggage with him?'

'A small suitcase... that's all.'

'Then leave it, Tim. Warn Hammer to say nothing. If he spots the taxi he is to try to find out where Sherman was taken, but he mustn't make a thing of it. This could be a very tricky one. Stay near a telephone, Tim. I could need you in a hurry,' and Dorey hung up.

He pushed back his chair and stared sightlessly across the room his mind busy.

If this man was really Henry Sherman, the thought, what in the world was he doing in Paris? He was pretty sure that O'Halloran was right and this man was Sherman. Had Sherman gone out of his mind? Dorey dismissed this thought immediately. The fact that Mary Sherman had obviously helped her husband to make this dangerous and mysterious journey must mean that they were both involved in a very serious, personal matter which had forced Sherman to sneak out of the country and come to Paris.

Dorey wiped his damp hands on his handkerchief. If the Press got hold of this story! Henry Sherman of all people, in a disguise and travelling on a false passport!

Dorey had reason to be alarmed for Henry Sherman was running for the Presidency of the United States and so far he was well ahead of the small field. Apart from being the very possible future President, Sherman was one of the richest and most powerful men in America. He was the President of the American Steel Corporation, Chairman of the United American & European Airways, and he held innumerable directorships on various important boards. His influence was considerable and he was on first-name terms with all the important members of the present Government. He had always led an immaculate private life, and his wife, it had been generally agreed, would make the ideal First Lady.

Dorey had known Sherman for some forty-five years. As freshmen, they had shared a room together at Yale University. Thinking back, Dorey realised what a dynamo Sherman had been even at the beginning of his spectacular career and how much Sherman had inspired him to work to gain his own position in the world when there had been times when he could have lagged behind. Dorey was very much aware that it was due to Sherman's influence that he was still at his desk instead of eating his heart out in retirement. He had heard that Sherman had said: 'Retire Dorey? Why? Because he is sixty-five? Ridiculous! He has years of experience behind him. He has tremendous drive still and he is utterly

ruthless... we can't afford to be without him... so keep him!" Dorey remembered this. Although he had to admit that often Sherman was too tough, too anti-Russia, too anti-China and made enemies easily, Dorey felt an unshakeable loyalty towards this man who had done so much for him. If there was anything he could do for Sherman, he wanted to do it. But what should he do in this situation? Sherman was no fool. He must know he was risking his chances of becoming President by coming to Paris as he had done. What a scandal would blow up if this reckless move were to be discovered! The Press of the world would make headlines of it!

Dorey thought for some minutes, then he made his decision. The best thing he could do for Sherman was to do nothing. He knew Sherman was very capable of looking after himself. O'Halloran had been warned to do nothing. Hammer was a good agent and he wouldn't talk. Dorey decided to let Sherman remain anonymous, to do what he had come to do, then return to his supposed sick bed. If no one interfered, Sherman would do exactly this, but suppose someone did? Dorey looked out at the sunshine and at the green trees. The view no longer held any charms for him. Suppose the French police picked Sherman up and charged him with travelling on a false passport? Suppose some crackpot who hated him - as many crackpots hated him — recognised him and assassinated him? Suppose ...

Dorey flinched. Anything could happen to a man of Sherman's stature. But what was he to do?

As if in answer to this question, the telephone bell buzzed.

'What is it?' Dorey snapped, anxious not to be disturbed from his line of thinking.

I have a caller on the line, sir,' Mavis Paul said. 'He won't give his name. He says you and he were at Yale together.'

Dorey drew in a long breath of relief.

'Put him through at once.'

There was a brief pause, then a man's voice said, 'Is that you, John?'

'Yes. Don't identify yourself. I know who you are. I am entirely at your service. Is there anything I can do?'

I want to see you ... it's urgent.'

Dorey cast a quick eye at his engagement diary. He had two appointments set up within the next two hours, but neither of them was important.

'Where are you?'

'Hotel Pare, Rue Meslay.'

'I'll be with you in twenty minutes. Please remain in your room. I take it I ask for Mr Jack Cain?' Dorey couldn't resist this and it pleased him to hear a startled catch of breath at the other end of the line.

'Yes, but...'

'I'm on my way.' Dorey hung up, snatched his coat and hat from the rack and walked quickly into the outer office.

Mavis Paul, dark, beautifully built and very assured, paused in her typing. She had been with Dorey now for a little over a year, and both of them had come to respect each other. Mavis was conscientious, serious, in spite of her glamour, ambitious and a ferocious worker: all qualities that Dorey admired, but at this moment, he was not in an admiring mood. His cold, set expression startled Mavis.

'I may not be back before three,' he said, scarcely pausing. 'Cancel my appointments. Say I am not well,' and he was gone.

Mavis was too experienced not to put two and two together. O'Halloran had telephoned: a stranger had telephoned, and now her boss had shot off like a rocket. These brief events added up to trouble, but Mavis was used to trouble. She shrugged her pretty shoulders and reached for her address book to cancel the appointments.

Dorey drove his Jaguar to Hotel Pare, a small, dingy hotel near Place de la Republique. As was to be expected in this arrondissement — as in

all arrondissements of Paris - he found no parking space. He finally left the Jaguar on a pedestrian crossing within a minute's walk from the hotel, certain a contravention would be waiting under his windscreen wiper on his return.

Reaching the hotel, he paused to regard the entrance, thinking at least Sherman had been discreet. No one in their right minds would imagine the future President of the United States would stay at such a place.

He pushed open the glass door, smeared with finger prints, and entered the tiny lobby that smelt of garlic and faulty drains. A bald-headed, fat man sat behind the reception desk, aimlessly turning the pages of *Le Figaro*. Behind him was a rack of keys and by his side, a small, antiquated telephone switchboard.

'Monsieur Jack Cain?' Dorey said, coming to rest in front of the desk.

The bald-headed man blinked sleepily. 'Who, monsieur?' Dorey repeated the name.

Reluctantly, the bald-headed man took a tattered register from a drawer and examined it. Then he nodded his head as he said, 'Room 66, monsieur. Third floor.' He then returned to his aimless reading.

As he climbed the three flights of stairs, covered by green, threadbare carpet, the smells seemed to grow stronger and Dorey wrinkled his nose. He reached the third-floor landing, walked along a dimly-lit corridor until he found Room 66. He paused, aware that his heart was beating a little too fast. He wasn't sure if it was because of the climb or because he was about to face the future President of the United States.

He rapped gently on the door. After a brief pause, the door opened.

'Come in, John.'

Dorey moved into a small, shabbily furnished bedroom and Henry Sherman closed and locked the door. The two men regarded each other.

Sherman was an imposing, massive figure of a man in his late fifties. Some six feet three inches tall, he had broad shoulders, a fleshy, deeply tanned face, piercing, steel-blue eyes and a thin hard mouth. He was not only handsome, but he exuded that authoritative air and personality that put him in the top echelon of V.I.Ps.

Dorey hadn't seen him now for some five years. He could see the change in him. Something pretty bad must have happened, Dorey decided, for Sherman to look so haggard and to have these black smudges of worry under his steel-blue eyes. 'It's good to see you again, John,' Sherman said. 'Thank you for coming so quickly.' He paused, looking at Dorey, then went on, 'How did you get onto Jack Cain?' Dorey slid out of his coat. As Sherman sat on the bed, Dorey took the only upright chair. 'You were spotted leaving Orly, sir,' he said quietly. 'Your embarkation card was checked. O'Halloran called me. I told him to lay off.' Sherman passed his hand over his face. His massive shoulders sagged a little. 'But how could I have been spotted?' he asked without looking up. 'Alec Hammer covers Orly. You remember him? He recognized your walk.' Sherman looked up. His tired face split into a rueful grin. 'You have good men working for you, John.' 'Yes. When do you plan to leave here, sir?' 'I'm booked out on the next flight in three hours' time. Can you guess why I am here?' Dorey shook his head. 'No, sir. Something pretty urgent, of course. You're taking one hell of a risk... but I don't have to tell you that.' Again Sherman smiled wearily. 'I know it, but Mary and Cain co-operated. Otherwise, I would never have got here.' He leaned forward, his massive hands on his knees and stared directly at Dorey. 'I am here because you are the only man I can rely on to keep me in the Presidential race... and I mean that.' Dorey shifted uneasily, but his deadpan expression didn't change. 'It will be my pleasure, sir, to do the best I can. What am I to do?' Sherman continued to stare at him. 'You mean that?' 'Yes... I mean it' I knew I could rely on you, John. Goddamn it! You and I are old friends. When this mess blew up, I told Mary you were the only one I could trust to help. Mary fixed it. Without her, I'd never have got here.' There was a pause, then Sherman went on, 'I haven't much time. I want you to see something, then we'll talk. Sit where you are.' He got to his feet, crossing the room to where his suitcase stood against the wall. From the suitcase he took an 8 mm film projector, neatly stowed away in its blue carrying case. Quickly, he assembled the machine, threaded on a spool of film, then set the projector on the shabby dressing-table. He plugged into the lamp socket, pulled the thick, dusty curtains, shutting out the late morning sunlight. Dorey watched all this uneasily. Neither man said anything until Sherman had switched on the projector, quickly focusing the picture on the grubby white wall in front of Dorey, then he said, 'I've seen this. I don't want to see it again.' He crossed the room, his body cutting off the picture on the wall for a brief moment, then he sat on the bed, his face in his hands, his eyes staring bleakly at the threadbare carpet by the bed. Dorey watched the film. It was one of those blue films so popular at American stag parties: obscene, crude, sexually brash and to Dorey utterly disgusting. The male participant had a black hood over his head, disguising his features. The girl was around twenty-two years of age, dark, sun-tanned and sensually and sensationally built. The film lasted some five minutes and Dorey was relieved when the spool ran out. He had often heard of these blue films, but he had never seen one before. He was shocked to see living proof on this film that a man and a woman could behave in a way no animal would behave. He felt a sense of outrage. What was Sherman thinking of, showing him this filth? As the end of the film began to flick around in its spool, Sherman got up, switched off the projector, then walked across the room and drew back the curtains. He turned and looked at Dorey who had taken off his spectacles and was looking anywhere but at Sherman. Sherman said quietly, his voice unsteady, 'The girl in that film, John, is my daughter.'

* * *

As Captain O'Halloran was pleased that his agent, Alec Hammer, had been alert enough to identify Henry Sherman so too was Serge Kovski, head of the Paris division of Soviet Security, pleased that his agent, Boris Drina, had also identified Sherman. Drina, a fat, suety-faced, nondescript-looking man in his late forties, spent much of his time hanging around Orly airport. Kovski had placed him there because he knew Drina lacked courage and brains and was idle. The only reason why Drina was retained as an agent was because he possessed an extraordinary photographic memory. Once he had had a glimpse of someone, he could identify him, even after a long period of time. Imprinted on his mind were this man's characteristics, his features and even the sound of his voice. Four years ago, Henry Sherman, with his wife, had arrived at Orly for a dinner with the President of France. Drina had seen this tall, massively-built man leave Orly, and the camera in Drina's mind had photographed this man's movements, his swinging walk, the quick jerk of his head and the sound of his voice. All this remained an undeveloped negative in Drina's mind until he spotted Sherman, now wearing a moustache and dark glasses move from behind the Douane barrier and make his way quickly to the taxi rank. Drina knew immediately that this man was the likely President of the United States. Unlike Alec Hammer who couldn't believe the evidence of his eyes and hesitated, Drina relied on his photographic memory and immediately moved into

action. He followed Sherman, and as Sherman was taking the only taxi on the rank, Drina was close enough to hear him say, 'Hotel Pare, Rue Meslay.'

Drina had managed to get this close by pretending to take the taxi while Sherman was speaking to the driver.

Seeing him about to get into the taxi, Sherman said curtly, 'This is mine, monsieur.'

Drina lifted his shabby hat that looked like a drowned cat and backed away.

'Excuse me.'

As soon as the taxi had driven off, Drina walked quickly to the nearest telephone kiosk. Any exertion made him breathless as he lived on a diet of vodka, onion soup and too much bread. Before putting through the call to Kovski, he paused to get back his breath.

His report electrified Kovski. Knowing Drina's reliable, photographic memory, Kovski didn't waste time querying if Drina just might be mistaken.

The two men spoke in Russian.

Kovski said, 'Go to the Hotel Pare immediately. I will send Labrey there. Every move Sherman makes must be reported to me. I will see Labrey has a radio car. Go at once. You have done well.'

Drina had his own car parked at Orly. Even while Alec Hammer was still talking to O'Halloran, Drina half-ran, half-walked to his car, then scrambling breathlessly into the car, he started the engine.

You have done well was music to his ears. He couldn't remember when last Kovski had given him any praise. His heart beating fast, his breath wheezing through his fat covered lungs, Drina sent his Renault shooting along the autoroute towards Paris.

* * *

The girl in this film is my daughter.

For a moment Dorey again wondered if his hearing was failing, but one look at Sherman's haggard face and the cold misery in his eyes told him he had heard aright.

Dorey's mind worked swiftly. Vaguely now, he remembered hearing that Sherman had a daughter. The last time he had heard anything of her was that she was being educated at an expensive school in Switzerland. When was that? Possibly six or seven years ago. Since then he had heard nothing of her. Whenever Sherman and his wife went on vacation, attended premieres or important dinners, the daughter was conspicuous by her absence. Dorey recalled the girl in the film. Now he knew who she was, he realised she took after her mother. She had Mary's beauty, Mary's slimness, long legs and beautiful hands.

'I'm sorry, sir,' was all he could say.

'Yes.' Sherman sat on the bed. 'You'd better hear the whole, sordid story, John.' He paused, rubbing his hands across his face. 'Gillian and I have never hit it off.' He looked directly at Dorey.

'I guess it was half my fault... half hers. Maybe more my fault than hers because I didn't want children. Anyway, from the very beginning when she was a baby, we resented each other and she was a complete little hellion. She deliberately set out to be difficult, making blackmailing scenes, yelling and screaming if she didn't get her own way. When she reached her teens she became insufferable... anyway to me. How the hell can a man work when there is pop music, long-haired creeps, shouting and yelling, Gillian kicking up trouble every hour of the day? I just couldn't stand it any longer. Why the hell should I? It was my house and Gillian turned it into a goddamn zoo. So I packed her off to Switzerland. The school was top class and they promised to discipline her. She remained in Switzerland, not coming home at all, for four years. God! It was a relief to get her out of my hair... you have no idea the peace I had once she had gone! Well, she stayed at the school until she was nineteen. By then Mary and I were used to living without her.'

Sherman looked down at his massive hands, frowning. 'Both of us were constantly busy. When we found time to take a vacation we went with a group of people who were helping me build my political career...there was no place for a teenage daughter. Anyway, Gillian would have been bored

stiff with the people I moved around with, so we arranged for her to stay in Europe. We wrote regularly, of course. She didn't seem to be interested in anything so I suggested she should study architecture. She agreed. I found a woman professor to go around with her, teach her, take her to France, Germany and Italy and generally keep an eye on her. Then eighteen months ago, I heard from her professor that she had packed her things and had gone off into the blue.'

Sherman paused. I thought maybe this was the best thing that could happen. I was busy . . . Mary, of course, was worried, but frankly, John, Mary was also busy . . . she wants to become the First Lady as much as I want to become the President.'

Dorey was only half-listening to this. He couldn't get out of his mind the pictures of the naked girl he had watched with so much disgust. Sherman's daughter! He felt a chill run up his spine. If this film got into the wrong hands, not only would Sherman be politically finished, but his social life would also be ruined.

Sherman was saying, 'Of course I accept some of the blame. We've behaved selfishly, but Gillian just doesn't fit in with our way of life nor we with hers. I thought it best to let her make her own life. I was ready to give her money, but she never asked for it.' He paused to stare at Dorey who sat motionless, his legs crossed, his hands in his lap. 'We tried to bury her, and this is the result.'

'Yes,' Dorey said, feeling he was expected to say something. 'I understand.'

Sherman forced a rueful smile.

'That's because you are loyal to me, John. Most people would say I deserve what I'm getting. We have been neglectful parents and now we are reaping the whirlwind . . . and my God! . . . what a hell of a whirlwind!' He took from his wallet a piece of paper and handed it to Dorey. 'Take a look at this.'

Dorey unfolded the paper. The typewritten note ran:

To the Sucker who imagines he is going to be the President.
We send you a souvenir from Paris. We have three other similar
souvenirs even better (or worse) than this one. If you continue to
run for election, these souvenirs will be sent to your Opposition
Party who will know what to do with them.

Dorey studied the uneven typing. He held the letter up to the light, studying the faint watermark. 'You have the envelope, sir?'

'The film and the letter came in the Diplomatic bag,' Sherman said. He opened a brief-case, lying on the bed and took out a stout manilla envelope. He handed it to Dorey. The envelope was addressed to:

Mr. Henry Sherman, 134, Whiteside Crescent. Washington. c/o American Embassy. Paris. Please forward. Personal & Urgent.

There was a pause, then Sherman said, 'Well, John? You see why I am here. Someone in Paris - and this is your territory - is blackmailing me to give up running for the Presidency. Mary and I have talked it over. She wanted me to give up, but then I thought of you. Jack Cain has always served me well. I went to see him in hospital, told him I had to come to Paris and asked him to lend me his passport. He gave it to me without hesitation even though he knew if this leaked, he'd lose his job. So, here I am. If you can't come up with a solution, I'll have to withdraw from the election. I don't have to tell you that being the President means more to me than anything that has happened in my life so far. Can you come up with a solution?'

Dorey's agile mind was already busy with the problem. Seeing his expression of concentration, Sherman sat back and lit a cigar with an unsteady hand. He had to wait several minutes before Dorey said, 'I could find this blackmailer in a few days and I could put him out of business. I have the men and the organisation to do it. That's why I'm in office. But this isn't the solution, I'm afraid.' He looked directly at Sherman. 'You and I are friends. We have things in common. You have done a lot for me, and I would more than welcome the opportunity to do something for you. But you have enemies. Some of my men wouldn't want you as President. They don't agree with your views ... that's their privilege. It would be impossible for me to use my network on this problem without one or maybe more of my agents deliberately leaking the news that your daughter is in a blue film. I'm putting this bluntly because we haven't much time. As I see it, I can't, use my organisation to help you. You know how my system works. Every assignment I work on has its own file; a copy always goes to Washington. To open a file on this problem is unthinkable. I'm sorry, sir, but that is the position.' Sherman rubbed his hand over his face, then lifted his massive shoulders in a resigned shrug.

'Mary said more or less the same thing. I know you are right, John. I had a faint hope that you might be able to help, but I didn't pin much on that hope.' Again he shrugged. 'So, okay, I'm caught. At least it was a try.'

'I didn't say I can't help you, sir. I said my organisation can't help you,' Dorey said quietly.

Sherman looked sharply at him.

'You can help me?'

'I think so. It will cost money.'

Sherman made an impatient movement.

'What's money to me? I don't give a damn what it costs. How can you help me?'

'I could offer this assignment to Girland, if anyone can swing it, he can.'

'Girland? Who is he?'

Dorey smiled wryly.

'You may well ask. Girland was once one of my top agents, but I had to get rid of him. He was too much the rebel. He always put himself first. He has no social conscience and he moves so close to dishonesty I marvel he isn't in jail. He has swindled me out of considerable sums of money. He is tough, ruthless, an expert Karate fighter and a first-class shot. He is dangerous, calculating, shrewd and tricky. He has a lot of courage and I am not saying this lightly. He has lived for years in Paris. He knows Paris the way I know the back of my hand. He mixes with every kind of crook, con-man, swindler, tart and queer. He has shady contacts everywhere. Those who live in the shadows trust him. He has two obsessions: money and women. If there is anyone who can solve your problem, it is Girland.'

Sherman looked uneasily at Dorey.

'Are you sure, John? A character like that could also attempt to blackmail me once he knew the set-up. Surely you're not serious?'

'Girland would never blackmail anyone. In his odd way, he has his standard of ethics. I know Girland. He is a rebel and he is tricky, but if he accepts an assignment, I have never known him not to deliver the goods. He is your only hope, sir. I wouldn't say this unless I was sure.'

Sherman hesitated, then raised his hands helplessly.

I have no alternative then, have I? If you really believe we should hire this man and he can fix it, then let's hire him.

Will he take the assignment?'

Dorey smiled sourly.

'Give Girland a whiff of money and there is no job he won't do. It'll probably cost you twenty thousand dollars. I'll try to get him for less of course. With that kind of money hanging in front of his nose, Girland would undertake to kidnap Charles de Gaulle.'

Drina found Paul Labrey lounging at a table outside a cafe that faced Hotel Pare. He sat down heavily beside Labrey, took off his hat and wiped his balding, sweating forehead.

'Anything happened?' he asked.

'Your man arrived fifteen minutes ago,' Labrey said, not looking at Drina. 'He's in there now.'

'Nothing else?'

'No.'

Drina continued to mop his face. He scowled at Labrey whom he disliked, knowing Labrey regarded him with contempt and looked on him as a joke.

Paul Labrey was twenty-five years of age. His French mother, now dead, had been a waitress in a lowly bistro. His father, whom he had never known, had been a passing American soldier.

Labrey was tall, painfully thin with thick flaxen hair that reached to his shoulders. His skin was milky-white, his mouth wide and hard and his hazel eyes shifty. Green tinted sunglasses were never off his face. Some of his friends thought he even slept in them. He wore a black turtle neck sweater and black hipsters that seemed to be painted on him. He was known to be dangerous and vicious in a fight. He was also known to be cunning, quick witted and a Communist. One of Kovski's agents had come across him in a cellar club, addressing a group of hippies, explaining to them the theory of Communism. The agent was so impressed by what he heard that he alerted Kovski. Labrey had been interviewed and accepted as an agent, and was now drawing enough money from the Russian Security police to live the life he wanted to live, but he, in turn, gave service.

Kovski often found Labrey useful since American tourists were only too happy when Labrey introduced himself and offered to show them the more seamy side of Paris night life. The Americans talked to him and he listened and reported back. Kovski often marvelled at the amount of loose talk that went on among V.I.P. American tourists when they came to Paris and had too much to drink and were enjoying themselves. Labrey had a good memory. Much of what he reported

was of no interest, but every now and then something would crop up of importance and this was relayed to Moscow.

Kovski considered Labrey an excellent investment at eight hundred francs a month.

The barman from the cafe came out into the sunshine and stood over Drina.

'Monsieur?'

Drina would have liked to have had a vodka, but he was afraid that Labrey would report back that he was drinking spirits while on duty. Sullenly, he ordered a coffee.

As the barman returned to the cafe, Labrey said, 'Why don't you buy yourself a new hat? That thing looks like a drowned dog.'

Drina was sensitive about his hat. He couldn't afford to buy a new one, but even if he had had the money, he would not have parted with this hat. It was his one link with his happier days when he lived in Moscow.

'Why don't you have a haircut?' he snarled. 'You look like a lesbian!'

Labrey hooted with laughter.

'You improve with age,' he said when he stopped laughing 'That's not bad! Maybe you aren't such a dummy as you look.'

'Shut up!' Drina said furiously. 'Back in Moscow, I would have...'

But Labrey wasn't listening. He was still chuckling.

'Lesbian! I love that! I must tell Vi.'

Drina suddenly sat upright as he saw John Dorey walk quickly along the street, pause for a long moment to survey the dingy Hotel Pare, then enter.

Labrey looked questioningly at Drina, seeing his face stiffen.

'Don't go theatrical on me, comrade... someone you know?'

'Shut up!' Drina snapped. He went into the cafe and shut himself into a telephone kiosk. He called Kovski.

'What is it?' Kovski demanded.

'John Dorey has arrived at Hotel Pare,' Drina said in Russian.

'Dorey?'

'Yes.'

There was a pause, then Kovski asked, 'Is Labrey with you?' 'Yes.'

Kovski thought for a long moment. So Dorey was having a secret meeting with Sherman. This could be of vital importance. He mustn't make a mistake.

I will send you two more men to you immediately. Sherman niul Dorey must not be lost sight of. . . you understand?'

'Yes.'

Drina returned to the outside table and sat down. He removed his hat and mopped his forehead.

'The man who went into the hotel is John Dorey, Director of the CIA,' he told Labrey. 'Comrade Kovski is sending two more men to help us. Sherman and Dorey must not be lost sight of... it is an order.'

Labrey nodded. His flaxen hair danced on his collar.

* * *

Serge Kovski was a short fat man with a chin beard, an enormous bald dome of a head, ferrety eyes and a thick, blunt nose. He was shabbily dressed in a baggy black suit and there were food stains on his coat lapels for he was a gross eater.

While he was reading through a mass of papers that had come in the Diplomatic bag, his telephone bell rang.

It was Drina again.

'Sherman has left in a taxi for Orly,' Drina reported. 'Labrey and Alex are following him. I think Sherman is taking the 15.00hr. flight to New York. Labrey will call you as soon as they arrive at the airport. Max and I followed Dorey. He left Hotel Pare before Sherman did. He was carrying an 8 mm Kodak movie projector. He must have had this from Sherman as he didn't have it when he arrived. He drove in his car to Rue des Suisses. Leaving his car, he entered an apartment block and walked to the top floor.' Drina was deliberately holding back on the final denouement. 'The top floor of this building, comrade, is occupied by Mark Girland ... the man we have had trouble with before.'

Kovski's ferrety eyes narrowed as he listened.

'Very well,' he said, after a pause. 'Max is to follow Dorey when he leaves. You will follow Girland. Be very careful of Girland. He is tricky. Don't let him see you.'

'I understand,' Drina said and hung up.

Kovski stared down at his desk while he thought, then with a sneering little smile, he pressed a bell button.

A fat, shapeless, elderly woman came in, a notebook and pencil in her hand.

'Send Malik to me,' Kovski said curtly, not looking at her. Now that he had lived in Paris for some eight years, he had become used to seeing the young, slim girls moving on the streets and he secretly lusted for them. Elderly, fat women no longer appealed to him.

The woman went away. A few minutes later the door opened and Malik came in.

Before he had disgraced himself and had fallen from favour, Malik was considered to be the most dangerous and the most efficient of all the Soviet agents.

He was a giant of a man; a splendid looking athlete with silver blond hair cut short. His square-shaped face, with its high cheekbones, its powerful, aggressive jaw, its short, blunt nose revealed his Slav extraction. His flat, green eyes were windows revealing a cold and ferocious ruthlessness that made most people flinch from him.

He and Kovski were bitter enemies. Until the moment when Malik had fallen into disgrace, he had always treated Kovski with cold contempt. Although Kovski was his senior in rank, Malik never accepted this fact, and Kovski was too cowardly to attempt to exert his authority over this menacing giant. But now, once the news broke that Malik was no longer considered the best agent and had been removed from the active field and given a desk job, Kovski decided at last he could take revenge on this man who had treated him so contemptuously. He had written to his own superior, suggesting that Malik should be transferred to Paris, pointing out that he could use him usefully as he was behind in his paper work and Malik could make a trusted clerk. Kovski's boss also hated Malik and he appreciated Kovski's sense of humour. So Malik was sent to Paris and loaded down with routine and dull paper work. There was nothing he could do about it except continue to hate Kovski and bide his time.

The two men looked at each other.

I didn't hear you knock,' Kovski growled.

Malik inclined his head:

'Because I didn't.' He looked around, drew up an upright chair and sat astride it, staring at Kovski with his bleak, snake's eyes.

For a brief moment, Kovski wanted to tell Malik to stand while he was talking to him, but he hadn't the nerve. There was that deadly menace lurking in the green eyes that warned Kovski that Malik could be pushed so far, and no further. He knew Malik had only to reach out and grip his neck in his huge killer's hands for him to die quickly and unpleasantly.

'You have a chance to get back into favour,' Kovski said with his sneering smile. 'Listen carefully.' He told Malik what he had learned

about Sherman's arrival, how Dorey had seen Sherman and had left with a movie projector.

'And this should interest you: Dorey is now talking to Girland... the man who has always defeated you in the field...

who is responsible for your present disgrace. I must know what is happening. You are to take over this assignment.

Labrey, Drina, Alex and Max are already working on this. You must find out why Dorey has this movie projector: why Sherman has been here: why Girland is being consulted. I want immediate action. Do you hear me?'

Malik stood up.

'Deafness is not among my many failings,' he said, and without looking at Kovski, he left the room.

Two

A little after 10.00 hrs. on this bright May morning, Girland came awake. He came awake by slow degrees, groaning a little, stretching and yawning, then remembering he had work to do, he heaved himself reluctantly from under the sheet and walked with eyes half shut into the shower-room. Still only half-awake, he ran his electric shaver over his face, moaning softly to himself and feeling like a resurrected corpse.

He had had an exhausting evening and the girl who had been him had been young and wildly enthusiastic. He had been

glad to see her go, and thankful she hadn't insisted on spending the rest of the night with him. It wasn't until he had stood under the blast of cold water from the shower for some minutes that he finally came alive, then he discovered he felt fine. He threw on a sweat shirt and a pair of blue hipsters and as he did so, he found he was hungry. He hurried into the kitchenette and peered hopefully into the refrigerator. A few minutes later two eggs were cooking in a pan of butter and two thick slices of ham were sizzling under the grill. The coffee percolator was performing and Girland now felt much more with the world. After breakfast, he cleared the table, dumping the used crockery into the sink. Then lighting a cigarette, he placed a mirror from his dressing-table on the table. He found a pack of playing cards, then sitting down in front of the mirror, he began to shuffle the cards. This evening he had been invited to a poker game. He knew that two of the players were professional card sharpers: the other six were pigeons to be fleeced, and Girland had no intention of being fleeced himself. He hadn't played serious poker for some time and suspected that his technique might have become rusty. Watching his hands in the mirror, flicking the cards through with lightning speed, he saw that the manoeuvre of bringing all the aces to the top of the deck would be obvious to a trained eye. He continued to practise for the next hour until he was satisfied that all his rust had been removed. He then began another manoeuvre which was much more difficult: that of dealing himself Ace, King, Queen after eight hands had already been dealt. He was still working on this, the ashtray now over loaded with cigarette butts when the telephone bell rang. He put down the cards, hesitated, then shrugging, he crossed the room and picked up the receiver. 'Is that you, Girland?' a voice asked: a voice that sounded oddly familiar. 'If it isn't, some creep is wearing my clothes,' Girland returned. 'Who is this?' 'I shall be with you in ten minutes ... wait for me,' and the line went dead. Girland replaced the receiver, rubbed the end of his nose and frowned. 'Unless I am very much mistaken,' he said aloud, 'that sounded very much like that old goat, Dorey.' He looked around the big studio room. It had undergone certain changes for the better since he had lifted several thousand dollars off Dorey. Gone were the canvas deck-chairs that had once served him as armchairs. Now the room sported a deep reclining padded-chair and a big settee which his girl-friends appreciated very much. There was also a splendid Bukhara rag on the floor: its rich colouring did much to give a tone of luxury to this otherwise dark-looking room. Humming under his breath, Girland put the mirror back on the dressing-table, emptied his cigarette butts into the trash basket, made his bed and then washed up. Some fifteen minutes later, he heard footsteps coming up the stairs, then the doorbell rang. He opened the door. Breathing heavily from the long climb, Dorey surveyed Girland, seeing a slimly-built man, thin-faced with black hair, a few scattered white hairs either side of his temples, dark alert eyes that often had a jeering light in them, a thin hard mouth and a pronounced almost Wellingtonian nose. Girland looked at the movie projector Dorey was carrying, then with his jeering smile, he shook his head. 'Not today, thank you ... I never buy anything at the door.' 'Don't be impertinent,' Dorey said, trying to regain his breath. 'I want to talk to you.' With a resigned shrug, Girland stood aside. 'Well, come in. This is a surprise. I thought you had retired long ago and were back in the States with your feet up.' Dorey ignored this. He looked around the room, then eyed the big lush-looking rug, his eyebrows lifting. 'Hmm... that's a nice rug you have there... a Bukhara, isn't it?' 'Yes... thank you very much.' Dorey looked sharply at Girland who was grinning. 'I suppose that means you bought it with the money you stole from me.' Girland laughed. 'Sit down. Take the weight off your feet. It's a long climb for an elderly gentleman... it even makes me tired sometimes.' Dorey took off his overcoat, dropped it on a chair, then sat down in the big armchair. He surveyed Girland with disapproval. 'I have a job for you.' Girland grimaced, then held out his hands as if to push Dorey away. 'No, thank you. If it is anything like the last job you landed in my lap, I'm not interested. I've finally made up my mind, Dorey, I have had enough of your funny little jobs. I'm getting along very well without you and I intend to continue to get along without you. Working for you is nothing but a pain in the neck.' 'This is an unofficial job,' Dorey said, crossing one bird-like leg over the other. He suddenly became aware how comfortable the big armchair was. 'This is a nice chair you have.' 'Glad you like it,' Girland said and smiled. 'Thank you very much.' Dorey's face suddenly relaxed and he gave his dry, wintry smile. 'You are an amusing rogue, Girland. There are times when I actually find myself liking you. How would you like to pick up ten thousand dollars?' 'Have you been drinking?' Girland lifted his eyebrows. He sat on the settee, then stretched out lengthwise, and eyed Dorey with a

shade more interest. 'Ten thousand? Not from you ... that would be too much to believe.'

'Ten thousand and expenses,' Dorey said, sensing that Girland, like a hungry trout, was now beginning to nibble at his bait.

'Could be you just might end up with fifteen or even twenty thousand dollars. Does it interest you?'

Girland laced his fingers at the back of his head. He stared up at the ceiling for some moments, then said, 'You know something, Dorey? You are not very subtle. You are sure I am for sale. Well, I am not. Every so often you and I get into this kind of huddle and you wave a bait under my nose and I fall for it. So what happens? I pull your chestnuts out of the fire and always land in grief myself. No... I'll get by without your ten thousand dollars. I'm not interested.'

Dorey smiled.

'What's the matter with you, Girland?' he asked. 'I thought you still had some guts.'

'This kind of talk I love! So now, apart from all this money you're offering, I also have to have guts.'

'Let's stop this fooling!' Dorey said, his voice sharpening. 'Time is running out. Do you want this job which will pay a guaranteed fifteen thousand dollars or don't you?'

Girland studied Dorey thoughtfully.

'Guaranteed?'

'That's what I said.'

'How is this fifteen thousand to be paid?' 'Five thousand tomorrow and ten thousand when the job is done.'

Girland shook his head.

'No, Dorey, I don't go along with that, but I might if you paid ten thousand tomorrow and ten thousand when the job is done. Yes ... I just might be tempted on those terms.'

Dorey snorted and got to his feet. ,

'You've heard my terms. I can get anyone to do this job, Girland. Don't imagine you are the only man...'

'Save it,' Girland said and closed his eyes. 'Nice to see you looking so well considering your age. Thanks for coming.

Good-bye.' Dorey hesitated, then sat down again.

'One of these days, Girland, I'm going to fix you and fix you good. It's time you spent a few years in jail...'

'Are you still here?' Girland opened his eyes. 'The trouble with you, Dorey, is you take life too seriously. It's fatal. Okay, stop

looking like an outraged crocodile . . . have we a deal or haven't we?'

Dorey choked back his wrath. This was too important to waste further time haggling. Sherman had all the money in the world. He would be furious if he got to know that Dorey was quibbling about money, but it stuck in Dorey's throat to give this insolent layabout such a sum.

'Yes ... we have a deal,' he said finally.

Girland eyed him.

'Ten thousand tomorrow morning, and ten thousand when I have fixed this job?'

Dorey drew in an exasperated breath.

'Yes.'

Girland swung his legs off the settee and sat up. His face was alert now and his eyes bright.

'Come on... tell me. Just what is this job?'

Dorey picked up the movie projector...

'Do you understand how to work this? I don't. I want you to see a film.'

'Oh, sure.' Girland got to his feet, set up the projector, wound on the film and then pulled the long, gold-coloured curtains over the big studio window.

'Nice, aren't they?' he said, fingering the material. 'Again, thanks.'

'Get on with it!' Dorey snapped. 'I can take just so much from you, Girland, but I warn you...'

'Dorey! That's temper!'

'Look at this film and stop behaving like a delinquent!'

Girland laughed. He switched on the projector, throwing the picture on his white wall. He flopped back on the settee and watched what went on on the film.

When he realised the kind of film he was looking at, he muttered, 'Dorey! You surprise me!' Then he said nothing further, but sat forward, his elbows resting on his knees, watching the girl and the hooded man in their shameless act. Finally the film ran off the spool. Girland got up, turned off the projector and pulled back the curtains.

He returned to the settee and lay on it.

'Go ahead and talk. I don't imagine you brought this thing along for me to see for fun. What's it all about?'

'There are three other films like this,' Dorey said. 'I must find them. I also, want to find the girl in the film. That's the job, Girland. Do you

think you can trace these films and find the girl? Try to be honest with me. The films were taken in Paris so I presume the girl is here too. How about it?'

Girland rubbed his hands on his knees as he studied Dorey.

'What's the rest of it?'

'That's as much as you need know,' Dorey snapped. 'You will be paid.'

'Oh, cut it out! If I handle this, I want the whole photo. Why are you mixed up in this?'

'That's not your business, Girland. I want you to trace these other three films and find the girl... that's what you're being paid for.'

Girland got up, took a cigarette from a pack on the table and lit it.

'How's our future President keeping these days, Dorey? Is he free from trouble and worries... is he happy?'

Dorey started as if he had been stung.

'What are you talking about?' he demanded. 'What has ... ?'

'Come off your ladder!' Girland said impatiently. He returned to the settee and sat down, facing Dorey, his eyes probing and hard. 'You forget I get around in this city. You forget I was once one of your dreary agents. You forget I meet and see lots of people you have never heard of. That girl on the film is Gillian Sherman, the daughter of the possible future President of the United States ... God help them! No wonder you've come here offering me all this money. Well, Dorey, for perhaps the first time in your life, you have done the right thing, coming to me. This job is right up my cul-de-sac. Now don't look like a turkey with colic. She's Sherman's daughter, isn't she?'

Dorey drew in a long, slow breath.

'Do you know her?'

'I've seen her... I don't know her. I ran into her at a pot party. She was stoned. Some little wasp whispered in my ear that she was Sherman's daughter. This would be three months ago... probably more.'

'Do you know where to find her?'

'That's not answering my question. She is Sherman's daughter, isn't she?'

'Yes.' Dorey hesitated, then plunged on, 'Sherman is being blackmailed. He's been warned to stop running for the Presidency or three more films will be mailed to the Opposition Party. They will not only wash him up as President, but they will utterly ruin him. He came to me for unofficial help. I come to you.'

Girland thought for a long moment, his face expressionless.

'It takes some time to dig the facts out of you, doesn't it?' he said finally. 'So for twenty thousand dollars, Sherman hopes to become President of the United States with me doing his dirty work.' 'Isn't it enough?' Dorey asked, looking anxious. 'Oh yes, but I'm wondering if I want to help him. I don't like him. I may be out of your racket now but I listen and hear things. I know he tried to get rid of his daughter. I don't dig for that. He is a creep who yearns for power and anyone who gets in his way, goes down the hole. I don't like his politics. I wouldn't vote for him. I wouldn't tell him the time if he asked me.'

Dorey said quietly, 'Would you put the projector in its case for me? I see I am wasting my time with you, Girland.'

As he got to his feet, Girland said, 'Don't be so touchy. You know I'll do the job. You know if the money is big enough, I'll do any job. You get off. Leave the film with me. I'll let you know something in a day or so.' Dorey regarded him. 'It's a deal then?'

'Oh, sure.' Girland sounded bored. 'I'm always a sucker for money.' He suddenly grinned. 'I want ten thousand dollars in traveller's cheques right here tomorrow morning. I'll trust you to pay the balance when the job is done.'

'I'll arrange it.' Dorey put on his overcoat. 'I don't have to remind you to be careful... if there is the slightest leak...'

'On your way.' Girland waved to the door. 'This is my pigeon now. You don't have to remind me about anything.'

* * *

Max Lintz was tall and bony. He had recently come from East Berlin to work for the Soviet Security in Paris. Nearing fifty years of age, balding with deep-set eyes and a thin, sour mouth, he was known to be an expert tracker of men and an expert pistol shot.

Drina liked him. They were of the same age and they got along well together. Whereas Paul Labrey, because of his youth and his manner, often made Drina boil with fury, Lintz had a soothing effect on him.

They were sitting at a cafe near Girland's apartment, waiting.

'Would you prefer to follow Dorey?' Lintz asked suddenly. 'I will take care of Girland... if you wish.'

Drina shifted, frowning. This remark implied that he wasn't capable of following Girland and he looked sharply at Lintz.

'We obey orders, comrade. I am to watch Girland. Comrade Kovski said so.'

Lintz shrugged.

'As you will, but be careful. Girland is a professional.'

Again Drina shifted in his chair.

'So am I.' He stared suspiciously at Lintz. 'Don't you think so?'

Although Lintz liked Drina, he secretly thought he was well past his prime. He thought Kovski had made a mistake using Drina to watch a man like Girland, but that was Kovski's business.

'Of course,' he said.

There was a long pause. Drina sipped his cooling coffee and stared at the entrance to Girland's apartment block.

'I hear Malik is in Paris,' Lintz said, 'and in disgrace.'

'Yes.' Drina's little eyes surveyed the cafe's terrace. There was no one within hearing distance. 'A wonderful man ... the best.'

'Yes. It can happen to any of us.'

'Girland tricked him.'

'So I heard. How long do you think Malik will remain out of the field?'

Drina hesitated. Again he assured himself no one was listening.

'Kovski hates him.'

'Of the two men,' Lintz said softly, 'I prefer Malik.'

This was too dangerous, Drina thought. He merely shrugged his fat shoulders. He loathed Kovski and was terrified of

him. Kovski, to his thinking, was the jackal to Malik's lion.

'Perhaps we had better not discuss this, Max,' he said uneasily. 'Nothing good ever comes of discussing personalities.' 'That's true.'

The two men remained sitting on the terrace in silence until they saw Dorey appear and walk towards his parked Jaguar. 'There's my man,' Lintz said. 'I leave you to pay the bill. Good luck . . . and be careful' He got to his feet and crossed to where he had left his shabby Renault 4, climbed to and drove after the Jaguar.

Drina watched him disappear, then putting three francs on the table, he lit a Gauloise and continued his wait. He was nervous. Lintz was right. Girland was a professional. He would have liked Lintz to have taken care of Girland, but his pride wouldn't allow it. Now, thinking that in a little while, he would have to follow this man wherever he went and remain out of sight brought him out into a cold sweat. Suppose he lost him? Suppose Girland spotted him? He licked his dry lips, trying to assure himself that for the past fifteen years he had followed suspects and had always been successful. He was so unnerved he could no longer sit at the table. He got up, waved to the waiter, indicating he had left payment and walked across the narrow street to where he had parked his Deux Chevaux. He got in and waited.

Ten minutes later, he saw Girland come from his apartment block and saunter down the street. Girland was wearing a short leather coat over his sweater and hipsters. He was smoking, his hand thrust into his coat pocket.

Drina started his car. He watched Girland cross the road and tuck himself into a shabby, beaten-up* Fiat 600. Drina followed the Fiat into the mass of traffic, struggling along Rue Raymond Losserand and finally into Avenue du Maine. Here, Girland turned left. Allowing two cars to be between Girland and himself, Drina kept after the Fiat. At Rue de Vaugirard, Girland turned right and drove a few metres down the traffic-packed road before edging his car into a courtyard.

Forced to continue on down the street by the traffic behind him, Drina had just time to see Girland get out of his car before he lost sight of him. Cursing, he drove on, turned off into a side street and was lucky to find a car pulling away from the kerb. He edged the Deux Chevaux into the space. Snapping off the engine and without waiting to lock the car door, he ran back to the courtyard.

The Fiat was still there, but Girland had disappeared. Drina looked around. There were several doorways leading into the courtyard building that stood in a half square. A brass plate on one of the doors caught his eye.

BENNYSLADE Photographic Studio

Remembering the movie projector, Drina decided that Girland was paying Benny Slade a visit. He now wished Lintz had taken this assignment. When Girland eventually came out of this building, he would drive away. Drina would have to run down the street, get in his car, and by the time he had got back to Rue de Vaugirard, he would have lost Girland. He hesitated for a long moment, then decided he had to have help.

He walked to the entrance of the courtyard, spotted a cafe further up the road and ran to it.

A few minutes later, he was once more talking to Kovski.

He had known Benny Slade for some years. Benny was an enormously fat, jovial homosexual with a brilliant flair for photography. He ran a very special and lucrative business supplying the luxury hotels where the Americans were to be found with coloured slides and 8 mm colour films of The Girls of Paris. There was nothing pornographic about his work: every shot was artistic, but somehow managed to be titillating. His slides and films had a very brisk sale. Most of the American tourists bought them to show their neighbours back home just what they were missing.

Benny was onto a good thing and he knew it. He kept clear of any smut. He was the Playboy of Paris, and he prospered.

The door was opened by a fair, beautiful looking youth clad in skin tight trousers and a white shirt worn outside the trousers. He gave Girland a coy little smile and lifted carefully plucked eyebrows as he asked, 'Yes, monsieur?'

'Is Benny hatching an egg?' Girland asked.

The eyebrows went up and then down.

'Mr Slade is shooting.'

'When isn't he? Okay, I'll wait.' Girland moved forward, driving the youth into a long corridor lit by rose-pink lamps held in golden hands fixed to the wall. Everything about Benny's studio was artistic. Girland thought it was terrible.

The youth shut the door.

'Who shall I say, monsieur?'

'Girland... he knows me.'

The youth led the way down the corridor and opened a door.

'Will you wait in here, please, monsieur?'

Girland walked into a glossily furnished room with chairs along the walls, a table in the centre littered with the latest magazines, several of Benny's masterpieces of nude girls enormously blown-up, hanging in gilt frames on the wall.

As the youth closed the door, Girland became aware of a girl sitting on a chair in the far corner of the room, a cigarette in her slim fingers, leafing through a copy of Elle.

She glanced up and looked Girland over as he was looking her over. Quite a doll, he thought.

The girl was possibly twenty-three or four years of age. She had long silky blonde hair that reached below her shoulders and concealed most of her face. Her eyes were large and the colour of first grade sapphires. Her mouth was made for kissing. Girland eyed her legs: long and slim, the way he liked them. She was wearing a white silk wrap that hung open revealing the swell of her breasts. She seemed to be wearing nothing under the wrap although Girland couldn't be sure about this. She pulled the wrap close to her when she saw Girland was staring.

He gave her his most charming smile.

'Like waiting at the dentist, isn't it? Are you modelling for Benny?'

'That's right.' He could see by the sudden interest in her eyes that he appealed to her. 'Are you?'

'Me?' Girland laughed and sat down two chairs away from her. 'Benny wouldn't want to shoot me. I'm just paying a social call. I'm Mark Girland.'

I'm Vi Martin.'

Again they regarded each other. This was a girl, Girland told himself, who could be exciting in bed.

'Do you do much work for Benny?' he asked. She grimaced.

'About once a month. The competition is fierce. Every little cow with good legs and tits comes rushing here. They'll even be shot for nothing.'

'That's tough. What else do you do beside work for Benny?'

'Oh, I model clothes.' She was vague enough for Girland to guess this wasn't strictly the truth. 'What do you do? I live off the fat of the land,' Girland said airily. I don't believe in work. It's against my principles.'

'It's against mine too, but I have to eat.'

'A doll with your looks shouldn't have to worry.'

She smiled.

I didn't say I worried. Do you mean you don't do any work?'

'Not if I can avoid it'

'And you live off the fat of the land?' She let the wrap slip a little and Girland had a glimpse of firm, well-rounded thighs before the wrap was whipped into place.

I get by. Perhaps one of these evenings we could get together over a dinner and I'll tell you about it... that is if you are interested.'

She regarded him, then nodded.

I could be. I've always wanted to live off the fat of the land and not do any work.'

'This sounds as if we have a lot in common. Do you know Chez Garin restaurant?'

Her sapphire coloured eyes opened wide.

'I've heard of it... isn't it terribly expensive?'

Girland shrugged.

'So-so. The food's good. Perhaps you would like to have dinner with me tonight at nine? We could meet there.'

She stared at him, then her face hardened.

I hate being kidded so you can skip the routine.'

'Listen, cherie, I don't kid beautiful dolls,' Girland said quietly. 'When I invite a doll like you to dinner, she stays invited.'

'A girl can get stood up,' Vi said bitterly. 'I'd look wet, wouldn't I, if I turned up at that restaurant, and you weren't there to take care of the check.'

'Okay... if you're that suspicious... I'll pick you up. Where do you live, unbeliever?'

She relaxed and laughed.

'I'll believe you. Nine o'clock then at Chez Garin.' She leaned back in her chair, her eyes sparkling. 'Do you have abstract paintings to show me after dinner?'

'Nothing like that,' Girland said, meeting her look. 'But I do have a beautiful Bukhara rug.'

'I've never been asked to do it on the floor before.'

'You haven't? It's the rage this season. You don't know what you're missing.'

The door burst open and what appeared to be an elephant stamped into the room. This was Benny Slade's normal entrance. In spite of his 280 lbs., he moved always with a quick rushing charge, surprisingly light on his small feet. Before Girland could avoid the rush, he was engulfed in enormous fat arms and hugged to breasts that felt like plastic balloons, beaten on the back with hands that felt like pads of dough, then pushed back while Benny beamed on him, his enormous, jovial fat face joyful and delighted.

'Mark, my duckie darling! I'm so pleased! Imagine coming here! Only last night, I was dreaming of you and now ... here you are!'

'Throttle back, Benny,' Girland said, escaping from the embrace. 'You're giving me a bad reputation. We have a lady present'

Benny giggled.

'So like you, pussy-cat.' He beamed at Vi. 'Hello, baby. This is my very good, nice boy-friend, Mark Girland. He's quite the loveliest man!He...'

'Benny! Wrap it up!' Girland said sharply. 'We've already met. We know each other. Don't be so goddamn exuberant.'

Benny's fat face fell. 'Have I said anything wrong?'

'Not yet... but you are showing signs. Miss Martin is waiting to be shot.'

Benny made a motion of dramatic despair. Not now, sweetie,' he said, turning to Vi. 'I'm sorry. . . I'm devastated, but I must talk to Mark. You see Alec. Tell him to arrange everything. You know... he'll give you you-know-what. Then come back the same time tomorrow, huh? I must talk to Mark.'

Vi's expression could have frozen an ice cube.

'You mean that little rat will pay me for just sitting here?' she demanded, getting to her feet T bet he won't'

'Now, lovie, don't talk that way.-You know Alec loves you as I love you.'

'Like a mongoose loves a snake.'

Benny spluttered into giggles.

'What a darling! Now, listen, lovie, I'll talk to Alec. You pop your clothes on and I'll see Alec pays you.' He wrapped a fat arm around Girland's shoulders and led him to the door.

Girland looked back at Vi who smiled at him.

'Operation Bukhara at nine o'clock,' he said.

She nodded as Benny half-led, half-dragged Girland out into the corridor.

'Mark! You're not planning to do anything naughty with that girl, are you?' Benny asked as he propelled Girland by sheer weight down the corridor.

'Why not?'

'She has a bad boy-friend.' Benny led Girland into his private office. 'He sticks knives into people.

'So do I.'

Girland paused to absorb the room which made him blink.

Benny had lavished a lot of care and money in making this room something very special. The big desk had a top of gleaming copper. The lounging chairs were covered in zebra skins. Ornate orchards, growing behind glass made up the walls. The lighting bathed this big movie set of a room in soft pink.

'Phew!' Girland exclaimed, looking around. 'You're doing yourself well, aren't you?'

'Do you like it?' Benny gave a laugh that sounded like a child with whooping cough. 'It took me weeks, darling . . . honestly. It nearly drove me out of my little mind. But do you really and honestly like it?'

I think it stinks,' Girland said, sinking into a zebra-covered chair.

'Do you... do you really? I am so glad. I think it does too, but how it throws my clients! They just pee in their pants when they come in here.'

'Look, Benny, I'm in a hurry. I want your help.'

Benny's face lost its foolish animation. His eyes became alert. He no longer looked soft and stupid.

'My help? Well, of course. Anything for you, sweetheart.'

Some months ago, Girland had fixed a blackmailer who was putting the bite on Benny. He had to get very tough with the boy, but he finally fixed him. Had he not succeeded, Benny would have been out of business: the bite had been a big one. From that moment, Benny was Girland's slave.

'I'll do anything for you, baby,' Benny went on. 'Ask and you will receive.'

I want you to look at a film. I'm hoping you will know who shot it, where it was shot and who the man is in the film.

This is blackmail again, and urgent.'

'Let me see it. Come into the studio.'

'This is Top Secret, Benny. I wouldn't show you this film if I wasn't sure you won't talk about it.'

'That's okay, sweetie. I once relied on you. You can rely on me.'

His fat face serious now, Benny led the way into the big studio with its screens, lights, photographic equipment and a king-sized bed mounted on a golden dais on which most of the girls were photographed.

The blond youth who had let Girland in was busy loading film into a camera.

'Run along, Alec, my pet,' Benny said. 'Give Vi some money. She's dressing.'

'But she hasn't done any work,' Alec said scowling.

'Never mind... we must never be mean... just give her something. She'll be back tomorrow.'

Alec shrugged and left the studio. Benny shot the bolt on the door.

'We're quite alone now,' he said. 'Let's see the film.' This was not strictly accurate for Vi Martin had come quietly into the studio to collect her handbag. Alec hadn't seen her, and hearing Benny and Girland coming down the passage, she had stepped behind one of the big screens. Girland intrigued her. She was curious to know what his business was with Benny.

Girland handed over the 8 mm film. Benny threaded it onto a projector. He cut the lights and threw the picture on a beaded screen.

The two men stood side by side watching the film. Vi took a chance and peered out from behind her screen. She had only a brief glimpse of what was going on in the film before she ducked back again.

When the film was finished and Benny had put on the lights, he said, 'Who's the girl? I know most of them who work in this racket, but she's new to me.'

'Never mind about her.' Girland sat on a nearby table and swung his legs. 'She doesn't interest me. Any idea who shot the film?'

Benny scratched his ear as he thought.

'There are six boys in Paris making these films.' He perched himself on a stool and regarded Girland. 'There's big money in this rackets but it's dicey. You never know when you're going to get the flics on your collar, but these boys are ready to take chances so long as they collect. Now take that film we've just seen. At a rough guess, it's . worth thirty thousand dollars. The way this racket works is these boys make the film, run off copies, smuggle them into England and America where they sell around a hundred dollars a spool... sometimes more. We have a big market here, of course. Each boy has his own particular camera technique. I would say Pierre Rosnold shot that film. I can't swear to it, but the lighting and the camera angles have Rosnold's touch.'

'Where do I find him?'

'He has a studio on Rue Garibaldi. His front cover is high-class studio portraits for movie stars and society people ... you know the drag, but his folding money comes from blue films.'

'Do you know him?'

Benny's fat face wrinkled in disgust.

I wouldn't be seen with him in the same toilet. I loathe the beast.'

'And the man in the film?'

'That's a problem with that hood. Rosnold has a permanent stallion for these movies: Jack Dodge ... he's an American. I've never met him, but I hear he always wears a hood on these films because he doesn't want to be recognised. He works at Sammy's Bar where simply hordes of ghastly American tourists go.' Benny shifted his enormous buttocks on the stool. 'The girl interests me. She's an amateur of course, but she has great technique. She could be making herself nice money... and I mean nice.'

'I'm not interested in her,' Girland said. 'There are three other films, Benny. I've got to find them. It looks as if I'll have to call on Rosnold and twist his arm a little.'

Benny's small eyes widened.

'Be careful, darling. He's atoughie.'

Girland slid off the table.

'So am I.' He grinned at Benny. 'Well, thanks. I'll go talk to Rosnold.'

Benny rewound the film and gave it to Girland.

'Anything else I can do, give me a call.'

They walked together to the door and Benny slid back the bolt.

As they moved out into the corridor, Vi Martin came from behind the screen. She ran silently across the studio to the dressing-room and began hurriedly to dress.

* * *

With sweat running down his face, Drina kept looking at his watch. Kovski had promised to rush a man down to where he was waiting, but up to now the man hadn't arrived.

What was he to do if the man didn't arrive and Girland appeared and drove off in his car? He would be held responsible for losing Girland! He knew Kovski was already displeased with his work. He could get into serious trouble.

He took off his shabby hat and wiped the sweat off his balding head. He moved from one foot to the other. His heart hammered and his mouth was dry.

Then he saw Girland come out of the building.

Drina was unprepared. He shouldn't have been standing in the entrance to the courtyard. He should have concealed himself in one of the many doorways leading into the big apartment block. It was too late now. He lost his head and turned quickly, walking into the street.

Had he not moved so quickly, Girland wouldn't have noticed him, but that panicky movement alerted Girland. He saw the short, fat man wearing a greasy fur hat dart into the street and Girland's eyes narrowed.

He had decided, as he had descended the stairs from Benny's studio, that as Rosnold's studio was close by, he would walk rather than chance finding parking space. So he sauntered out of the courtyard and almost cannoned into Drina who wasn't sure whether to dart to the right or left.

The two men looked at each other.

Girland too had a photographic memory. He placed Drina immediately: a washed-up, hack Soviet agent of the Security police. 'Pardon,' Girland said, moved around Drina and set off with his long strides towards Boulevard Pasteur.

Hardly believing his luck, Drina went after him. He had to half-run to keep up with Girland's swinging strides and sweat ran down his face as he bounced along, dodging people on the sidewalk, but keeping Girland in sight.

Girland was thinking: is this a coincidence? I don't think so. Have the Russians got onto Sherman?

He reached Boulevard Pasteur and stopped at a busy bistro. It was lunch time and he decided to have lunch. He entered the Bistro and took a vacant table at the far end of the big room.

Drina saw him enter the bistro and hesitated. He too was hungry. He again hesitated, then sat at one of the outside tables where he could watch the exit.

From his table, Girland could see the outside terrace and he watched Drina take a seat at a table.

When the waiter came, Girland ordered a steak and a lager. Drina, outside, ordered a ham roll and a vodka.

Drina had placed himself in a bad position. He could watch the exit from the bistro, but he couldn't see Girland. Aware of this, Girland got to his feet and went to a telephone kiosk. He called Dorey.

When the connection was made, Girland said, 'I think our Soviet friends have become interested in our movie. I have Drina on my tail.' Dorey knew Drina as he knew every Soviet agent operating in Paris.

'You have the film on you?'

'Of course.'

'Where are you?'

Girland told him.

'I'll send two men down to cover you. Stay where you are.'

'Hitch up your suspenders!' Girland said impatiently. 'I can handle this. Wake up! You can't send two of your jerks down here to cover me unless you make this official.'

Dorey swallowed this, knowing Girland was right.

'But if they jump you and get that film...!'

'They won't get it. Stop laying an egg! I'll lose this fat slob and I'll call you later. I just thought I'd increase your blood pressure,' and Girland hung up.

When he returned to his table, his steak was placed before him. It looked very good. He made a leisurely lunch, paid the bill, then wandered out onto the busy boulevard.

Drina gave him a few metres start, then went after him. Girland wandered along, taking his time. Satisfied now that Girland hadn't spotted him, Drina loafed along in the rear.

Girland was an expert at losing a tail. When he came upon a crowd of people staring at a TV programme showing in a radio shop window, he stepped around them swiftly and into a doorway. The movement was so quick Drina didn't see it.

Suddenly Girland had vanished. Drina paused, people pushing by him. In a panic, Drina rushed past the doorway in which Girland was standing to the cross-roads. He looked frantically to right and left.

Watching the panic-stricken face of the fat agent, Girland grinned.

Three

On the top floors of most of the older apartment blocks in Paris there are a number of small rooms known as *chambres de bonne* where servants who worked for the owners of the apartments below used to live. But now servants were almost impossible to find, the owners rented these miserable little rooms to students or to those unable to afford higher rents.

Vi Martin lived in one of these rooms on the eighth floor of an old-fashioned block in Rue Singer. The room was equipped with a toilet basin, a portable electric grill, a bed, one small battered armchair and a plastic wardrobe. There was a table under the attic window on which stood a small transistor radio that never ceased to churn out swing music from the moment Vi woke to the moment she went to sleep. She just could not imagine anyone not living in the perpetual din of swing music.

There were eight other little rooms on her floor. Four of them were occupied by elderly women who went out early every day on cleaning jobs. There were two Spanish couples who worked as servants in the apartments below and two elderly widowers who worked at the post office, a few doors down the street.

These people had the habit of leaving their doors open so they could converse with their neighbours without leaving their rooms.

These conversations were carried on at the top of their voices so the din, plus Vi's transistor, was a nightmare bedlam of noise.

Vi shared her room with Paul Labrey. They had met at a Left Bank party and Vi had immediately fallen for Labrey. She thought he was terribly with it with his green tinted glasses and his long hair. He told her as they were dancing that he was sharing a room with a Senegalese who was planning to get married and he would have to move out. Did she know of a cheap room he could rent? Under the influence of six large gins and feeling sexually aroused by the way he was holding her, Vi suggested he should move into her pad and share the rent.

Labrey's hands moved down her back as he regarded her. He decided 'he could do a lot worse and moved in the following day, bringing with him an old battered suitcase and a few tattered paperbacks.

When Vi asked him what he did for a living, he grinned. 'I sell dirty postcards on Place de la Madeleine. It's a good racket. I catch the tourists when they leave Cook's.'

She didn't believe this, for often he wouldn't return to the room until well after 03.00 hrs. and sometimes he would rush off, swearing, before 08.00 hrs. She was sure he did some shady work - probably in drugs - but she didn't care. Vi was that kind of a girl. At least he always seemed to have a reasonable amount of money and wasn't mean with it. After a little persuasion, and after living with her for two months, he even agreed to pay the whole of the rent, and when they ate out at the bistro in Rue Lekain, he always picked up the tab.

She enjoyed sleeping with him in the single bed. He had a lot of technique and wasn't selfish in his love-making. He was fairly easy to live with. There were times when he revealed a quick, dangerous temper, and once when she nagged him about his dirty fingernails, he slapped her bare bottom so viciously, her screams brought their neighbours tapping on their door. That taught Vi, as nothing else could, not to nag. Until she was seventeen, Vi lived with her parents in Lyons. Her father was well off and retired. Vi had always been a rebel. She loathed the provincial life in Lyons. She dreamed of Paris. Finally, she persuaded

her father to let her study English at the Sorbonne. She learned without regret that both her parents had been killed in a car crash. She inherited three hundred thousand francs. She promptly gave up her studies, hooked up with an American newspaper man, and between the two of them, they ran through the money in two years. The American faded and Vi found herself high and dry with no money. She spent the next two years studying the ceilings of sordid hotel bedrooms while any man with money grunted on top of her.

It was pure luck that she ran across Benny Slade. He was searching for a blonde, long-haired beauty with good legs to work in his studio. Seeing Vi as she walked down Avenue des Champs Elysees looking for a client, he decided she was just what he was looking for.

He put her under contract and paid her a thousand francs a month which covered her rent and food bills.

Vi had no difficulty in dressing herself. When she was short of money she either visited one of the big stores and stole what she needed or found an American tourist who paid her well for her favours. When Labrey appeared on her

horizon, she became so much better off, since he paid the rent, that she dropped her street-walking, but remained a nimble shop-lifter.

Returning to her room this evening, her mind was full of Girland. Chez Garin! she thought as she dumped her handbag and coat on the bed. Had she a decent dress? She went to the plastic wardrobe and nicked through the dresses hanging there. She decided the Swiss silk red dress she had stolen from Aux Trois Quartiers store only last week would do. She checked on her store of stockings - also stolen, and then examined her collection of shoes. Satisfied that she had the right clothes, she turned on the radio and stretched out on the bed.

She closed her eyes and thought of Girland. What a man! There was something about him that Paul just hadn't got. Paul was tough, young, good-looking and dangerous, but there was no polish to him. Sometimes she got bored with his green tinted glasses and his long hair. If he would only wash his hair more often perhaps he would look more attractive.

Thinking of his hair, made her think of her own. She scrambled off the bed and regarded herself in the mirror over the washbasin. Her long blonde hair didn't look all that hot, she decided, and she began to fill the basin with hot water.

It was while she was bending over the basin, clad only in white panties and bra, her hair floating in the hot water, Labrey came in.

'If you touch me, I'll throw water over you,' Vi said hastily, aware that her position was a strong temptation for his heavy hand.

But Labrey wasn't in the mood for fun and games. His face was sullen as he sat on the bed. The trip out to Orly had been a drag. Seeing Henry Sherman pass through the police barrier, he had assumed that he would board the New York flight. But when he telephoned Kovski and had reported, Kovski had flown in a rage. He wanted to know if Labrey was sure that Sherman had taken that flight.

Impatiently, Labrey had pointed out that he couldn't pass the police barrier himself, so how the hell could he really be sure? Kovski had called him an incompetent, idle idiot and had slammed down the receiver. This criticism infuriated Labrey who could never take any form of criticism.

'What are you doing back at this time - I thought you were working,' he said as Vi wrung her hair out over the basin. 'Benny had an unexpected visitor,' she explained, wrapping her hair in a towel and making herself a turban. 'What a dream of a man! He's taking me out tonight.'

Labrey wasn't interested. They had an agreement that when either of them felt like a change of sex partners they need not consult each other.

'You're not bringing him back here!' he snapped. 'I'll probably be in.' 'Bring him to this hole?' Vi laughed. 'As if I would! He has class! We're going to Chez Garin ... I bet you've never even heard of it.'

I haven't and couldn't care less.' Labrey lit a cigarette and let smoke drift down his narrow nostrils. He felt a pang of jealousy. Girls got taken to the top places if they were willing to lie on their backs, he thought bitterly. 'You watch it. Any pal of Benny's is a suspect.'

'Not this one! He's a real doll! After dinner, he is going to show me his Bukhara rug.' Vi giggled excitedly as she began to dry her hair. 'He has money. I could have myself a ball for a change.'

'What's he doing mixing with a slob like Benny then?' Labrey asked, now a little curious.

'He showed Benny a film... a stag film. He wanted to know who shot it and who the man in the film was ... don't ask me why.' Behind the tinted glasses, Labrey's eyes became alert. 'Did you get this guy's name?'

'Why, of course! I told you he's taking me out tonight.' Vi looked indignant. 'You don't imagine I'd go out with a man without knowing his name?'

Labrey sneered.

'No, you wouldn't go out with him, but you would sleep with him. What's his name?'

'Mark Girland, if it's any of your business.'

Labrey stiffened. He sat motionless, his brain racing. Drina had often talked of an ex-CIA agent named Mark Girland. 'One of Dorey's top men, but they fell out,' Drina had said. 'A good thing for us. Girland was a nuisance. You should hear what Malik thinks of him!'

Once when Drina and Labrey were together on a job, Girland had passed them, and Drina had pointed him out to Labrey who had stared at the tall, dark man, envying him because he was now out of this rat race of a racket.

'Have you swallowed a wasp or something?' Vi asked, staring at Labrey.

'Is he tall, dark with a big nose?'

'I wouldn't call it big... it's a dreamy nose.'

'Is he tall and dark?' Labrey restrained his impatience with an effort.

'Yes, and handsome.'

Labrey had telephoned Drina before signing off. Drina had told him that Girland was now involved somehow with Sherman. Labrey felt a wave of excitement run through him.

'Sit down,' he said, patting the bed.

'I'm busy, dopey... can't you see?' Vi turned to the mirror. I can hear what you say without sitting ... ouch!'

Labrey's hand cracked across her buttocks, making a pistol-like report.

'Ooooh! You beast!' Vi cried, dancing with the sting and rubbing herself. She started towards the basin of water when Labrey snarled, 'Come here and sit down or you'll get a hiding!'

The note in his voice brought her to an abrupt standstill. She looked at him. His thin, white face had that savage expression she didn't often see, but when she did, it scared her.

'All right, all right, you needn't have hit that hard.' She came hurriedly and sat by his side. 'What is it? God! You hurt

me!

I want to know exactly what happened between Girland and Benny. I want every detail... right from the beginning.'

'What on earth for?' Vi demanded, bewildered, her eyes opening wide.

Labrey's hand came down on her naked thigh with another vicious slap that made her squeal.

Talk!

Hurt and now really scared, Vi talked. At the end of her recital, Labrey said, 'You're definitely meeting him at this restaurant at nine o'clock tonight?'

'Yes.' Vi rubbed the red mark on her thigh. 'Look what you've done to me, you stinking brute!'

'Shut up!' Labrey thought for a long moment. 'You're sure it was a blue film?'

'I'll say. They were on the bed, very busy.'

Labrey got to his feet.

'Now listen, don't say a word to anyone about this ... do you understand? Don't go yakking as you always yak.' He leaned forward, his eyes glittering to stare directly into her eyes. 'This is important. If you say one word to anyone, I'll fix you and you'll stay fixed!'

Vi shrank away from him, horrified by the murderous expression in his eyes.

'I won't say a thing ... honest'

'You'd better not. Stay here until I come back. Don't move from here!' 'I'll stay.'

Again he stared at her for a long chilling moment, then turned and went from the room. She heard him going down the stairs three at the time.

What's happening, she thought. Oh, God! He's never been like this before! He looked as if he could kill me! Has he gone crazy! What does it all mean?

She sat there, trembling, the water from the ends of her hair making patterns on the red, soiled bedspread.

* * *

Although he was satisfied that he had lost Drina, Girland was still cautious. He wanted to be certain there wasn't a second tail. As Drina darted off down Rue de Vaugirard, Girland left the shop doorway and retraced his way towards Benny's studio. He spotted a free taxi, crawling in the traffic, signalled and slid in as the taxi stopped. The taxi moved off again before the cars behind could begin any impatient hooting. Girland told the driver to take him to the American Embassy.

Twenty minutes later, he walked into Mavis Paul's office. The moment she saw him, she snatched up a heavy ruler and eyed him suspiciously. She had had one embarrassing experience with him and she had no intention of repeating it. 'Hello, beautiful,' Girland said, regarding the ruler and keeping his distance. 'Long time no see. You're looking as radiant as this May morning. When are we going to have dinner together? I have a new and wonderful Bukhara rug I want to show you.'

Mavis snapped down a switch on the intercom.

'Mr Girland is here, sir.'

'Send him in.' Dorey's voice was curt.

Mavis flicked her pretty fingers to the door.

'On your way, Romeo.'

Girland shook his head sadly.

'If only you could realise what you are missing. A night out with me is an experience every beautiful girl dreams of.' I can imagine,' Mavis said, unimpressed. 'He's waiting,' and putting down the ruler where she could grab it, she continued with her typing.

'The last time you kissed me...' Girland began but Mavis seized the ruler.

'Not another word from you!' she said, her face red. 'Go in there!'

The door opened and Dorey peered into the office.

'What are you waiting for, Girland? Come in... come in,' he said impatiently.

As Girland wandered into the big room, he said sadly, 'It's spring and yet there is still ice around. I find it depressing.'

'You leave my secretary alone,' Dorey snapped. He had once caught Girland kissing Mavis and the shock still irked him. 'She's a serious girl and you're wasting your time.'

Girland folded himself down in the visitor's chair. 'It's never a waste of time. Where there's a will, there's a woman.'

Dorey snorted and sat behind his desk.

'You are sure Drina was following you?'

'Of course.' Girland took the 8mm film from his pocket and put it on the desk. 'Lock it away. Now the Soviets are interested that film could be dynamite for Sherman.'

'You think Drina spotted Sherman?'

'I'm sure of it.' Girland reached for one of Dorey's hand-made cigarettes and lit it. 'I can't understand why they didn't alert the police that he was travelling on a false passport. They could have got him cold. Why follow me?'

'Kovski is a fool,' Dorey said. 'We can thank our lucky stars.'

'Well, at least, he knows you have met Sherman and there is a film involved.' Girland thought for a moment. 'If Kovski thinks this is

important enough - and it's my bet he will - he will put pressure on Benny Slade.'

'Who's he?' Dorey demanded.

Girland told him.

'Benny had to see the film. The girl meant nothing to him. I had to show him the film to get a lead on the man who shot it. Kovski could work on Benny who is soft. If they twist his arm, he will sing. If Benny sings, Sherman is in real trouble.'

Dorey considered this.

'I can't do anything official, Girland. I'm relying on you. Can you protect this man?'

'Oh, sure, but it'll cost.' Girland studied Dorey. 'You did say expenses, didn't you? I don't want my money frittered away.' 'This is important. Spend what you like.' Girland looked at Dorey.

I would never have expected to hear you make such a statement,' he said. 'Well, well... of course it's Sherman's money you're spending, but even at that. ...'

Dorey banged his fist on the desk.

I want action and I want results! You'll be paid, but I want results.'

'Take it easy. I know a couple of toughies who can take care of

Benny. Instead of screaming for results, Dorey, let's have some money.'

Dorey took from his drawer a thick envelope which he tossed across the desk.

'Here's ten thousand in traveller's cheques.'

'Thank you... now I can get to work.'

Girland stowed the envelope away in his pocket.

'Don't lose them! They're unsigned!' Dorey hated to see Girland take so much money from him so casually.

'The way you're working yourself up, you're heading for an ulcer.' Girland reached for the telephone. He spoke quietly, then replaced the receiver. 'That takes care of Benny.' There was a pause, then he went on, 'Maybe you had better alert Sherman the Soviets are interested in him.'

'How can I?' Dorey lifted his hands and slammed them down on his desk. 'I can't send him a coded cable. He's never learned to decode a cable for himself. I'm cut off from him. This is unofficial, and it has to remain unofficial.'

Girland stroked the end of his nose while he thought. 'I'm beginning to see now that I'll have to earn my money,' he said with a crooked smile. 'I'm not so sure I'm going to like this job.'

'If you don't want it then give me back my money!' Dorey barked.

'I'm not as sure as all that' Girland got up and began to move to the door.

'And leave my secretary alone!' Dorey said.

'What nasty ideas come into your little mind.' Girland looked sadly at Dorey, eased himself out of the room and closed the door.

At the sight of him, Mavis picked up the ruler.

Girland came slowly over to her desk, placed his hands on it and leaned towards her.

'My father told me never to be afraid of a pretty girl. Since you are the loveliest star in my sky... kiss me.'

She stared at him for a long moment, then slowly put down the ruler as Dorey opened his door.

'You still here, Girland?'

Mavis returned to her typing and Girland straightened up. He regarded Dorey with an exasperated expression.

'The only person who could ever have loved you was your mother,' he said, 'and I am sorry for her.'

'Never mind about my mother,' Dorey snapped. 'You get off and earn your money.'

Girland glanced at Mavis who was pounding away on her typewriter, shook his head and moved out into the corridor.

As he closed the door after him, Dorey stamped back into his office.

Without pausing in her typing, Mavis smiled.

Malik sat behind his small, shabby desk and listened to what Labrey had to tell him. He thanked the gods that all his agents weren't as stupid and as unreliable as Drina. He decided this long-haired boy with his ridiculous green tinted glasses was worth five of Drina. When Drina had reported that he had lost Girland, Malik couldn't see how he was to make further progress. Now Labrey had come to him and had opened it all up again ... or rather, Labrey's girl had done so.

'Can you trust this girl?' Malik asked. His fiat green eyes surveyed Labrey.

'Can you trust any woman?' Labrey shrugged. So this is Malik, he was thinking. He had heard a lot about this man from Drina, and it gave him a kick to have direct contact with him. He was everything that Labrey would wish to be: big, muscular, ruthless and very efficient. 'I've thrown a scare into her, but it might not stay thrown.'

'Have you anything you can use against her?' 'She steals from shops ... she's always at it' 'You have proof of this?' 'Her place is full of stolen stuff.'

'That is not proof. We will have to make use of her as Girland is interested in her. Would she work for us?' Labrey hesitated.

I don't think so. She has no brains. She has no feeling for politics. All she thinks about is money, clothes and sex.'

Malik thought for a moment: a massive stone-like figure, his huge killer hands resting on the desk.

'Then we will pay her. What do we pay you?' 'Eight hundred a month.'

'We will pay her six hundred. Tell her she has no choice. Tell her we need her. If she won't co-operate, then one night something bad will happen to her ... frighten her. Make sure she understands that Russia rewards good agents, but punishes bad ones. Do you understand?'

I understand.'

'Arrange it then.' Malik regarded Labrey. 'I shall have further work for you. You have done well. I will see you get more

money.'

When Labrey had gone, Malik unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk and switched on a tape recorder. From the drawer he took a sensitive button microphone, so sensitive it didn't need leads to the recorder. He tapped the microphone gently to make sure the magic eye of the recorder reacted, then he clipped the microphone over his wristwatch and covered the watch with his frayed shirt sleeve. He walked down the corridor to Kovski's office. Kovski was busy writing a minute. He started violently when he saw Malik who had moved silently to Kovski's desk.

'Will you never learn to knock?' Kovski snarled, putting down his fountain pen.

Malik sat on the hard, upright chair.

'Sherman will be arriving at the Kennedy airport in another five hours,' he said. 'We know he is travelling on a false passport and in disguise. I understand he would not be welcomed by us as the future President. It occurred to me that you could alert the American airport police that he is travelling on a false passport.' Kovski stared at him. 'And suppose I do?'

'The police will have to take action: the Press will hear about it, there will be a scandal: Sherman won't be elected President,' Malik said.

Little red patches of rage appeared on Kovski's face. Had he thought of this himself, he might have acted, but coming from Malik made this impossible as Malik had foreseen.

'Since when have you been asked to dictate policy?' Kovski demanded, his voice shaking with fury. 'This is not your job! Your job is to find out why Sherman came to Paris and why Dorey has talked to Girland!'

'An anonymous cable to the American police at the Kennedy airport would result in Sherman's embarrassment,' Malik said woodenly. 'I suggest it is your duty to send this cable.'

'Are you telling me what my duty is?' Kovski shouted.

'Yes.'

Kovski glared with hatred at the big man sitting so relaxed before him.

'Be careful,' he said viciously. 'You are in disgrace! You are nothing! A word from me could send you for years to Siberia. You are to do what I tell you! Understand that! I will not listen to your views which are of no importance because you are stupid!' His rage so carried him away that he found he was no longer afraid of Malik.

'By sending this cable, you would be certain that Sherman could not become President of the United States,' Malik said, his face expressionless.

'You think so, you fool?' Kovski snarled. 'Are we so sure this man is really Sherman? We have only the word of that idiot Drina! If this man is really Sherman - and there are doubts and we alert the American police, then how are we to find out why he came here? This is what we want to find out! As soon as the CIA know we know who he is, they will throw up a smokescreen and then we will find out nothing!'

'We don't need to find anything out if you will send the cable. We will have achieved what we want . . . Sherman, won't be elected President.'

'You are a triple fool!' Kovski's voice was completely out of control. 'How many more times do I have to tell you, idiot? What we want to know is why he came here ... go and find out! As long as Sherman believes he has come here and has got back safely to America, we have him where we want him!'

'But we have him where we want him by sending this cable', Malik said quietly.

'Get out!' Kovski slammed his fist down on the desk. 'Do what I tell you! Find out why Sherman has been here! That's your job!'

A thin smile lit up Malik's stone-like face.

'Those are your orders?'

'Yes! Get out and do your job!'

Malik nodded and rose to his feet.

I am compelled to obey your orders,' he said, staring at Kovski, 'but I only obey them because you are my superior.'

He left the office, quietly, shutting the door after him and returned to his own office. He turned off the tape recorder, rewound the tape, listened for a few seconds to the playback, then satisfied he had an excellent recording, he ran off the tape. He found a large envelope and wrote on it: Conversation between Comrade Kovski and myself. May 5th. Subject: Henry Sherman. He put the spool of tape into the envelope and sealed it with Sellotape, then dropped the envelope into his pocket. This was yet another tape to be added to a small collection he had in a safe deposit bank not far from the Soviet Embassy: yet another nail in Kovski's coffin.

* * *

Still careful he wasn't being followed, Girland made his way from the American Embassy to Pierre Rosnold's studio on Rue Garibaldi. The studio was housed on the fourth floor of an old-fashioned building, but there was nothing old-fashioned about the ornate elevator nor about Rosnold's entrance. The double doors that led to the studio were covered with white suede, embossed with gilt scrolls and which opened automatically when Girland broke an invisible beam as he approached them. He found himself in a small lobby, draped in red velvet with gilt chairs, and a glass-topped gilt table on which were spread the usual glossy magazines.

Girland decided that Rosnold's set-up was of better taste and smelt more of money than Benny's exotic studio.

As he was surveying the scene, a door facing him opened and an elderly man, wearing a black hat and a light-grey overcoat came into the lobby. He moved with the arrogance of the very rich. In his right gloved hand, he carried a bulky envelope. His long, thin aristocratic face, the lines around the weak, sensual mouth, the smudges under his baggy eyes made him look like an ageing Casanova. His satisfied expression swiftly changed to startled apprehension as he saw

Girland. He gave Girland a quick, uneasy glance, then moving quickly, he left the lobby, clutching his envelope and Girland heard him entering the elevator.

'Yes?'

Girland glanced around.

A woman stood in the doorway, regarding him. She was tall, probably in her early thirties, slim, dark with a heart-shaped face that could have been a tinted plaster mask.

'Mr Rosnold please,' Girland said with his most charming smile.

The smile bounced off her like a golf ball slammed against a wall.

'Mr Rosnold is not here.'

'You mean he doesn't work here any more?'

'He is not here.'

'Then where do I find him?'

Again the dark eyes went over Girland, examining his clothes. From the bleak expression that showed in her eyes, the woman thought nothing of him.

'Do you want a sitting?'

The automatic doors swung open and another elderly, rich looking man came in. He hesitated for a brief moment at the sight of Girland, then gave the woman a wide, toothy smile.

'Ah, Mile Lautre, how well you are looking.' He again glanced uneasily at Girland.

The woman stood aside and smiled. The plaster mask cracked for a moment, but the smile didn't reach her eyes.

'Please go in, monsieur. I won't be a moment.'

The elderly man slid around her and passed through the open doorway.

'If you will give me your name, I will tell Mr Rosnold you have called.'

'It's urgent. When will he be back?'. Girland asked.

'Not before Monday. May I have your name?'

'It's very urgent. Where can I contact him?'

The woman stared at him. She was as hostile as a barbed-wire fence. 'Your name please?'

'Tom Stag. Mr Rosnold and I have business together.'

'I'll tell Mr Rosnold when he returns.' The woman began to back through the doorway. 'Perhaps you will telephone for an appointment on Monday,' then she closed the door.

Girland left and crossed to the elevator. He thumbed the call button and while he waited, his mind was busy. When the cage stopped

before him, he got in and went down to the ground floor. Before leaving the elevator, he took out his wallet and extracted two ten franc notes. He walked over to the concierge's window and tapped.

A fat, elderly woman, her hair in steel curlers, a shawl around her shoulders opened the window and regarded him with that stony, indifferent stare that most Paris concierges cultivate.

'Excuse me,' Girland said and turned on charm. I am sorry to disturb you, madame. I want to see Mr Rosnold very urgently.'

'Fourth floor,' the concierge snapped and prepared to shut the window.

'Perhaps you could help me.' Girland put the two ten franc notes on the shelf of the window, keeping a finger on them.

The woman looked at the notes, then at Girland. She became visibly less hostile.

'I'm sure you are busy,' Girland went on. 'Of course, I expect to pay for your time.' He took his fingers off the notes. 'I've already been to the fourth floor. I am told Mr Rosnold is away. I need to see him urgently. Do you happen to know where he is?'

'Didn't you ask his secretary, monsieur?' the concierge asked, eyeing the notes that lay between them.

'I did, but she was evasive. You see, madame, Mr Rosnold owes me a sum of money. If I don't find him quickly and persuade him to pay me, I shall be in trouble.' Girland turned on his boyish smile. 'But perhaps you can't help me.' He extended his finger, but the concierge got there first. She drew the two notes out of Girland's reach and palmed them.

I know where he is,' she said, lowering her voice. 'His secretary had a letter from him yesterday. I know his handwriting and the stamp interested me. The Alpenhoff Hotel, Garmisch... that's where he is. When he left, he told me he would be away a month.' 'When did he leave, madame?' 'Last Monday.'

'You are very kind... thank you, madame.' 'I hope you get your money, monsieur,' she said. 'He is not a nice gentleman.' Her old fat face crinkled into a grimace. 'He is mean.'

Girland again thanked her and walked out onto the busy street. He glanced at his watch. It was 16.20 hrs. He decided to visit Sammy's Bar and talk to Jack Dodge, the second lead Benny had given him.

He found Sammy's Bar on Rue Berry off Avenue des Champs Elysees: a typical, dimly lit bar like so many bars that grow like

mushrooms around any tourist haunt. He pushed open the door and walked into a long narrow room, the bar to the left with the standard stools, to the right were banquettes and tables. At this hour the place was empty except for the barman who was browsing over a racing sheet, Biro in hand, a look of concentration on his handsome face.

As soon as Girland saw him, he guessed he must be Jack Dodge. This man with his sandy-coloured hair, his sun lamp complexion, his bulky shoulders and the shadow of dissipation under his close-set eyes looked the part of a stallion: a sensual lump of muscle and flesh: whose brain and mind were as small as his sexuality was enormous.

The barman glanced up, then pushed the racing sheet away. He gave Girland a smirking grin and placed big hands on

the bar counter.

'Yes, sir?' he said. 'What is your pleasure?'

Girland hoisted himself on a stool.

'Rye whisky and ginger ale.'

'Yes, sir... a nice reviving drink.'

'That's what I need. Have one with me.'

I won't say no.' The barman made two drinks with a lot of unnecessary flourishes. 'First one today.'

He placed one of the glasses before Girland and lifted the other.

'Sante.'

They drank, then Girland asked casually, 'Are you Jack Dodge?'

The barman lifted a sandy eyebrow.

'That's me. Can't say I've seen you before. I have a good memory for faces.'

"That's good news. I want you to remember a girl'

I get a lot of girls in here. I won't swear I can remember them all. It's the men I concentrate on.' He grinned slyly. 'They pick up the tab.'

I understand. Well, never mind about the girl for the moment. Are you still happy working for Pierre Rosnold?' Girland asked, his dark eyes on Dodge's face.

If he had leaned across the bar and punched Dodge in the eye, he wouldn't have got a bigger reaction.

Dodge reared back. His close-set eyes went blank with shock. The blood moved out of his face leaving his skin blotchy under the sun lamp complexion, but he recovered quickly. For a brief moment, when Girland could almost hear his brain creaking, he stood motionless, then pulling himself together, he eyed Girland with sudden suspicion.

I don't know him,' he said. 'Excuse me. I've things to do.'

'Don't be so obvious,' Girland said. 'You have nothing to do except talk to me. I know what your side-line is, but that doesn't mean I'll make trouble for you. How would you like to pick up an easy hundred bucks?'

'I told you, sir, I have things to do.' Dodge began to move away down the bar.

'If you don't want my money, I can always call Inspector Dupuis of the vice squad and turn you in. Please yourself.'

Dodge hesitated, then glared at Girland. 'Just who the hell are you?'

'Look on me as your pal,' Girland said and smiled. He took ten ten-dollar bills from his wallet. These he had got by cashing some of his traveller's cheques at the American Express on his way to the bar. 'All yours, buddy, for a little information which won't go further. Don't look so anxious. I'm not after you. I want to find a girl who went through a performance with you before Rosnold's camera.'

Dodge eyed the money, licked his full lips, took a drink, then looked at the money again.

'You mean that's for me?'

'That's right. No strings to it... just information.' Dodge hesitated, but the power of money was too much for him. He finished his drink, then made another while his brain creaked.

'What do you want to know?' he asked finally. 'I came across an 8 mm movie,' Girland said. 'It is labelled "A Souvenir from Paris". It shows you, wearing a hood, performing with a dark-haired girl. Three other films were shot, probably at the same time. Mean anything to you?'

Dodge again looked at the money. 'You really mean that's for me?' Girland pushed five ten dollar bills across the counter. 'You get the rest when you talk,' he said. Dodge snapped up the bills and stowed them away in his hip pocket.

'This is strictly confidential.'

'You are right out of it,' Girland promised. 'What do you know about this movie?'

'Well, Rosnold called me. This was to be a special job. Okay, I make these movies. It's business and pleasure. I do a job for Rosnold two or three times a week. Last month, he called me. I went to the studio and there was this girl. I've never seen her before... a new one.' He thought for a moment. The memory seemed to please him because his face broke into a sensual leer. 'Very good... an amateur, you understand, but good.'

'Did you get her name?'

Dodge shook his head.

'No. Rosnold called her Cherie, but I did get she and he were buddy-buddies. We made four films. Rosnold paid me \$50 a film.' Again the leer. 'It was a pleasure.'

'Let's do better than that,' Girland said. 'What makes you think Rosnold and the girl were buddies?'

'The way they behaved ... the way they talked. I could tell. I guess Rosnold digs for her.'

'Yet Rosnold took the shots while you were working on her?'

'That's nothing... that's business. I've worked with wives while their husbands took the shots. When you make a stag, it's strictly business. Besides, I got the idea the girl was stoned.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Well, you know... L.S.D. She was higher than a kite and as hot as a stove.'

'You think she had taken L.S.D.?'

'I'm damn sure she had.'

Girland grimaced.

'What did they talk about... did you hear anything?'

'Well... I had to rest between the shootings.' The leer irritated Girland. 'While I was building myself up, they got in a huddle. They were planning to go to Garmisch together as soon as the shooting was processed.'

'What do you know about Rosnold?'

Dodge shrugged.

'He's one of the bright boys. When he isn't making movies or photographing the snobs, he organises a group of nuts who call themselves Ban War. He tried to get me to join the organisation but it didn't interest me. How the hell can you ban war anyway? It's like bashing your nut against a wall. Anyway, he makes a good thing out of it. Every sucker who joins pays ten francs and the money goes into Rosnold's pocket.'

The door swung open and four American tourists, each with a camera slung around his neck, came into the bar, shattering the quiet atmosphere as they climbed thirstily onto stools away from Girland.

I see you're getting busy,' Girland said. He slid the other dollar bills over to Dodge. 'Forget you've seen me,' and he walked out onto the street.

It now looked as if his next stop would be Garmisch, but first he wanted more information. He headed back to the American Embassy.

Four

His hands clammy, his heart thumping, Henry Sherman handed his false passport to the blue-uniformed official at Orly airport. The man glanced at the photograph, glanced at Sherman, nodded, stamped the passport and returned it with a brief 'Merci, monsieur.'

Sherman walked through the barrier, consulted the index board and found his flight left from Gate 10. He glanced at his watch. He had twenty-five minutes before take-off. Nice, easy time, he thought as he walked down the long aisle towards Gate 10. He paused at the bookstall to buy the New York Times and a couple of paperbacks, then as he was starting on his way again, there was an announcement over the tannoy.

'There will be a one hour delay on Flight AF 025 to New York. Will passengers for New York please go to the reception centre? They will be informed when to proceed to Gate 10.'

Sherman flinched. This could be dangerous. The longer he remained at the airport, the greater the chances were of his being recognised.

'Tiresome, isn't it? Especially for you,' a quiet voice said at his side.

Sherman started and swung around, then stiffened as he stared at the short, squat man who had come up silently and was now standing before him.

This man had hooded eyes, a thick hooked nose and the deeply tanned complexion of a man who travels a lot in the sun. He wore a black slouch hat and a dark English tweed suit, impeccably cut. Over his arm, he carried a light-weight black cashmere overcoat. A large diamond glittered in his tie. Another large diamond set in a heavy gold ring, glittered on his thick, little finger. His shirt, the handkerchief in his top pocket, his lizard skin black shoes were immaculate. He exuded power, money and luxury as he might well do for that squat man was Herman Radnitz, internationally known as one of the richest men in the world whose thick fingers spread like the tentacles of an octopus over the whole of the financial globe; a deadly spider sitting in the middle of his web moving bankers, statesmen and even minor kings as a chess player moves his pawns.

Radnitz was the last man on earth Sherman expected or wanted to see. He knew immediately that Radnitz was far too astute not to have recognised him. There was no question of attempting a bluff.

'We mustn't be seen talking together,' Sherman said hurriedly. 'It's too dangerous.'

'Yet we will talk,' Radnitz said in his guttural voice. 'The door marked A.' He pointed. 'Go in there, I will join you.'

I am sorry, Radnitz, I...'

'You have no alternative,' Radnitz said. He paused, his hooded eyes were little pools of ice water as he stared up at Sherman, 'Or do you imagine you have?'

The threat was unmistakable. Sherman only hesitated for a brief moment, then he nodded and walked away, his heart now hammering, his breathing uneven. He reached the door marked A, opened it and stepped into a luxuriously furnished waiting-room - a room, he guessed, reserved for V.I.Ps.

A few seconds later, Radnitz joined him. He closed the door and turned the key.

'May I ask what you are doing here, Sherman?' he asked with deadly politeness. 'You are travelling on a false passport and wearing a ridiculous false moustache. Are you mentally ill?'

Sherman drew himself up to his full imposing height. Although he was frightened of Radnitz, he was determined to retain his dignity. After all, he reminded himself, he was the future President of the United States. This squat German must remember this.

I don't know what you mean! I'm perfectly well. If you are all that interested, I had to come here on urgent and private business. It was so urgent I had to resort to this - this subterfuge.'

Radnitz sat down in a big lounging chair. He took a seal-skin cigar case from his pocket, selected a cigar, nipped off the end of it with a gold cutter, then slowly and deliberately lit it. It was only when he was satisfied that the cigar was burning evenly that he again looked at Sherman who was now sitting on the arm of a chair opposite him, wiping his sweating face nervously with his handkerchief.

'Sufficiently urgent and sufficiently private for you to endanger your election as President of the United States?' Radnitz asked softly.

I can't discuss this with you!' Sherman's voice was sharp. 'I wouldn't be here unless it was vitally urgent.'

'My dear Sherman, I think you must be forgetting our bargain.' Radnitz's face was now a cold, forbidding mask, 'May I remind you that the money that is making it possible for you to become the President of the United States amounts to \$35,000,000. May I also remind you that the money that is making this possible is half mine . . . that I have put up half this sum from my own personal funds.' He leaned forward, his eyes suddenly alight with a contained, but burning rage. 'Do you imagine I will tolerate stupid behaviour from any man who owes me such a sum? Stupid behaviour? That is putting it mildly. You have been reckless and I consider the risk you have taken coming here disgraceful! If someone recognises you . . . some cheap hack of a newspaper man . . . anyone . . . your chances of becoming President are completely and utterly damned and my money will be lost. I promised you that I would make you President. In turn, you promised me the Arcadia Dam contract. Now here you are in this ridiculous disguise . . . here in Paris.'

Sherman squirmed uneasily. It was true that he and Radnitz had made a bargain. Radnitz wanted the contract to build the Arcadia Dam . . . the biggest and most expensive project on the agenda of the coming term which would cost the nation \$500,000,000. Sherman had agreed that Radnitz should not only get the contract if he (Sherman) became President, but would receive five per cent of the total cost for his fee. Sherman knew that if it wasn't for Radnitz's enormous political influence and his fantastic wealth, he would not have been nominated for the Presidency in spite of his own personal wealth. So they had made the bargain.

Sherman fell back on his charm that had won over so many of his opponents, but in this small, luxury room, he realised that his charm didn't make much impact.

He forced a smile as he said, 'Now, Radnitz, there is no need for you to worry. You wouldn't have known of this visit of mine but for this chance meeting . . . no one else does.'

'Chance? You say I wouldn't have known?' the guttural voice grated on Sherman's ears. 'I knew when you left New York. I knew you were in Paris. I know you have met Dorey of the CIA. That is why I am here - two hours ahead of my flight to Rabut. I am here because I want to know why you have taken this irresponsible risk. I demand to know!'

Sherman stared at him, shrinking a little under the glaring rage that burned from the small, venomous eyes.

'You knew?' Sherman felt blood leaving his face. 'I don't believe it! How could you know?'

Radnitz made a savage, impatient movement with his hand.

'You are an important investment, Sherman. I have agents who are well paid to keep me informed about all my investments... especially you. I am asking you why you are here.'

Sherman licked his dry lips.

'This is a private matter. It is nothing to do with you. I can't discuss it.'

Radnitz drew on his cigar. His hooded eyes never left Sherman's sweating face.

'Why did you go to Dorey and not to me?'

Sherman hesitated, then he said with an effort. 'Dorey was my only hope for help. He and I have been friends for a long time . . . I mean real friends.'

Radnitz's thin lips curved into a pitying smile.

'So you don't consider me as a friend?'

Sherman looked directly at him, then slowly shook his head.

'No... I look on you as a powerful associate, but not as my friend.'

'So you have put your trust in a fool like Dorey?' Radnitz touched the ash off his cigar and it dropped onto the thick, green carpet. 'You begin to worry me. I am now wondering if you have the personality, the authority and the necessary leadership to make for a great President.' He leaned forward. 'Don't you realise that if you are in urgent, personal trouble, you don't go to friends? You come to people like myself who has an investment in you and who knows how to handle any kind of trouble. So tell me . . . what is this personal and urgent trouble of yours?'

'Dorey is no fool!' Sherman exclaimed. 'He is handling this and I am satisfied he will produce results!'

'I asked you: what is this personal and urgent trouble? I have a right to know.'

Sherman thought rapidly. Perhaps he had been irresponsible in rushing off to Paris to consult Dorey who had only been able to offer him the services of a man who Dorey had admitted was something of a crook. Maybe he (Sherman) should have consulted Radnitz and dumped the whole sordid affair in his lap, but Mary had been against consulting Radnitz. She feared and hated this fat, squat German. When Sherman had asked her if she thought he should see Radnitz, she had begged him not to. Now, although he still refused to accept Radnitz's estimate of Dorey, he began to wonder if he should have listened to his wife's advice and instead, have gone immediately to Radnitz. After all, Radnitz had everything to gain in helping him and he also had tremendous influence.

Quickly, he came to a decision.

'I will tell you,' he said. Briefly, he told Radnitz about the stag film, the threatening letter and also that there were three other films and his need to find his daughter.

Radnitz sat motionless, drawing on his cigar, his hooded eyes veiled while he listened.

'So you see,' Sherman concluded, raising his hands helplessly. 'I was desperate. Dorey is my friend. He is helping me. I had to take the risk of coming here, but now I can see I could have been hasty.' He forced a smile. 'I see now I should have come to you.'

Radnitz let rich-smelling smoke roll out of his thin-lipped mouth.

'So Girland is handling this operation?'

Sherman regarded him.

'Sounds as if you know this man.'

'There are few men of his ilk - happily few - I don't know. I once employed him with disastrous results. (see 'This Is For Real') He is clever, cunning and dangerous ... a man I would never trust.'

'Dorey said he was my only chance to get these films.'

'Yes... I think Dorey might be right. If one pays Girland enough, he delivers. He could find the films and also your daughter.' Radnitz looked quizzingly at Sherman. 'Then what?'

Sherman moved uneasily.

'I will destroy the films and control my daughter.'

'Will you? How old is your daughter?'

'Twenty-four.'

'So how will you control her?'

'I'll reason with her... persuade her...'

Radnitz made an impatient movement with his hands.

'What do you know about your daughter, Sherman?'

Sherman looked away, frowning, then he said slowly, 'She has always been tiresome, unruly ... a rebel. I admit I don't know much about her. I haven't seen her for three years.'

'I know that. I have had her watched... she is part of my investment.' Radnitz shifted his bulk in the chair. 'What are your feelings about her?'

Sherman shrugged.

'I can't say I have any great feelings about her. She just doesn't fit in with my way of life. It would be impossible to have her with us at the White House ... utterly impossible.'

There was a long pause, then Radnitz said in his quiet, deadly voice, 'Suppose some unfortunate accident happened to her and you lost her... would you mind?'

Sherman stared at the squat fat man who reminded him of a stone Buddha.

'I don't understand'

'You are wasting time!' Radnitz's voice was savage. 'You heard what I asked you. If you never saw your daughter again, would you mind? That's simple enough, isn't it?'

Sherman hesitated, then slowly shook his head.

'No. In fact, it would be a relief to me if I was sure I would never see her again. But why go into this? She's here ... making a nuisance of herself, and I have to accept it.'

'Do you?' Radnitz flicked ash again onto the carpet. 'Your daughter presents a permanent embarrassment to you as long as she is alive. Suppose Girland is successful and he gets the films ... what good does that do you? She can make other films or she can make other scandals. The fact is she hates you and your way of life as much as you dislike her and her way of life. I have had your daughter investigated. She is tied up with this stupid, juvenile Ban War organisation. She goes around with a man called Pierre Rosnold who runs this vapid organisation for profit. She is under his influence. He is politically minded if you can call his mind a mind. She and he are determined you should not be President. He, because you stand for the escalation of the Vietnam war and because he can profit by his power: she, because you are her father and she wants revenge for the way you have neglected her.' Radnitz paused to stare at Sherman. 'Children have a way of paying back old scores. You wanted to be rid of her, she resented it, and now she has you where she thinks she wants you.' Again Radnitz paused. 'This is why,' he continued, 'you should have brought this problem immediately to me. Dorey may find your daughter, but he would not silence her, nor would he silence Rosnold.' The ice cold eyes surveyed Sherman. 'But I would and can.'

Sherman felt sweat break out on his forehead.

'I can't listen to this kind of talk,' he said. 'I am sure you don't mean what you seem to be suggesting.'

'What other solution is there to this problem?' Radnitz asked. 'Suggest something. Girland will probably find your daughter... then what?'

Sherman had no answer to this. He gnawed his lip, staring down at the carpet.

'Are you going to allow a degenerate chit of a girl to stand between you and the White House?' Radnitz asked. 'Because of the way you have treated her in the past, she will stop at nothing to prevent you becoming President ... and she has the power to do this if she is allowed to. These films can be found and destroyed ... they are nothing. It is not the films that need to be destroyed ... it is she.'

A voice broke in on this conversation, coming through the loudspeaker on the wall.

'Passengers for Flight 025 to New York should now proceed to Gate 10. Thank you.'

Sherman got hastily to his feet

'I must go,' he said huskily. He looked at Radnitz for a brief, furtive moment, then looked away. 'I feel sure I can leave this in your hands...'

But Radnitz wasn't going to let this tall, white-faced future President of the United States off his hook, nor let him shift his responsibilities nor let him salve his conscience so easily.

'I am going to cancel my flight,' he said. 'I am at the Georges V hotel. When you get home, telephone Dorey and find out what is happening. Then telephone me. Is that understood?'

Sherman nodded and began edging to the door.

'One moment...!' The ice cold eyes surveyed Sherman. 'I am to take it that I can arrange to get rid of your daughter?'

Sherman swallowed and dabbed his face with his handkerchief.

'I'll must discuss it with Mary ... but if you think there is no other alternative ... I - I suppose I must leave it to you.'

Gillian has always ...' He stopped with a shudder. 'I must go.'

'Very well then, I will wait to hear from you. It is your responsibility. I will act if you say so.'

As Sherman hurried from the room, Radnitz made a grimace of contempt.

* * *

Vi sat on the bed, her eyes round as she listened to what Labrey was saying. He was sitting in the shabby armchair, facing her, a cigarette between his nicotine-stained fingers, his eyes glittering behind the green glasses.

At first she thought he was joking, but now she realised he was serious. As he talked on, she felt a cold chill of fear crawling over her.

Paul! Working for the Russians! She had a child-like terror of anything to do with the Russians. She had seen all the James Bond films. She had adored Michael Caine in his spy films. She had read about Philby and Blake. Spies fascinated her so long as they remained on the screen or in newspapers or in books, but now Paul was telling her she was committed... suddenly she was a spy for Russia!

'I won't do it!' she said fiercely. 'I won't have anything to do with it! Take your things and get out! Now... do you hear? This very minute!'

'Oh, shut up!' Labrey said wearily. 'You're going to do what I tell you! You've only got yourself to blame for this because you have hot pants. If you had left Girland alone, you wouldn't be in this mess. Now you've got to make yourself useful.'

'Girland?' Bewildered, Vi clutched her wrap close to her 'What has he to do with this?'

'Don't be so goddamn dumb! Girland is an agent as I am. You're meeting him tonight. We want to know what he is up to and you are going to find out!'

'Then I won't meet him! A spy? Is he a spy? I'm not having anything to do with this! You pack your things and get out!'

'My boss has decided you are going to work for us,' Labrey said quietly. 'He has decided, so you will work for us or else . . .' He paused, staring at her through his green tinted glasses.

Vi shivered. The quietness of his voice was much more effective than if he had shouted at her. She was used to men shouting and getting into rages. During her short experience as a prostitute, so many men had shouted at her and she had learned how to handle them, but this quiet, deadly voice terrified her.

'Or else ... what?' she asked, her voice quavering.

'They have a technique with women who won't cooperate,' Labrey said. 'Women are easy. You can't hope to run away and hide. Sooner or later, wherever you are, they will find you. There are two things they can do: you are walking along some street and a man appears. He has a spray-gun of acid. You get the acid in your face, and your flesh peels off the way you skin an orange. That is one thing they can do. The other is they grab you and shove you in a car and take you to some house they have rented. Then they do things to you. I don't know just what they do... I haven't bothered to ask, but the girls after the treatment, don't walk well! He stared at her. "They have to keep their legs apart as they walk... so they hobble. I've heard girls prefer the acid to the other treatment...'

Vi regarded him in horror.

'I don't believe it! You're trying to frighten me!'

Labrey got to his feet.

'Think about it. Turn it over in your little mind. I'm not trying to frighten you. I'm sorry for you. You have a hook in your mouth now . . . and it won't come out. You will go to this restaurant and meet Girland tonight. You will find out what he is planning to do. If you don't find out, you will get the treatment. Nothing can save you. You can run, but they will always find you. So think about it.'

He left the sordid little room and taking the stairs three at a time, he made his way down to the street.

* * *

Girland eased open the door, leading to Mavis Paul's office and moved silently into the room. If he had hoped to catch Dorey's pretty secretary unawares, he was disappointed. She was about to enter Dorey's office and she had the door half open.

'You again?' she said with a half-smile. She stepped into Dorey's office, leaving the door wide open. 'Mr Girland is here, sir.'

'Send him right in,' Dorey said, laying down his pen and pushing aside a file.

Girland entered the big room, giving Mavis a suggestive wink which she ignored.

'Would you please do something for me?' he said pausing. 'Would you get the Alpenhoff Hotel at Garmisch on the phone for me?'

Mavis looked questioningly at Dorey who nodded.

'Right away,' she said and giving Girland a wide berth, she left the room.

Girland came over and helped himself to one of Dorey's cigarettes. He sat on the arm of the visitor's chair and lit the cigarette.

'I'm making progress. I wanted to check with you. What do you know about Ban War... an organisation?'

Dorey shrugged.

'It's like the rest of them... they have about five thousand members ... most of them young. Their headquarters is in a cellar club on the Left Bank. I'd say they are pretty harmless. They throw the occasional brick, squat in the streets, paint signs on the walls and generally enjoy themselves. They are no more violent, no more vicious than the rest of the anti-brigades.'

'Gillian Sherman is a member.' Girland went on to tell Dorey what he had learned that afternoon. 'So it would seem that

Rosnold and

Gillian have gone off to Garmisch. I'm catching the 07.50 flight to Munich tomorrow. From there I'll hire a car and drive to Garmisch.' He tapped ash into Dorey's ashtray. 'I could catch up with this girl... just what do I do with her if I do catch up with her?'

'You are to persuade her to give you the other three films and make her come back with you to Paris. You are to bring her to me. I'll then arrange for her to be sent home.'

Girland lifted his eyebrows.

'Suppose she tells me to jump into a lake ... what then?'

Dorey moved impatiently.

'This is part of your job, Girland. You are free to offer her any reasonable sum of money if she will co-operate. Sherman doesn't care what this costs so long as he gets the films and gets his daughter home.'

'Has it crossed Sherman's small mind that she might not give a damn about money?'

Dorey stiffened.

'That's no way to talk about your future President, Girland. Don't you realise this is a national emergency?'

Girland laughed.

'Oh, come on! It isn't. It's Sherman's emergency. I dare say the American public could easily find another President. But why should I care? Suppose she isn't interested in money? There are still some people who aren't interested in money . . . odd as it seems. Do you authorise me to kidnap her?'

'I am paying you twenty thousand dollars to bring this girl here and get those films! I don't wish to discuss how you will do it... do it!'

There came a tap on the door and Mavis looked in.

'I have the Alpenhoff Hotel on the line,' she said and withdrew.

Girland picked up the telephone receiver on Dorey's desk.

'Reception, please,' he said, then went on, 'Is Mr Pierre Rosnold staying with you?' He listened, then said, 'No, thank you. I just wanted to be sure he is still with you. Will you reserve a single room with bath for me for tomorrow... three or four days. Mark Girland. Fine... thank you,' and he hung up. 'He's still there,' he said to Dorey, 'and I imagine she'll be there too.'

'Can't you get off tonight?'

Girland shook his head.

'Too late tonight.' He was thinking of his date with Vi Martin. He believed in pleasure before business. 'I'll get off first thing tomorrow

morning. I'll be in Munich by 9.15, pick up a Hertz car at the airport and be in Garmisch by 11.30. Can you get your secretary to book me on the 07.50 flight?'

'Of course. Your ticket will be waiting for you at the airport.'

'Then I'll get along.'

'Keep me informed and be careful.'

As Girland started for the door, Dorey said, 'There's one thing you should know... Malik is in Paris.'

This news stopped Girland in his tracks.

I thought he was in Moscow, standing in a corner with a dunce cap on his head.'

'He's in Paris, but he is probably standing in a corner. Knowing Kovski, he could turn Malik onto this if they really mean to make trouble for Sherman.'

'That would make this job a real beauty,' Girland said. 'Well, okay, thanks for telling me.'

Dorey got to his feet and walked with Girland to the door. He stood in the doorway as Girland passed Mavis who didn't look up from her typing. Aware Dorey was watching him, Girland kept on his way down to the street.

He took a taxi to Benny Slade's studio, made sure that the two guards he had hired were on the job, then he collected his car and drove back to his apartment. He didn't bother to check to see if he was being followed. The time to make sure he wasn't being followed was when he set off for Orly airport the following morning. Now, he could relax, reserve a table at Chez Garin, pack a bag, take a shower, have a couple of drinks, then stretch out on his bed until it was time to meet Vi Martin.

A few minutes to 21.00 hrs., Girland arrived at Chez Garin restaurant to be welcomed by Georges Garin who, before coming to Paris, had lived for some years in Nuits-St. Georges where the truly great Burgundy wines are born.

As Girland was settling at his table, Vi arrived. The moment he saw her approaching him, he knew something was wrong. The unnatural glitter in her eyes and her quick grimace of a smile as he got to his feet made him wonder if she wasn't loaded with pep pills. He was disappointed. There was now something about her that made her less attractive, less sexually exciting than when he had first seen her.

She further dampened his spirits by declaring she wasn't hungry. He had hoped that she would have enjoyed the decor of this gracious

restaurant, but she didn't look around her so when Garin joined them, Girland explained that Mademoiselle would prefer something very light. Garin suggested his truite soufflee explaining the trout was first boned, then stuffed with the pounded flesh of a pike. The trout was cooked in butter and served with a butter sauce to which was added almonds and raisins.

Watching her, Girland saw Vi cringe as Garin explained the dish, but she said quickly it sounded marvellous and she would have it. Feeling even more depressed, Girland ordered a steak au poivre en chemise. Garin suggested a slice of

smoked salmo with buttered shrimps to begin the meal.

Vi was hipped up. Terrified by Labrey's threats, she had decided to do what he told her to do. To get herself into the right mood, she had taken four Purple Heart pills before leaving her room. Their effect made her now feel light-headed, reckless but queasy. Somehow she managed to eat the smoked salmon. She prattled to Girland about Benny, her modelling work, what a gorgeous restaurant this was, about the movies she had seen in a non-stop flow that quickly got on Girland's nerves.

Well. You can't expect to pick them all the time, he thought as he toyed with his glass of Chablis. She looked marvellous. Now she was hipped to her eyeballs, and for God's sake, woman! do stop this awful yakkiting! Suddenly aware that she was boring him and suddenly terrified that she was handing this badly, Vi pulled herself together.

'But tell me about yourself,' she gushed. 'I want to know all about you... everything. How do you manage to live so well and not work?'

The truite soufflee and the steak au poivre arrived at this moment and Girland paused to discuss with Garin what Burgundy he should have with his steak. Having decided on a Nuits-StGeorges 1949 which knew would cost him enormously, but felt he deserved as a compensation for having being landed with this yakking girl, he turned his attention once more to her - this blonde beauty who was now overwhelming him with her gushing interest in his way of life.

'I wouldn't say I live well,' Girland said. 'I get along. I've lived in Paris now for fifteen years. There are plenty of ways of making money here and there if you know the right people and know what to do.'

Vi pushed her trout about on her plate with her fork. She couldn't bring herself to eat it. The pills were now making her feel bad.

'That sounds marvellous.' She patted his hand and smiled at him. 'For instance, tell me, what are you doing tomorrow?' Completely bored with her now, Girland glanced at his watch.

'This time tomorrow I will be in Garmisch,' he said. 'I have a little deal on there.'

'Garmisch? How wonderful! What kind of deal?'

Girland regarded her thoughtfully, then grinned.

'Oh, a deal. What are you doing tomorrow?'

'I'm modelling for Benny.'

Garmisch! Vi was thinking, aware that she was now feeling sick. She swallowed the rising saliva back. Garmisch! This was what Paul wanted to know! Well, at least, she had learned something. She could see Girland was disappointed in her, and she couldn't blame him. Paul had said he was an agent. She was scared to ask further questions. She could make him suspicious.

All the fun and joy had gone out of her life now. She remembered Paul's threat: You now have a hook in your mouth . . . and it won't come out. The terror that was gnawing at her had ruined her evening. She had been crazy to have taken so many of those damned pills. Now the sight of the truite soufflee suddenly turned her stomach.

She felt if she didn't get out at once, she would disgrace herself. She turned desperately to Girland, her face pallid, little beads of sweat on her upper lip.

'I'm terribly sorry ... I'm not well... I - I have this awful liver thing ... it hits me ...' She got hastily to her feet. 'I - forgive me ... I'm so sorry ...'

Seeing her obvious distress, Girland moved quickly, taking her arm and leading her to the lobby. Garin came to his side.

'A taxi,' Girland said. 'Mademoiselle is not well.'

There was a taxi waiting by the time Vi had put on her coat.

'I want to go home alone,' she said to Girland. She couldn't another second of his company so great was her terror.

'Thank you . . . I'm sorry...!'

'But of course I'll take you home,' Girland said quietly.

Vi cried hysterically, 'I want to go alone! Leave me alone!' Pushing past Girland, she ran out, got into the taxi and was driven away.

Girland stared after the taxi, then shrugged.

You can't win all the time, he told himself as he walked back to his table, feeling depressed. His evening had collapsed under him.

The steak au poivre had been removed and was being kept hot. The wine waiter served the Burgundy. Girland received his steak, but he now found he had lost his appetite. A gruesome evening, he thought, but cheered up slightly after drinking a glass of the magnificent wine.

Later, he left the restaurant and got into his little Fiat. He sat for a long moment wondering what to do. The time now was 21.50 hrs. He wondered if he should go to the Poker Club where the game would be in full swing, but decided against it. He wasn't in the mood, and besides, he reminded himself he would have to be up horribly early to catch the 07.50 flight to Munich. Feeling deflated, he decided to return to his apartment.

One of these days, he said to himself as he drove with the slow moving traffic, you'll have to find yourself a permanent woman. You're getting bored with looking after yourself... chasing rainbows.

He became even more gloomy with this thought until suddenly he caught sight of a blonde girl running along the sidewalk. She wore a red mini skirt and a tight-fitting white sweater. She ran easily well, and her long legs were slim and beautiful: her full breasts bounced joyfully as she ran.

Girland brightened immediately. So long as there were girls around like this one, he told himself, there must still be fun

and hope left in this drab, drab world.

In a much better frame of mind, he continued on towards his apartment.

* * *

Vi lay on the bed. She was feeling better. She had only just managed to reach the toilet on the eighth floor before she had thrown up. She was now feeling relaxed, a little cold and still frightened, but better. She began to think of that delicious-looking trout left on the plate at Chez Garin and became aware she was hungry.

The door jerked open and Labrey came in. He stood in the doorway glaring at her.

'What the hell are you doing back here?' he snarled. He moved into the tiny room and slammed the door. 'Why aren't you with Girland?'

Vi cringed away from him.

I was ill... I did see him... I took too many pills. I had to leave.'

Labrey stood over her. He looked as if he were about to hit her.

Ill? Didn't you find out anything, you stupid bitch?'

'Don't call me that!' Vi struggled to sit upright, but he put his hand over her face and slammed her back on the pillow.

'Answer me!'

'He told me he was going to Garmisch tomorrow.'

Labrey drew in a long, deep breath, then sat on the bed beside her. He put his hand on her arm, digging his fingers into her flesh.

'Garmisch, Germany? Are you sure?'

'How can I be sure? ... he told me he was... you're hurting me!'

'What happened? Tell me everything!'

As he released the grip on her arm, Vi recounted the meeting at the restaurant and what was said.

Labrey considered what she had told him, then got to his feet. 'All right. Stay here. I must telephone.'

'But I'm hungry,' Vi wailed.

'Then come with me. I want to eat too.'

As Vi struggled off the bed, she asked, 'Have I done right? Are you pleased with me?'

He suddenly smiled at her. The hateful, savage expression went off his face and he was again the Paul she knew.

'You've done damn well... at least, I think so. Come on, let's get out of here.'

At the bistro on Rue Lekain, Labrey left her to order the meal while he shut himself into the telephone booth. He got through to the Soviet Embassy and asked for Malik. Although it was now 21.30 hrs., Malik was still at his desk, plodding through the mass of paper work Kovski had left him.

Labrey reported that Girland was going to Garmisch the following morning.

'Hold on,' Malik said. There was a long pause, then he came back on the line. 'There is only one morning flight to Munich at 07.50. The next flight is at 14.00 hrs. Girland will take the first flight. You are to travel with him. Find out where he is staying. Be careful. This man is very dangerous. I will follow on the next flight. Girland knows me. I can't travel with him. I will wait for you at the Garmisch railway station. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'Your girl is to come with me... she might be useful. Tell her to be at Orly airport at 01.15 hrs. How will I know her?'

Labrey stiffened.

'She won't come... she's difficult.'

'She is to come. Arrange it.' The snap in Malik's voice warned Labrey there was to be no farther argument. 'How will I recognise her?'

'She has blonde hair down to her shoulders. I will tell her to carry a copy of Paris Match.'

'Very well. She is to be waiting outside Hertz Rental car office at Orly at 01.15 hrs. Your ticket to Munich will be at Air France's information desk. You understand what you have to do and where to meet me?'

'Yes. Then tomorrow,' and Malik hung up.

Labrey stood for a long moment in the kiosk, then bracing himself, he walked back to where Vi was eating onion soup.

He sat down and began on his own onion soup.

She looked up, lifting her eyebrows.

'Now what's happening?'

He told her that she was to meet Malik at Orly and fly with him to Munich. Vi stared at him, blood leaving her face.

'No! I won't do it!' she said, pushing aside the soup.

Labrey expected this reaction. He shrugged and went on eating.

'All right,' he said, without looking at her. 'I've warned you. If you won't do it... you take the consequences. They never take no for an answer... you either do what you are told or you get the treatment.'

Vi shivered.

'Eat up!' Labrey said. 'You told me you were hungry.'

'Paul! How could you do this to me?' she said, tears in her eyes. 'How could you?'

Labrey stared at her coldly.

'I've done nothing.' He stirred the soup as he continued to stare at her. 'You went after Girland. If you hadn't such hot pants for any man with money you wouldn't be in this mess. Don't blame me. But you went after him, now you have a hook in your mouth. It won't and can't come out. I'm sorry for you. You either do what you are told or you'll get the treatment.'

'I'll go to the police V Vi said desperately. 'They'll protect me!'

'Do you think so?' Labrey shrugged and finished his soup. 'Okay, go ahead and tell them. What can they do? Do you imagine they will give you a flic to walk behind you for months? You can't get away. You're hooked. You either do what they tell you or they will peel the skin off your face or shove a wedge between your legs.'

Vi sat for a long moment, her eyes closed, her hands clenched into fists on the table, then she pushed back her chair and got up.

'I'll go back and pack a bag,' she said. 'I can't eat any more.'

When she had gone, Labrey grimaced. He too had lost his appetite. When the waiter brought him a steak, he waved it away.

Five

Mary Sherman was tall and elegant: a woman in her early forties. She looked as if she had stepped out of a Beaton photograph: immaculately dressed by Balmain, she was extremely conscious that before long she would be the First Lady of the United States. She was a shrewd, cold and calculating woman with a burning ambition for her husband and herself. She had a cold, magnetic charm. She seemed to have an irresistible interest in people who felt, when they met her, that their cares were her cares: it was a trick that served her husband well.

As Sherman came into the big, comfortable lounge, Mary was at her desk, writing a letter. She turned, looked inquiringly at him with those blue, impersonal eyes and then got to her feet.

'Henry! I've been waiting.' She moved to him and kissed his unshaven cheek with a little grimace of disapproval. 'Was it all right? What happened?'

During the drive back to Washington from Kennedy airport, Sherman had got rid of his false moustache, but he had retained the heavy sun goggles. He had picked up his car which he had left at the airport, but his return hadn't been so lucky as his leaving. As he had come in through the back entrance to his imposing house, Morgan, one of the F.B.I. agents responsible for his security, had stepped out of the shadows. The two men had confronted each other, genuine horror in Morgan's eyes.

Sherman realised Morgan's position and he gave him his wide, easy smile, strictly reserved for the people who might vote for him.

'I felt like a breath of fresh air, Morgan,' he said, 'so I slipped out. I'm feeling fine now.' He put his hand on Morgan's arm, patting it as he had patted so many arms of possible voters. 'Naughty of me ... I'm sorry. Let's keep it between ourselves, huh?' Then before the horrified agent could protest, Sherman had left him and had entered the house.

'Morgan spotted me as I was coming in,' Sherman said, stripping off his overcoat, 'but it's more than his job's worth to report it.' He dropped wearily into an arm chair. 'Sit down, Mary... let me tell you.'

She sat by his side.

'Have you found her?'

'Not yet.' Sherman went on to tell her about his talk with Dorey and what Dorey was doing.

Mary listened to this, her eyes incredulous.

'You mean there is only this ex-agent looking for her?' she exclaimed. 'This is ridiculous, Henry! Why didn't you consult the police?'

'And make this official?' Sherman shook his head. 'Use your brains! We have no choice but to hope Dorey's man will find her.'

'A crook! Henry!'

He looked at her.

'We have to find her, Mary... this man will find her'

She made a savage little movement with her hands.

'And then ... what?'

'It is possible he will be able to persuade her...'

'Oh, for God's sake! Persuade her? Gillian? How can any man persuade a little fiend like that!' She got to her feet and began to move around the big room, beating her fists together. 'Gan't you realise she is determined to ruin us! Why did I have to produce such a child! Listen, Henry . . . you must give up the election. At least, if you withdraw, we can keep our social life intact, but once those filthy films get into the wrong hands ... how can we face anyone and who would want to see us again?'

Sherman got wearily to his feet. He crossed over to the telephone, consulted his pocket address book, then dialled Dorey's home number in Paris.

'Who are you calling?' Mary demanded shrilly.

'Dorey. He may have news for us.'

Dorey was in bed, asleep, when the sound of the telephone bell woke him. He became instantly awake and alert.

'Is that you, Dorey?' He recognised Sherman's voice.

'Yes ... you've got back all right?'

'All right... have you any news for me?'

'Yes... some good... some bad. I must be careful. We are talking over an open line.' There was a pause, then he went on,

'You remember Uncle Joe?'

Sherman stiffened.

'Of course ... what is this, John?'

'His nephews are now interested. Mr Cain was recognised as he left Orly. Joe's nephews know Mr Cain and I met.'

Sherman's face went slack with shock. Watching him, Mary jumped to her feet in alarm.

'What is it, Henry?'

He waved her to silence.

'Do they know about the movie?' he asked Dorey.

'I don't think so, but they are curious. My man has been alerted.'

'Well, go on... what else?'

'My man is going to Garmisch ... he should be on his way in an hour or so,' Dorey said. 'He has received information that the party you are interested in is there.'

'Garmisch... Germany? Are you sure?'

'Yes. The party is staying at the Alpenhoff Hotel'

'Do you think your man can handle this?'

'If he can't, no one can.'

'Then I suppose I must accept this situation . . . I'm not happy about it, but I am relying on you.'

I will do my best, sir.' Dorey's voice sounded flat. Sherman's obvious lack of confidence hurt him. 'I will telephone you again,' and he hung up.

Sherman slowly replaced the receiver and then turned and looked at Mary.

'A Russian agent recognised me at Orly and now the Russians are on to this.'

Mary's hand went to her mouth; her face became waxen.

'You mean they know about these filthy films?'

'Not yet, but they are investigating. This man Girland has located Gillian at the Alpenhoff Hotel, Garmisch.'

'Garmisch? What is she doing there?'

Sherman shrugged impatiently.

'How do I know? Girland is on his way there now.'

Mary suddenly pounded her clenched fists on the back of the settee.

'What can a man like that do? God! I wish the little bitch was dead!'

Sherman shifted uneasily.

'You'd better know, Mary... I ran into Radnitz in Paris of course, he recognised me.'

Mary stared at him, her steel-blue eyes widening.

'Radnitz? He recognised you?'

'Yes. It was one of those things... I told him what was happening.'

'You mean you told him about Gillian and these filthy films?'

'I had no alternative.'

Mary dropped onto the settee.

'Henry! Radnitz only thinks about this contract! You were mad to have told him. Now he will blackmail you!'

Sherman looked patiently at her.

'You're being stupid. Radnitz can't expect the contract unless I am President. He is ready to help me.' He crossed to the cocktail cabinet, made himself a stiff whisky and soda, then came and sat down again.

'Radnitz help you?' Mary's voice was shrill. 'You can't believe a man like that would help anyone!'

'Mary . . . just a moment ago you said you wished Gillian was dead... do you mean that?' Sherman asked, not looking at her.

She sensed the question was serious. For a long moment, she sat still, her face expressionless.

Finally, she said, 'If she was dead, you would become the President of the United States. If she remains alive and continues to blackmail us, you won't become the President... so ... yes ... I suppose I do wish she was dead.'

Sherman stared down at his hands.

'Radnitz said the same thing. He said he could arrange it. I - I told him to go ahead ... I was worked up, but before he takes action, I wanted to talk to you... then if you agree, I have to tell him where to find her.' He stroked the back of his neck, staring out of the window. 'He knows where she is, of course. He knows everything, but if I tell him she is at the Alpenhoff Hotel at Garmisch, he will know this is my okay for him to get rid of her.'

Mary leaned forward, her eyes glittering.

'Well, what are you waiting for?' she demanded. 'We have fought and fought to come this far. Why should our ambitions and our way of life be ruined because we have been unlucky enough to have spawned this hateful, spiteful animal. Call Radnitz and tell him where she is!'

Sherman moved in his chair. His shaking hands went over his sweating face.

'She is our daughter, Mary.'

'Call him!'

They stared at each other for a long moment, then Sherman shook his head.

'No! We can't do this, Mary. We can't!'

'And the Russians? Suppose they find out about this degenerate animal? We can't allow ourselves to be blackmailed by such a creature. She must be silenced!'

Sherman made a helpless gesture.

'Suppose we wait until Girland finds her. He might just possibly talk some sense into her.' He got to his feet. 'I'm going to bed.'

'Yes...!' Mary looked strangely at him. Her eyes were remote. 'The Alpenhoff Hotel, Garmisch... you said?'

'Yes.'

'And where is Radnitz?'

Sherman hesitated.

'Georges V, Paris.' He looked away from her. 'Why do you ask?'

'Go to bed, Henry,' Mary said quietly. 'You need your rest'.

Sherman hesitated again, then moved to the door. He paused and looked at her. Her cold, hard eyes fixed his.

'Go to bed, Henry,' she repeated.

Sherman left the lounge. He moved slowly like an old man moving to his bed, directed by his nurse. She listened to him mount the stairs and the slight creak of the floorboards as he moved into his bedroom.

For sometime, she sat staring out of the window, watching the sun rising, heralding a new day. Her face was stony, only the glitter in her eyes hinted at the turmoil that was going on in her mind.

Finally, she reached for the telephone. She asked the operator to connect her with Georges V hotel, Paris.

* * *

A black Thunderbird drew up under the canopy of the Georges V hotel and the doorman stepped forward to open the car door.

Lu Silk slid out.

'Park it... I won't be long,' he said curtly and walked into the lobby. He crossed to the concierge who was standing behind his desk.

'Mr Radnitz,' Silk said.

The concierge had seen Silk several times. He knew him to be a man who didn't tip and was disagreeable to the staff. The concierge inclined his head coldly, picked up a telephone receiver, spoke briefly, then said to Silk, 'Fourth floor, monsieur, suite 457.'

Silk sneered at him.

'As if I didn't know.' He turned and walked towards the elevators.

Lu Silk (see 'Believed Violent') was Herman Radnitz's professional killer: a tall, lean man in his early forties with a hatchet-shaped face, a glass left eye and a white scar running down the side of his left cheek. His crewcut hair was white. He wore a dark flannel suit that fitted him well, and he carried a black slouch hat in his hand. He had worked for Radnitz now for some years. When Radnitz wished to get rid of anyone troublesome, he called for Silk. For \$ 15,000 as a killing fee and \$30,000 as a yearly retainer whether he worked or not, Lu Silk made a satisfactory living.

He arrived on the fourth floor and rang the bell of suite 457. The door was opened by Ko-Yu, Radnitz's Japanese servant and chauffeur.

'Hi,' Silk said as he entered. 'The old man waiting for me?'

Ko-Yu regarded Silk, his face expressionless, his manner distant.

'Mr Radnitz is expecting you.'

Silk went into the big, luxuriously furnished sitting-room where Radnitz was at his desk, dictating to his secretary, Fritz Kurt, a small, thin man who glanced up as Silk came in.

Radnitz broke off his dictation and waved Kurt away. There was a moment's pause while Kurt left the room, then Radnitz said, 'I have work for you.'

'That's easy to guess.' Silk was in awe of no man, and he never showed any respect when talking to Radnitz. He was the only member of Radnitz's staff who wasn't a 'Yes-man'. He sat down and crossed one leg over the other. 'Who is it this time?'

'You are ready to travel immediately?'

'Of course. I always keep a bag in the car. Where to?'

'Munich.' Radnitz opened a brief-case and took from it a bulky envelope. 'Here are your instructions with your ticket and travellers cheques. You are to get rid of two people. A girl: Gillian Sherman. A man: Pierre Rosnold. There is a photograph of the girl here, but I have no photograph of the man, but they will be together. This is important, Silk. You will receive thirty thousand dollars when I know they have been eliminated.'

Silk got up, crossed to the desk and took the envelope Radnitz was offering him. He returned to his chair, sat down and removed the contents of the envelope. He paused to study the photograph of Gillian Sherman. Her beauty had no effect on him. For more years than he could remember, Silk had lost interest in women. He read through two typewritten pages of instructions, then he looked up.

'I don't hit them until these films are recovered? How do I know when they are recovered?'

'This man Girland will get them. He will be constantly watched. You don't have to worry about that. Your job is to get rid of these two when you are told to go ahead.'

'How do you want this arranged?'

Radnitz selected a cigar from a cedar, gold-topped box.

'An accident. . . perhaps a hunting accident?'

'The two of them?' Silk shook his head. 'No... one of them could be shot by mistake, but not two of them. The German

police aren't stupid.'

Radnitz shrugged impatiently. Small details always bored him.

'I leave it to you. I have a place near Oberammergau. I have a good man there and I have already alerted him. He will do everything that is necessary. His name is Count Hans von Goltz. You will be met at the Munich airport and taken to my place. By that time, von Goltz will have information for you. You need take no weapons. There is everything you may need at my place. I have some thirty good men who look after the estate. You can use them if you want them.'

Silk put the envelope in his pocket and got to his feet.

'I'd better get off if I'm to catch the 14.00 hr. plane.'

'Be careful of Girland,' Radnitz warned. 'He is dangerous.'

Silk showed his even white teeth in a vicious smile.

'I'll watch it,' he said and left the suite

Because Mary Sherman had forgotten to tell Radnitz that now the Russians were also involved in this hunt for the daughter of the future President, Silk left the Georges V hotel thinking he had only Girland to deal with. Had he known that he was to come up against not only Girland, but Malik as well, he would have been less confident he was on to easy money as he drove his Thunder bird towards Orly airport.

* * *

Feeling slightly jaded, Girland passed through the Customs barrier at the Munich airport and made his way across the big hall to the Hertz Rental car service. Seeing where he was going, Labrey who had been following him, paused. He had little money to spare. There was no question of his hiring a car. His Soviet masters were tight with money. He watched Girland as he talked to the girl clerk.

Girland showed his Hertz Credit Card and told the girl, a pretty blonde, he wanted a Mercedes 230.

'Yes, sir,' the girl said. 'How long will you need it, do you think?'

I don't know.' Girland found the girl attractive. 'It depends on how much I like your country. If it's as lovely as you are, I might spend the rest of my days here.'

The girl giggled and blushed.

'Shall we say... a week?'

'Leave it open ... I don't know.' Girland leaned on the counter while she completed the form, then he signed it.

'I'll get the car for you, sir.' She used the telephone and then hung up. 'In five minutes, sir.' She looked adoringly at him as she smiled. 'The exit door is to your right.'

'Thank you.'

They exchanged glances, then feeling considerably revitalised, Girland left the airport and stood waiting in the pale sunshine for the car to arrive.

'Excuse me, sir,' a voice said at his side. 'Would you be going to Garmisch?'

Girland turned. Standing by his side was a tall thin young man with long blond hair and wearing green tinted sunglasses. He had a rucksack on his back.

'Sure,' Girland said. 'Do you want a lift?'

I was hoping for one,' Labrey said, 'but I don't want to push myself onto you.'

At this moment a black Mercedes pulled up beside them. The white coated driver got out and saluted Girland.

'You understand the car, sir?'

'Oh, sure.' Girland tossed his suitcase onto the back seat. He tipped the man, then turning to Labrey, he went on, 'Hop in.'

Labrey slid into the passenger's seat. He put the rucksack down between his feet.

Girland got under the driving wheel and set the car in motion.

Labrey said, 'Thank you very much, sir.' The conversation from the beginning had been in French. 'You're an American, aren't you?'

'That's right.'

'You look American, but your French is perfect.'

I guess I get by. Where are you from?' Girland asked as he headed the car fast along the highway towards Munich.

'I'm from Paris. I'm on vacation. I plan to walk through the Isar valley to Bad Tolz,' Labrey said. He had spent his time profitably while in the aircraft, reading a guide book of Germany which he had bought at Orly airport.

'Fine walking country,' Girland said.

Labrey looked shiftily at him.

'Are you on vacation or on business, sir?'

'A bit of both. You're walking from Garmisch?'

'Yes, but I will stay in Garmisch for a few days if I can find a cheap hotel.'

'You won't have any trouble about that. There are plenty of good, cheap hotels to choose from.' Girland spoke from experience as he often came to Garmisch for the winter sports.

Having been warned by Malik about Girland, Labrey decided not to ask any further questions. It was truly a bit of luck to be riding with this ex-CIA agent who obviously was quite unsuspecting. Labrey was pleased with himself.

The conversation got around to Paris and the night clubs. Labrey could tell Girland of two or three he didn't know and Girland could tell Labrey of a dozen and more he didn't know. Chatting this way, they reached Munich and Girland who knew the route, took the outer-ring road and got onto E.6 highway that led directly to Garmisch, under 100 kilometres from Munich. Once on this highway, Girland increased speed and within a little over an hour and a half, he drove into

Gannisch's crowded, narrow main street.

Pulling up by the square, he said, 'You'll find three or four hotels over there to the left.'

'Are you going to one of them?' Labrey asked as he opened the car door.

'My hotel's further down the road.' Girland offered his hand. 'Have a good vacation.'

'Thanks for the ride, sir.'

Girland nodded, started the car moving and drove on to the Alpenhoff Hotel. Labrey half ran, half walked after the Mercedes which was moving slowly as the traffic was heavy. He saw Girland swing the car into the driveway of the hotel, then satisfied he knew where Girland was staying, he went in search of a cheap hotel for himself.

As Girland walked into the softly lit hotel lobby, a short, chunky man, wearing a canary coloured polo neck sweater and white slacks paused to let him pass. Behind him was a girl who Girland immediately recognised as Gillian Sherman from the movie he had seen. He was sure he wasn't mistaken. She was slightly above average height. Her bronze-coloured hair was cut in the shape of a helmet which suited her attractive, sun-tanned face. She had on a white square-necked sweater and black stretch-pants, revealing her sensual figure.

Girland immediately stopped and stood aside to let her pass. She favoured him with a long, searching stare and then a smile, saying, 'Merci, monsieur.'

'Come on, Gilly, for God's sake!' the man said in French. 'We're late already.'

They crossed to where a scarlet T.R.4 was parked, got in, and with a violent roar from the exhaust, the chunky man whipped the car dangerously fast into the main street and drove away out of sight at speed.

Girland approached the reception desk, setting down his suitcase.

'Mr Girland booking in,' he said to the clerk. 'Was that Mr Rosnold who just left? I believe I recognised him.'

'That is correct, sir.'

'He's not checking out?'

'Oh, no, sir. He is with us for another week.'

Satisfied, Girland completed the usual form, went up to his room, unpacked his bag and changed into a sweat shirt and hipsters. As the time was only after 11.00 hrs., he decided to take a look at the country since he guessed Rosnold and Gillian could be out for the day.

As he left his room, an elderly chambermaid came along the corridor. Girland smiled, asking in his fluent German, 'Is Mr Rosnold on this floor, do you know?'

'He's right there,' the woman said, returning Girland's smile. She pointed to a door exactly opposite Girland's room. 'But he's out now'.

Girland thanked her and went on his way. He felt he had begun the assignment not only with a lot of luck, but well.

As he drove from the hotel, Labrey, sitting at a cafe near the hotel watched him leave. There was nothing Labrey could do about this. He would have to wait until Malik arrived, but at least, he knew where Girland was staying. The next move was to find out why he had come to Garmisch.

Girland returned to the hotel for lunch having driven as far as Wies where he visited what is considered by connoisseurs to be the most beautiful rococo church in Germany. Girland was not an admirer of this form of art, and after taking a hasty look around the massive, ornate interior, he decided to drive back slowly, savouring the magnificent scenery, the hills, the forests and the green of the rich spring meadows.

It was while he was driving along a narrow road bordered by wild flowers that he saw ahead of him a scarlet sports car, parked on the side of the verge. He slowed, seeing the hood was open and Gillian Sherman sitting in the passenger's seat. He slowed to a crawl, and as he approached, he saw Rosnold peering at the motor.

My lucky day, Girland thought and pulled up.

'Do you want any help?' he asked in French.

Rosnold regarded him. He was a man in his middle forties, but in good trim with a well-built, muscular body. His eyes were a little too close-set and his mouth hard, but he was reasonably handsome. He smiled, a tight-lipped smile, then raised his hands helplessly.

'The damn thing just stopped. Do you know anything about cars?'

Girland slid out of the Mercedes and went over to the T.R.4. He purposely didn't look at Gillian.

'Try to start her,' he said. 'Let's hear what she sounds like.'

Rosnold got under the driving wheel. The dynamo whirred, but the engine remained dead.

'All right for gas?'

'Three-quarters full.'

'Then you could have dirt in the petrol feed. Got any tools?'

Rosnold found the tool wallet and handed it over. It took Girland ten minutes to get the engine restarted. He stepped back and smiled.

'There you are... simple when you know how.'

Rosnold said gratefully, 'Thank you very much. You are most kind.'

'Glad to be of help.' Girland now looked at Gillian who gave him a wide, fascinating smile.

'I think you are wonderful,' she said.

'If you will permit me, madame, I will return the compliment,' Girland said. He gave her his long stare of admiration that had so often sent tingles up the spines of so many girls, then he returned to his car and drove off.

At the hotel he had a good lunch, then went up to his room, stripped off, put on a shortie dressing-gown and stretched

out on the bed. Girland believed in rest when there was time to rest. Within a minute or so, he was asleep. He woke a little before 18.00 hrs., took a shower, shaved and put on a midnight-blue suit, a white polo-neck sweater, black suede shoes. He surveyed himself in the full-length mirror. Satisfied, he pushed a small armchair up to the door, opened the door a crack and sat down to wait.

At 19.30 hrs. he heard a door open and he became alert. Leaning forward, he peered through the crack to see Rosnold come out of his

room, insert a key in the lock and turn it. Girland shoved the armchair away and moved out into the corridor. He too locked his door and turned to make for the elevator.

Rosnold recognised him and smiled.

'So we meet again,' he said and offered his hand.

Girland shook hands.

'I didn't know you were staying here,' he said. 'No further trouble with your car?'

'No... thanks to you. If you're not in a hurry, give me the pleasure of buying you a drink,' Rosnold said. 'I am most grateful to you.'

'Not at all.' Girland fell into step beside Rosnold. 'I'm here for a short vacation. I've been cooped up in Paris too long and I felt the need to stretch my legs. Would you know of a good restaurant around here? I get bored with hotel meals all the time.'

They reached the elevator and went down to the ground floor as Rosnold said, 'You mean you are on your own? Come and dine with us. I would take it as a favour.'

'But your wife...!' Girland let this hang.

Rosnold laughed.

'She's not my wife. We go around together. She'll be delighted. She's already told me she thinks you are dreamy.'

Girland laughed.

'You certainly know how to pick them.'

They went into the tiny bar and got the only, corner table. Both ordered double Scotch on the rocks.

'I'm in the photographic racket,' Rosnold volunteered as they waited for their drinks. 'What's your racket?'

I can't say I have one single racket,' Girland said and grinned. 'I work a number: agent for this and that. I work when I feel like it which isn't often. I guess I'm lucky. My old man left me some heavy money which I take care of.'

Rosnold looked impressed. He eyed Girland's clothes which had been bought with Dorey's money from a top tailor in London.

'Some people have all the luck. I have to work for my living.'

'You don't look as if you have to grumble.'

'Oh, I get by.'

As the drinks arrived, Gillian Sherman came into the bar. She was wearing a scarlet trousered cocktail suit of light nylon and wool with a gold link-chain around her slim waist. Girland thought she looked sensational. The two men got to their feet.

'This is Gilly... Gillian Sherman.' Rosnold blinked, then turned to Girland. 'I'm sorry . . . damn it! I haven't introduced myself. Pierre Rosnold.'

Girland was looking at Gilly.

'Mark Girland,' he said and took the hand she offered. Her grip was cool and firm. Mischief and sex danced in her eyes and she surveyed him. 'Miss Sherman, this brief encounter has made my vacation.'

'What makes you think it is going to be brief?' Gilly asked as she sat down. 'Pierre, a Cinzano bitter, please.'

As Rosnold went to the bar, Girland said, 'Two's company ...'

She regarded him.

'Can't you do better than that?'

'I could.'

They stared at each other. Girland gave her his intense look he had cultivated for just such an occasion. It was completely insincere, but it usually had a devastating effect on most women. Gilly reacted to it as he hoped she would. She leaned forward and smiled at him.

'Yes ... I think you could,' she murmured.

Rosnold joined them with the drink and set it before her. They talked. When Girland wished, he could be witty, amusing and often bawdy. Smoothly, he went into his act, and after a few minutes, he was holding the stage with Rosnold grinning appreciatively and Gilly doubled up with laughter.

It was while he was being his most entertaining that a tall, lean man came into the bar. He was about forty years of age with thick, flaxen hair taken straight back off a narrow forehead. His deeply-tanned face was long and narrow and his alert eyes a washed-out blue. He wore a bottle-green velvet smoking jacket, a frilled white shirt, a green string tie and black trousers. Around his thick muscular left wrist was a heavy platinum chain. On his right wrist a platinum Omega watch. He had that confident, slightly arrogant air reserved for the immensely rich. He merely glanced at the three sitting at the corner table, then sat on a stool up at the bar.

'Good evening, Count von Goltz,' the barman said, bowing. 'What is your pleasure?'

'A glass of champagne ... my usual,' the man said, and taking a heavy gold Cigarette case from his pocket, he selected an oval-shaped cigarette which the barman moved forward to light.

'Phew!' Gilly breathed. 'Some doll!'

Girland found her concentration in him had snapped. She was now studying the back of the blond man, her eyes calculating.

Rosnold touched her arm.

'Do you mind getting your eyes back on me, cherie?' he said, a slight rasp in his voice.

'Buy him for me, Pierre . . . he's simply gorgeous.' Gilly had deliberately raised her voice.

The blond man turned and regarded her. He smiled, an easy, pleasant smile.

'Your French tells me you are an American, mademoiselle, and I adore uninhibited Americans.' He slid off his stool and gave a stiff little bow. Then looking at Rosnold, he said, 'But I may be intruding, sir. If I am, I will take my drink into the lounge.'

Both Rosnold and Girland got to their feet.

'Intruding? Of course not,' Rosnold said. 'Perhaps you would care to join us?'

'For a few minutes... I would be delighted.' Von Goltz pulled up a chair. 'Count Hans von Goltz,' and he bowed.

Rosnold made the introductions while Gilly continued to stare at von Goltz.

'You mean you are a real count?' she asked breathlessly. 'I've never met a real count before!'

Von Goltz laughed.

'I am delighted to be the first.' His eyes shifted to Girland. 'And you? Are you also American?'

'That's right,' Girland said. 'I'm here just for a short vacation.'

Von Goltz nodded.

'This is ideal country for a vacation.' Sitting down, he began to talk about Garmisch and the surrounding district. Soon the conversation became general. When von Goltz had finished his glass of champagne, Rosnold asked him to have another, but von Goltz shook his head.

'Thank you, but I am afraid I must leave you. Please excuse me. I have a dinner date.' He regarded Gilly. 'If you have nothing better to do, perhaps you and your friends would care to visit my modest Schloss* not far from here? It could interest you. I can offer you all kinds of amusements. There is a heated swimming-pool, a lovely forest, twelve hundred acres of bridle paths and shooting - although Gilly clapped her hands, her eyes opening wide.

'That's marvellous! We would love to come!'

'My place is large and often lonely,' von Goltz said and lifted his shoulders. 'I live alone. I would welcome you all if you would care to stay for five or six days. I assure you you won't be bored. Would you all give me the honour of being your host?'

Gilly turned to Rosnold.

'Oh, do let's! It sounds absolutely dreamy!'

'It is very kind of you,' Rosnold said. 'If you are sure we won't be a burden, then we would happily accept your invitation.'

Von Goltz looked smilingly at Girland.

'And you, sir?'

This really must be my lucky day, Girland was thinking. Now I will have the chance to talk to this girl alone.

'Thank you,' he said. 'As I told you, I am here on vacation. I would like nothing better. It is very kind of you.'

Von Goltz shrugged.

'It will be my pleasure.' He got to his feet. 'I will send one of my servants here at midday tomorrow. He will direct you to the Schloss. It is only an hour's fast drive from Garmisch. You will arrive in time for lunch.' He took Gilly's hand and brushed it lightly with his lips, then shook hands with Rosnold and Girland. 'Until tomorrow . . . good night,' and with a pleased smile, he left the bar.

'What do you know!' Gilly said as soon as the count was out of hearing. 'A real, live count! And he has a castle! Gosh!' Rosnold looked at Girland, a puzzled expression in his eyes.

'I didn't know Germans were quite so hospitable ... did you?'

Girland laughed.

'I very much doubt if you and I were on our own, we would have been invited. I think mademoiselle in her scarlet outfit caught the count's eye.'

'Then you both should be very grateful to me,' Gilly said, laughing. 'Anyway, let's check out, Pierre. If we are going to stay at the castle for a week, there's no point in keeping our rooms on.'

'Yes.' Rosnold got to his feet. 'And when we've checked out, we'll eat. I'm hungry.'

The three went to the reception desk.

'We have been invited to stay with Count von Goltz,' Rosnold explained to the clerk. 'We will be checking out tomorrow morning. Will you have my bill ready?'

'Certainly, sir. You should have a very happy stay with the count,' the clerk said, obviously impressed.

'That goes for me too,' Girland said.

They went out into the courtyard where the cars were parked.

'Come in my car,' Girland said. 'There's more room.'

Gilly slid into the front passenger's seat and Rosnold got in at the back.

'Where to?' Girland asked.

'Turn right as you leave the hotel. The restaurant is about eight kilometres from here. I'll direct you,' Rosnold said. Watched by Malik and Labrey who were sitting at the opposite cafe, Girland drove away from the hotel.

* * *

They made an odd-looking trio as they stood outside Garmisch's railway station. Vi with her long, blonde hair, her pale-blue hipsters and red wool sweater looked absurdly small beside Malik who was wearing a short black leather coat and baggy black corduroy trousers, his silver coloured hair like a burnished steel helmet. Max Lintz in a coarsely-woven brown sweater and brown slacks with a brown woollen cap on his head stood on Vi's other side, his small, quick eyes examining the passers-by suspiciously and intently.

They had arrived only a few minutes ago. The time was just after 19.00 hrs. When Malik had reached Munich airport, he had gone to the Hertz Rental service and had hired a Volkswagen 1500. While he was waiting for the car to arrive, he had noticed a tall, white-haired man with a glass eye whom he had seen on the aircraft, standing near him. Malik merely glanced at him, and Lu Silk, not knowing who this giant was, gave him a steady stare from his one cold, hard eye and then looked away.

A big, black Mercedes pulled up and the driver waved to Silk who crossed the road and got into the car. As he was driven away, the Volkswagen arrived.

Malik told Lintz to get in at the back. Vi got in beside Malik, shrinking as far away from him as she could.

Malik had stuck terror into Vi the moment she had seen him at Orly airport. He had come up to her, stared at her with his evil green eyes and had asked abruptly:

'Mademoiselle Martin?'

She had nodded dumbly.

He had held out a huge, cruel-looking hand.

'Your passport.'

With shaking hands, she had found her passport in her bag and had given it to him.

'Follow me,' and he stalked into the airport.

They went together through the police barrier. For a brief moment Vi had been tempted to scream to the police officer that she was being kidnapped, but remembering Paul's warning, terror kept her silent.

In the reception lounge, Max Lintz had joined them. He had glanced at Vi without interest and then had drawn Malik aside. The two men had talked together in German, ignoring Vi who stood uneasily, shaking a little, while she waited.

On the aircraft, Malik had let her sit by herself while he and Lintz occupied the two seats behind her. All during the flight, they had talked softly in German while Vi had sat miserably wondering what was going to happen to her.

While waiting outside the railway station, she had screwed up her courage and asked Malik for her passport.

He turned and looked at her as if he was seeing her for the first time and didn't like what he was seeing.

'I keep it,' he snapped and looked away.

'But it's mine!' Vi cried with a sudden desperate flash of courage. 'You can't keep it! Give it to me!'

Lintz turned to stare at her as Malik said in his flat, dead voice, 'I keep it.'

Vi bit her lip and moved away. She felt trapped, and again terror went through her, leaving her cold and shaking.

'Here he is,' Lintz said suddenly.

Labrey came hurrying up the street to join them.

'I lost my way,' he said breathlessly, ignoring Vi. 'I'm sorry I'm late.'

Malik drew him aside.

'What has been happening?'

'Girland is at the Alpenhoff Hotel,' Labrey said. 'He has hired a Mercedes. Right now he is in the hotel.'

'Is there a hotel near his?'

'Right opposite. I've booked us all in.'

'Then we will go there now,' Malik regarded Labrey. 'You have done well.'

Vi and Labrey got in the back of the Volkswagen and Malik and Lintz in the front. Vi put her hand on Labrey's and looked beseechingly at him, but he snatched his hand away. He knew Malik could see them in the driving mirror and he was scared of Malik.

It took only a few minutes to reach the Alpenhoff Hotel. The hotel opposite was more modest. Malik sent Lintz and Vi into the hotel and he and Labrey took a table on the sidewalk and ordered beer. From there they sat they could look directly into the Alpenhoff Hotel's courtyard.

They saw Count von Goltz leave in a silver-grey Rolls Royce. He meant nothing to them. Then ten minutes later they saw Girland, Gilly and Rosnold come out and get into Girland's hired Mercedes and drive away.

'Who is the woman?' Malik asked.

'I haven't seen her before.'

Malik brooded, then he said, 'I want your girl's wristwatch.'

Labrey gaped at him.

'Vi's watch?'

'Get it!' the snap in Malik's voice brought Labrey to his feet. He hurried into the hotel, up the stairs to Vi's bedroom where he found her sitting on the bed, her head in her hands. She looked up as he came in and jumped to her feet.

'He's taken my passport!' she said wildly. 'You must get it back! Paul! I...'

'Shut up! Give me your watch!'

She shrank back, staring at him.

'My watch... why?'

'Give it to me!' Labrey's thin face had that vicious expression that always frightened Vi. With shaking fingers she undid

the gold-plated strap and handed him the watch.

Snatching it from her, Labrey left the room and ran down to the street.

'Here it is,' he said, handing the watch to Malik.

Malik examined it and his short, thick nose wrinkled.

'It isn't much but it will have to do. Wait here.' He got to his feet and moved to the edge of the crowded sidewalk. He had to wait a few moments before there was a gap in the steady flow of traffic, then he crossed the street and walked into the Alpenhoff Hotel's lobby.

The reception clerk looked up from his work as Malik came to rest at the desk. He stood up and inclined his head politely.

'Yes, sir?'

'A young lady left here a few minutes ago,' Malik said in his fluent German. 'She was wearing a red trouser outfit. As she got into her car, she dropped this.' He held up the watch. 'I wish to return it to her.'

'Thank you, sir. I will give it to her with pleasure.'

Malik regarded the clerk with a suggestive smile.

'I would like to give it to her myself. Who is she?'

'Miss Gillian Sherman. I believe she has gone out to dinner, but she will be back some time tonight.'

'Then I will return the watch tomorrow. Would you tell her I have found it?'

'Certainly, but you should be here before ten o'clock tomorrow. Miss Sherman is leaving us.' The clerk guessed this shabbily dressed giant was after a reward.

'If I miss her, do you know where she is going?'

'She will be staying at the Obermitten Schloss,' the clerk told him. 'Count von Goltz's estate.'

'Then I will be back before ten o'clock.'

Malik walked across the lobby to the row of telephone kiosks. He put through a call to a Soviet agent in Munich. He learned the Obermitten Schloss was owned by Herman Radnitz. Malik knew all about Radnitz. He talked for some minutes to the agent, instructing him to call Kovski in Paris. The agent promised to call him back at the hotel as soon as he had made contact with Kovski. Malik left word with the hotel's telephone operator where he could be found and went into the hotel lounge to wait. An hour later, his Munich call came through. He listened to the information he was given, grunted his thanks and hung up.

Six

It was after midnight when Girland returned to his hotel bedroom. It had been a good evening. The meal had been a little heavy, but excellent, and the restaurant, gay and amusing. Both Gillian and Rosnold had been good companions. If it hadn't been for Dorey and his dreary assignment, Girland thought as he undressed, he would have thoroughly enjoyed the hours he had spent with these two, but mindful that he had to earn Sherman's ten thousand dollars, he tried to switch his mind to the best approach to get the three films from Gillian.

But full of good food and German wine, he couldn't be bothered, and decided to concentrate on the problem in the morning. Tomorrow, the three of them would be at the count's castle. There would certainly come an opportunity to talk to Gillian during their five days stay.

Taking a shower, and then getting into bed, he reached for a cigarette and lit it. Gillian had made an impression on him. She was beautiful, gay, amusing and sensual. He found it hard to believe she had taken part in the film he had seen.

Thinking about her, Girland came to the conclusion that he dug for her.

Rosnold had also been amusing. Girland always kept an open mind about people. If this man made money by shooting pornographic films, this was no affair of his, Girland told himself. What he did for a living didn't matter. This was Girland's philosophy. It was the people themselves that were important, not what they did.

While he was finishing his cigarette and thinking he would now sleep, the telephone bell at his side buzzed, startling him.

He picked up the receiver. 'Yes'

'It's me.'

He recognised Gillian's husky voice and immediately he became alert.

'Hello ... what do you want?'

'I'm lonely.'

'Funny thing ... I seem to be lonely too.'

'Shall we be lonely together?'

'Then we wouldn't be lonely, would we? Two people together can't be lonely, can they?'

'Some can.'

There was a long pause while Girland stared up at the ceiling, trying to make up his mind if this was a good or a bad move.

I am in Room 462. It's at the end of your corridor,' Gilly told him.

'Do you like it at the end of the corridor?'

Gilly giggled.

'This is an invitation, stupid, not a geography lesson.'

Girland decided this invitation was unwise. Gilly was Rosnold's property. He didn't believe in poaching. 'It's too far,' he said firmly. 'Go to sleep,' and he replaced the receiver. He stubbed out his cigarette and relaxed back in bed. He didn't have to wait long. The door eased open and Gilly slid into his room, closing the door softly after her. She had on a white robe to cover a shortie nightdress. Her slippers were pale-blue. She looked very attractive as she regarded him. 'Hello there,' Girland said, smiling at her. 'As lonely as all that?' She came to the end of the bed and glared at him. 'You are a pig!' she exclaimed. 'When you had my invitation, you should have come to me!' 'I told you to go to sleep,' Girland reminded her. 'But since you don't want to sleep, and since I don't want to sleep, you'd better get in here before you catch cold.' He flicked aside the blanket and sheet and shifted over to make room for her. 'If you imagine I intend to sleep with you now, you are making a great mistake. I came just to tell you that I think you're a pig!' Girland flicked the blanket and sheet back into place. 'That has now been recorded ... I am a pig. Good night,' and he reached for the bedside lamp and turned it off. The room was plunged into darkness. 'Put that light on!' Gilly said sharply. 'How can I find my way out?' 'Fall over the furniture. I want to go to sleep,' Girland said out of the darkness. 'Good night... I'll see you in the morning.' She groped her way around the bed as Girland, grinning in the darkness, once more flicked back the blanket and sheet. There was a pause, then he heard the rustle of her clothes as they dropped to the floor. 'I hate you,' Gilly said, 'but now I'm here, I will stay.' 'I thought you might. It's a drag to walk all that way down that long corridor.' Girland reached out, his hands sliding around her naked back, pulling her down on him. He lay still with her resting on him. She began to unbutton his pyjama jacket. His hands moved down her back and clasped her firm buttocks. She gave a long ecstatic sigh and her mouth found his. During his chequered career, Girland had known many women. The act of love to him was always a unique experience. Sometimes he was disappointed, sometimes he was satisfied, but this experience with Gilly was something he hadn't experienced before. Later, they rested side by side, both breathless. Girland couldn't remember a more exciting and exhausting episode. The moonlight came through the chinks in the shutters, making a pattern on the carpet. The sound of fast-moving cars came and went. Faintly he could hear swing music from the cafe opposite. Gilly touched his chest. She sighed. 'I knew you had to be good, but I didn't imagine you could be that good.' 'Sleep,' Girland said. 'No post mortems.' She curled up against him, one long leg across his legs, her face close to his, her warm, scented breath fanning his neck. They slept. The sunlight coming through the shutters brought Girland awake. He screwed up his eyes and then opened them as he yawned. Gilly lay by his side, beautiful in her abandoned nakedness. She breathed gently, her shell-pink nipples bathed in a streak of sunlight. Girland put his hand lightly on the apex of her thighs. She murmured something and turning to him, her eyes still closed, she slid her arms around him. This drowsy passion was less violent than before but more gentle and more satisfying. Once she cried out, her body stiffening, but then she became relaxed again, her breath quick and irregular. Again they slept. Later still, Girland woke, raised his head and looked at his strap watch. The time was twenty minutes after nine. He prodded Gilly gently. 'Time you went to your room,' he said. 'It's long after nine.' 'Who cares?' Gilly said drowsily, stretching her lovely body. 'Kiss me.' But Girland was alive to the risk. He had no idea what time Rosnold got up. He didn't want Rosnold to find Gilly's bedroom empty. He slid out of bed and went into the bathroom. Before turning on the shower, he called. 'Oh your way. I'll see you downstairs in an hour.'

When he had shaved and showered, he returned to the bedroom to find she had gone. He felt relaxed and fine. He ordered toast, marmalade and coffee and then dressed. He threw open the french windows and stood, breathing in the sharp May air, watching the movement of the people on the street below.

* * *

At the modest hotel opposite the Alpenhoff, Malik left his room, walked down the corridor to Labrey's room. He tapped and entered. Vi, wearing bra and panties was making up her face before the small mirror. Labrey was putting on his shoes. 'Just bust in!' Vi said angrily, snatching up her wrap and struggling into it. 'Haven't you any manners?' Malik ignored her. He tossed her passport on the bed, then he signed to Labrey to follow him. Out in the passage, Malik said, 'I have no further work for you two for the moment. You are to return to Paris.' He took from a worn wallet several 100 DM bills and handed them to Labrey. 'I am satisfied with your work. Lintz and I can now handle it. You are to report to Kovski. Tell him I am still following Girland. Tell him nothing else. Do you understand?'

Labrey nodded. He was relieved he could take Vi back to Paris. He had had a hell of a night with her.

'And she?' Labrey asked.

'Tell her she will work for us in the future. Give her some of that money. There is plenty for both of you,' Malik said. 'I thought I might use her here, but she is now no longer necessary. Get off quickly.'

He left Labrey and went downstairs and joined Lintz who was sitting at a table outside the hotel.

'You've checked us out?' Malik asked as he sat down.

'Yes ... we're all ready to go.'

'I've got rid of those two upstairs,' Malik said. 'They have served their purpose. Now, they will only be in the way.'

'So what do we do now?' Lintz asked.

'The three of them will be going to the Obermitten Schloss some time this morning,' Malik said, lighting a cigarette. 'We follow them there. This is rather like a jigsaw puzzle, but now, the pieces are falling into place. I know now that this girl, Gillian Sherman is the daughter of the future President of the United States and that they are estranged. She is living with Pierre Rosnold, the man she is travelling with. He specialises in pornographic films. The girl is without morals and we can assume she has made a pornographic film. We know Sherman had a movie projector with him which he gave to Dorey who passed it on to Girland. I think it is obvious the girl is blackmailing her father. Now Radnitz's nephew appears on the scene. We know Radnitz and Sherman have a bargain. Radnitz will get a big contract from Sherman if Sherman becomes President. It would be in Radnitz's interest to stop the girl blackmailing her father. The girl, Rosnold and Girland have been invited to Radnitz's Schloss . . . why? Knowing Radnitz, they are going there to get their throats cut.'

'Do we care?' Lintz asked, looking at Malik.

'Yes. For reasons I will not discuss with you, we care,' Malik said quietly.

Half an hour later, while the two men still sat watching the movement of the crowd as it passed along the narrow sidewalk, Labrey and Vi came from the hotel. Labrey was carrying a suitcase. He paused at Malik's side.

'We're on our way,' he said. 'If there is anything else ... ?'

Malik shook his head.

'No ... you have been useful... get off.'

Vi stood away from Malik. She could scarcely believe she was leaving this silver-haired giant who so terrified her.

With Labrey, she began to walk towards the railway station.

'Pretty girl,' Lintz said, eyeing Vi's legs as she moved quickly along the street.

'A whore,' Malik said indifferently, 'but she will be useful.'

'Yes.' Lintz laughed, then seeing Malik was blank-faced and his eyes brooding, he cut off his laugh and remained silent.

A few minutes to mid-day, a black Mercedes turned into the Alpenhoff Hotel's driveway and pulled up outside the entrance. A short, thick-set man, wearing a green livery of cloth and leather, went into the hotel.

Malik became alert.

A few minutes later, the man came out followed by Gillian, Girland and Rosnold. Two porters carried their bags.

'They are on their way,' Malik said. 'Get our bags.'

Lintz went into the hotel.

The short, thick-set man in the green livery was talking to Girland.

'If you will follow me in your car sir, I will take you to the Schloss,' he was saying. 'It's about an hour's drive.'

Gilly said to Rosnold, 'I want to drive in the Merc. You follow us... okay?'

'No!' Rosnold said curtly. 'You are driving with me!'

Overhearing this exchange, Girland went to his hired Mercedes and got in. Without waiting to see if Gilly was winning her argument, he started the engine and followed the black Mercedes out into the main street.

Seeing him leave, Gilly grimaced and shrugged. She climbed into the T.R.4.

Rosnold said, 'Are you falling for that fellow?'

Gilly eyed him, then shook her head.

'If I'm going to fall for anyone, I'll fall for the count... he has the money.'

Rosnold got in the car and started the engine. 'I could get tired of you if you can't keep away from other men.' Gilly made a face at him. 'Would that be such a disaster?'

Rosnold scowled at her, then drove out into the main street and headed after Girland.

* * *

Count Hans von Goltz sat in a high-backed leather chair, facing Lu Silk who sat on a leather-covered settee. The two men were in the baronial hall of the Obermitten Schloss: a vast room with wooden beams supporting the arched ceiling. The big picture window looked out onto the magnificent park with its close-cut lawns and gnarled trees. Beyond the set garden was the forest.

Count Hans von Goltz was Herman Radnitz's nephew.

Had it not been for Radnitz, von Goltz would now be serving a life sentence for murder and rape. When he was sixteen years of age and living with his parents on their estate near the Saxon Forest, east of Hamburg, he had come across an Austrian girl student on a hiking vacation. She had strayed onto the von Goltz land and she had asked him the way to the main highway to Hamburg. They were completely alone together, and von Goltz had made advances which were repulsed. Von Goltz was used to having his way. There was a struggle, and after the brutal rape, he had strangled the girl. Leaving her body half-concealed in the bracken he had returned home. He told his father what he had done. One of the gamekeepers who hated von Goltz had heard the girl's screams. He had arrived on the scene a few minutes after von

Goltz had left. He had found von Goltz's watch by the body. It had been torn from von Goltz's wrist in the struggle. It so happened that Herman Radnitz was staying at the Schloss, spending a few days with his sister, von Goltz's mother. Von Goltz's father, horrified at what his son had told him, went to Radnitz. Radnitz advised that they should do nothing. The girl's body would be discovered sooner or later. Both he and the parents would say von Goltz had been with them all during the afternoon.

But they were reckoning without the gamekeeper who raised the alarm. The police arrived and the gamekeeper gave them von Goltz's watch. Although the parents and Radnitz confirmed the boy hadn't left the Schloss during the afternoon, he was arrested. His hands were badly scratched. White and trembling he had told the police he had been teasing one of the farm cats, but this explanation was not accepted.

Radnitz then talked to the gamekeeper. For an agreed sum of money, the gamekeeper told the police that he disliked young von Goltz and had fabricated the story about finding the watch by the girl's body. In fact, he had found the watch in another part of the estate and had intended to keep it. Radnitz then talked to the Chief of Police who had political ambitions. It was easy for Radnitz to arrange something advantageous and in return the Chief of Police dropped the murder charges. It had been a narrow escape and young von Goltz was grateful. A year later the von Goltz estate was wiped out by bombing and von Goltz's parents killed. He had served in the German army and when he was released Radnitz sent for him. He offered him the stewardship of Radnitz's rich estate in Bavaria. He would receive an adequate income. He would handle the estate and generally put himself at Radnitz's disposal. Von Goltz jumped at this offer and for the past twenty-five years, he had acted as major-domo to one of the finest private estates in Germany. There were times when Radnitz would visit the estate, look around, satisfy himself that his nephew was doing a good job, have some hunting and then go away. There were times when von Goltz received an abrupt order to visit East Berlin where he met shabby men who handed him packages or letters which he delivered to Radnitz. Once he was ordered to go to Peking where he collected another mysterious package, but these courier jobs didn't often happen. Von Goltz was quite content to do what his uncle told him without question so long as he could remain at the Schloss to hunt, entertain his friends, have women who came from all parts of Europe for a short visit and indulge in his dream fantasy that this splendid Schloss and estate belong to him.

The previous day, he had received written instructions from Radnitz, and for the first time since he had become Radnitz's steward, he had orders that made him flinch.

'It is necessary,' Radnitz wrote, 'to get these three films from this girl. You may use any method you may think fit, but she must be persuaded to give them to you. I am sending Lu Silk who will take care of the girl. You need have nothing to do with her disposal. Silk is a professional and is well paid and extremely efficient. But your job is to get the films. Until you have them, Silk is not to proceed with the next move.'

'I've made it easy for you,' von Goltz said as he sipped his champagne. 'They will be arriving shortly. Once they are here, they

won't be allowed to leave. I will get the films from the girl, then I will leave you to get rid of them all.'

Silk nodded.

'Okay,' he said. 'I'll keep out of sight until you get the films.' He thought for a long moment, then went on, 'They'll be traced here. You realise that? The hotel will know they are coming. They just can't vanish into space.'

Von Goltz shrugged.

'That's your affair. My affair is to get the films.'

Silk smiled.

'It will be a mental exercise that will amuse me.' He got to his feet. 'I will keep out of sight. Be careful of Girland. The other two are harmless, but Girland is dangerous.'

'My uncle has warned me.'

Silk left the room. He walked slowly up the broad staircase to the second floor. A long walk down a corridor lined on either side by medieval battle weapons brought him to his suite which consisted of a bedroom and a vast sitting-room. He let himself into the suite, locked the door, then crossed to the window which overlooked the lower terrace and the main entrance. He sat down, lit a cigarette and stared blankly down the long, winding drive while he waited for the three to arrive.

The entrance to the Obermitten Schloss was imposing. The flint and stone walls surrounding the estate were twenty feet high with cruel-looking steel barbs mounted along the top of the wall. The tall wrought iron gates swung open as the black Mercedes slowed and then drove through. Girland followed. His sharp eyes noticed that on both gates was a heraldic shield of black metal. Inscribed in glittering gold leaf were the initials H.R. This puzzled him. H.R.? he wondered. Why not H v G? As he followed the black Mercedes along the winding drive, bordered on either side by dense larch trees, he began to feel a little uneasy. He couldn't explain this uneasiness to himself, but the darkness of the overhanging trees, shutting out the sunlight and the barbed walls gave him a sudden feeling that he was driving into a trap. He told himself this was nonsense, but the feeling persisted.

He looked into his driving mirror and saw the T.R.4 was following behind. He drove after the black Mercedes for at least five kilometres, then suddenly the gloomy forest was gone and wide, immaculate lawns with ornamental fountains gushing water, banks of daffodils

and tulips made a splendid scene against a backdrop of clear blue sky and lazily floating white clouds. Against this scene was the Schloss: an imposing, magnificent building with turrets, terraces ornamented with marble statues and an arched entrance through which two trucks could have easily driven side by side.

Gilly scrambled out of the T.R.4 and joined Girland as he got out of his car.

'Just look at this!' she exclaimed breathlessly. 'It's the biggest and most perfect place I've ever seen!'

Rosnold joined them. He stood staring up at the building, shaking his head in wonderment.

The huge double wooden doors swung open and von Goltz came out onto the terrace. He waved to them, signalling to them to come up the three flights of marble steps that led to the main terrace.

'Welcome,' he said, smiling.

While two liveried servants appeared to take their bags, the three walked up the steps and joined von Goltz.

'What a dreamy place!' Gilly said excitedly. 'Do you really mean you live here all alone? There must be at least fifty rooms...'

Von Goltz laughed. He was obviously pleased by her excitement.

'To be exact there are a hundred and fifty-five rooms,' he told her. 'It's absurd, of course... an anachronism, but I love the place. I have lived here for twenty-five years. I couldn't bear to leave it.'

Girland was looking at the terrace furniture. On each wrought iron chair was a tiny shield each bearing the initials H.R. He glanced at von Goltz who was leading Gilly and Rosnold towards the entrance to the Schloss. He followed behind.

'Fritz will show you to your rooms,' von Goltz said, waving to a short, fat man in livery. 'You will wish to tidy up. Suppose we say lunch in half an hour?' he paused, then went on, 'I have put you all close together on the first floor.' He laughed. 'It is easy to get lost in this place.'

Twenty minutes later, Gilly came into Girland's enormous bedroom with its four-poster bed and its splendid view of the park and distant forest.

She was wearing a simple white dress and around her suntanned throat was a necklace of large blue beads.

'Isn't it marvellous?' she said, joining him at the open window. 'Look at that bed... it's made for love!'

Girland laughed.

'The one-track mind. Any bed is made for love ... it depends on who occupies it.'

'I'm right next door.' She lowered her voice as she continued, 'Til visit you tonight.'

Girland lifted his eyebrows.

'I don't remember inviting you.'

She laughed.

'You don't fool me, Casanova. You know you want me. You want me now... anyway, I'm coming tonight.'

'You have something there.' Girland studied her. She was very desirable. 'Where's Rosnold?'

In his room. Let's go down. I'm starving.'

They moved across the room together. At the door, Gilly paused, looked steadily at Girland, then said, 'Kiss me.'

As Girland took her in his arms, there came a tap on the door. They moved quickly apart, then Girland opened the door. Rosnold was standing in the corridor. He regarded Girland with a long, probing stare.

'I was wondering where you had got to,' he said, shifting his stare to Gilly.

'Well, here we are. I was investigating his room... look at it! It's marvellous, isn't it?' Gilly said innocently.

Rosnold glanced into the room and nodded.

'The whole place is fantastic. What it must cost to run*!'

There was a gentle cough behind them and turning, they saw Fritz standing behind them.

'Lunch is served if you please,' he said. 'Will you come this way?'

The lunch was impeccable, served in an enormous high-ceilinged room that could cater for two hundred people. There were footmen in green and gold livery standing behind each chair. The meal began with white caviar, served with chilled vodka, followed by breasts of wild duck in a wine sauce with a 1949 Ausone claret. The dessert, served, with a golden sauterne, was hot-house strawberries in a champagne sorbet.

During the meal, von Goltz chatted pleasantly, concentrating his attention on Gilly, but also including Girland and Rosnold.

Girland noticed the table silver all carried the initials H.R. and this again puzzled him.

As they moved from the big dining-hall into the lounge for coffee, Girland asked, 'Who is H.R.?'

Von Goltz looked sharply at him, then smiled.

'You noticed the initials? This place doesn't actually belong to me but to my uncle.'

'A perfect meal, Count,' Rosnold said as he sank into an armchair. 'I congratulate you. Your chef reaches the standards of my country and that is praise indeed.'

'He is French,' von Goltz said.

He sat on a satin-covered settee by Gilly's side. There was a pause while a footman served coffee and cognac.

When the footman had gone, von Goltz looked directly at Girland.

'You were curious about my uncle. I believe you have met him.'

Girland lit a cigarette. There was now an expression on von Goltz's face that he didn't like. Although he remained relaxed, he became mentally very alert.

'Havel?'

'Yes. He is Herman Radnitz.'

Girland's smile remained polite and easy. So they had walked into a trap, he thought as he said, 'Of course. Once we did some business together. How is he?'

'Very well.'

'Will he be visiting you while we are here?'

'No.' Von Goltz crossed one leg over the other. He sipped his coffee, staring thoughtfully at Girland. 'I don't think we

need waste any further time, Mr Girland. You realise now that you have walked into a trap?"

Girland put down his coffee cup and picked up his brandy glass.

'If Radnitz is behind your invitation, anything could happen,' he said lightly.

Gilly was listening to this, her expression bewildered.

'Can we share the joke, please?' she asked. 'I don't understand.'

'Of course,' Girland said, stretching out his long legs. 'The count's uncle is one of the richest and most evil men in the world. Had he not been so rich, he would be safely locked up in jail. His real name is Heinrich Kunzli. He made his fortune by supplying the Nazis and the Japs with soap, fertilisers and gunpowder. That seems harmless enough, doesn't it? But the Nazis and the Japs agreed to supply the raw materials for these products. The raw materials were the bones, fat and teeth of the murdered millions from concentration camps. The

count's nice uncle laid the foundation of his enormous fortune by turning into money the end-products of the dead bodies of Jews and other victims of the last war.' Girland smiled at von Goltz. 'That is correct, isn't it, Count?'

Von Goltz showed his teeth in a mirthless grin.

'Yes . . . near enough, but it is old history now.' He regarded Girland, his eyes glittering. 'You are an interfering, useless man, Girland. This time you will cease to interfere.'

Girland sipped his brandy and nodded his approval.

'I've heard all that before... I can't say it ages me.'

Gilly exclaimed, 'For God's sake... just what is this?'

'Let me explain,' von Goltz said quietly. 'You are blackmailing your father. You have three films which you are threatening to send to his opposition party unless he withdraws from the election. I want these films.' He stared at her, his eyes suddenly cold. 'I intend to have them.'

Gilly started to her feet. Blood rushed to her face and then drained away. Her eyes sparkled with anger.

'You're not getting them!' she cried. 'Pierre! Let's get out of here! Come on... don't sit there like a dummy! Let's go!'

Rosnold was studying von Goltz who toyed with his brandy glass, relaxed and smiling. His smile sent a chill up Rosnold's spine. He looked at Gilly.

'Sit down and shut up!' he said sharply. 'Can't you see, you fool, we're caught!'

'Caught? He can't stop us... I'm going if you're not!' Gilly rushed across the room, jerked open the door and dashed into the vast hall. She ran to the high entrance doors which she found locked. She tugged at the bolts while six, heavily-built men in the count's livery watched her with mask-like faces. The bolts were immovable and with a cry of rage, she spun around, rushed back into the lounge, darted past the three men who watched her and dashed out onto the terrace.

Below, on the driveway, was the scarlet T.R.4. With a gasp of relief, she started across the terrace to run down the three long flights of marble steps. Then she stopped short. Two huge black alsatian dogs stood at the bottom of the steps and snarled at her. Their white fangs sent a cold shudder of fear through her. She stared down at the dogs, hypnotised with horror. Crouching low and still snarling, the dogs began to climb slowly up the steps towards her. Gilly's nerve broke. Whirling around, she ran back into the lounge.

'Those dogs . . .' she began breathlessly then stopped as von Goltz laughed.

'Why don't you sit down?' he asked. 'You can't get away. Yes ... those dogs ... they will tear you to pieces if you are stupid enough to challenge them. Where are the films?'

Gilly faced him, white and scared, but her eyes still flashed with rage.

'You're not getting them!' She turned to Rosnold. 'Do something! Tell him... don't just sit there! Do something!'

'I warned you.' Rosnold was pale and uneasy. 'I'm not going though with this. I've had enough of it.'

Girland listened to all this. For a moment he was forgotten. The action now was between Gilly and Rosnold with von Goltz as an interested spectator.

'He's not having them!' Gilly cried, beating her fists together. 'He can't force us to give them to him! He can't!'

'But you are mistaken,' von Goltz said, his voice sounded bored. 'When I want something, I always get it. Do you want me to give you a demonstration of my persuasive powers?'

'Go to hell!' Gilly shouted at him, her eyes flashing. 'You're not having those films! If you don't let us leave I'll - I'll call the police.'

Von Goltz regarded her as he would regard a difficult child.

'You are still very young and still very stupid. How do you call the police?'

Gilly turned desperately to Girland.

'Aren't you going to do something?' she demanded, going to him and standing over him. 'Do you call yourself a man . . . just sitting there? Get me out of here!'

'The Count holds the four aces,' Girland said quietly. 'I don't bet against such odds. Give him the films.'

She turned away from him in disgust.

'You're not having them!' she said, spinning around to confront von Goltz. 'Understand? You're not having them!'

Von Goltz waved her away. He looked now at Rosnold and his eyes were glittering with suppressed fury.

'You realise, of course, I have ways to persuade you both?' he said. 'Why let us have any unpleasantness? Where are the films?'

Rosnold licked his dry lips.

'If you tell him, I'll kill you!' Gilly screamed furiously. 'He can't force us ...'

Von Goltz came out of his chair very quickly. He hit Gilly across her face with the back of his hand with cruel violence. She catapulted across the room, smashed into a small occasional table and sprawled on the floor, flat on her back.

Girland looked down at his hands. This wasn't the time to go into action. He knew for certain that if he made a move the big room would be filled with von Goltz's servants.

Rosnold half started to his feet, staring at Gilly as she lay, sobbing, her hands holding her aching face.

'I apologise,' von Goltz said quietly. 'I didn't want any unpleasantness, but this stupid girl doesn't seem to realise the situation.' He paused then looked at Rosnold. 'Where are the films?'

'In my bank at Paris,' Rosnold said.

'You stinking coward!' Gilly cried, scrambling to her feet. 'How could you tell him!' She started across the room towards Rosnold, but Girland was out of his chair and intercepted her. He ducked her flying fist and pulled her against him.

'Play it cool,' he said softly. 'Don't get so excited. You can't win all the time.'

She stared for a long moment at him, then she threw off his hands and walked unsteadily to a chair away from him and sat down.

Girland returned to his chair and sat on the arm. He took out his pack of cigarettes, shook out a cigarette and lit it. Von Goltz said, 'You will write a letter to your bank, Mr Rosnold, telling them to give the films to the bearer of the letter.' He pointed to a desk standing in a corner of the room. 'You will find paper and envelopes there. When my messenger returns from Paris with the films, you three will be free to leave here.'

Rosnold hesitated, then got up and went to the desk. He wrote rapidly, addressed the envelope and then gave the letter to von Goltz to read.

'Excellent. Thank you for your co-operation.' Von Goltz got to his feet. 'In two days you will be free to go. In the meantime, please amuse yourselves. I would not advise you to leave the terrace. The dogs are extremely dangerous. However, there is a swimming-pool at the back terrace you may use. There is a billiards room. Make yourselves at home. I will see you all again for dinner. If there is anything you want, please ask Fritz.'

He left them, carrying the letter, his smile showing his satisfaction.

Girland got to his feet.

'After that lunch, I think I need a cap,' he said. He looked at Gilly. 'Maybe we'll meet in a couple of hours at the swimming-pool.'

He walked into the hall where the servants stood watching him. He stared at them and they stared woodenly back, then whistling softly under his breath, he climbed the stairs to his room.

* * *

At 16.00 hrs. Girland came from his room wearing a pair of swimming trunks and carrying a towel over his shoulder. Fritz was waiting in the corridor. He bowed to Girland and led the way down to the swimming-pool.

The heated pool was at the rear of the Schioss and so positioned that it caught the afternoon sun. It was some twenty metres long with a high dive board and around it were set out tables, lounging chairs, li-los and sun umbrellas.

Girland dived in and swam the length, then turning on his back, he floated in the warm, blue water, staring up at the sunlit sky. He hadn't been in the water for more than a few minutes when Gilly appeared, wearing a white bikini. She took a racing dive into the water and swam past him with a showy, fast crawl.

Girland watched her as she spun around, kicked off against the side of the bath and made for the other end. She swam well: almost professionally. When she reached the far end, she hoisted herself out of the pool and sat on the edge, her feet in the water.

With a slow, lazy crawl stroke, Girland swam towards her. Reaching her, he trod water, looking up at her.

'Got over your temper?' he asked with a smile.

'Oh, stop it!' she said sharply. 'It isn't funny! What is going to happen to us?'

He caught hold of her ankles and hauled her into the water. She splashed down beside him. His hand supported her, keeping her head above water.

'We're being watched,' he told her. 'There is a man on the second floor right window watching us.'

Gilly swam around the pool and then rejoined Girland.

'Who is it?'

'Your guess is as good as mine. Let's sunbathe. Keep your voice down, and don't get excited. Remember you are being watched.'

They hauled themselves out of the pool and stretched out on li-los.

Fat Fritz appeared with cigarettes and a lighter. He asked what they would like to drink. Gilly shook her head, but they took cigarettes.

Girland waves Fritz away. When he had left the terrace, Girland said, 'I hope you now realise the spot we're in?'

Gilly lit the cigarette and half-turned on her side to look at him.

'You puzzle me... just where do you come in on all this?'

'Your father hired me to get your films.' Girland spoke softly. He was lying on his back, staring up at the blue sky.

'What defeats me is how a girl like you could have made such films.'

'Are you telling me you are working for my father?' Gilly half sat up, then controlling herself, she relaxed back on the li-lo.

'That's what I'm telling you. I work for anyone who pays me,' Girland said. 'I don't like your father. I don't like you. This is a job... simple as that.'

'You don't like me?' Gilly glared at him. 'You didn't dislike me last night!'

'When a woman walks into my bedroom and throws herself at me - especially when she is as well put together as you

are -I take what she offers,' Girland said. 'But that doesn't mean I like her or think anything of her.'

'Oh! Just why don't you like me?'

'Because you are a blackmailer.' Girland released smoke down his nostrils, eyeing the burning end of his cigarette.

'Blackmailers are never my kind of people.'

Gilly lay still, her hands on her breasts. Her face had lost colour and her mouth was now a thin, hard line.

'All right. . . I'm a blackmailer. How else could I stop my father becoming President? I don't give a damn about myself...

I never have, but I am determined he isn't going to be President. I used the only weapon I had to stop him.'

Girland turned his head to study her.

'Tell me why you want to stop him?'

'I'll tell you... because he is unfit for high office. Because he is weak, vain and stupid. Because he and my mother only think of themselves and seeing themselves with power.'

'That's your point of view . . . I'm not saying you are wrong. You're working with Rosnold, aren't you? This Ban War organisation gives you a kick, doesn't it?'

'And why shouldn't it?'

'It's the old story, Gilly . . . people like to be big fishes in a small pond. If Rosnold and his organisation wasn't so interested in you -and they are interested because you can stop a man from becoming a

President - you wouldn't be making this trouble. Isn't it because this organisation is making you an important person, you are blackmailing your father?'

'All right... if you like to think that... I don't care! There are many reasons. Anyway, he made a mess of my life . . . now, I'm going to make a mess of his!'

'Are you sure he made a mess of your life?' Girland asked. 'Are you sure you're blaming him instead of blaming yourself?'

'Don't feed me that stuff!' Gilly said fiercely. 'Neither of my parents wanted me... they did everything they knew how to get rid of me. So now I'm in the position to give them something really to be ashamed of. I don't expect you to believe this ... and I don't care, but I hated making those films. Pierre promised me once they were made, my father couldn't become President... so I made them.'

'Oh, come on!' Girland said impatiently. 'I don't believe it. Why don't you face facts, Gilly? You are an immoral slut. You have let this weak-kneed organisation go to your head. You are glorifying in being someone important because you are in the position to stop a man becoming President of the United States. If it wasn't for Rosnold and this organisation, you wouldn't give a damn if your father became President or not.'

'God! I hate you!' Gilly said. 'Everything you've said is not true!' She sat up and leaning over him, she went on fiercely, 'This count can have the films! Whyshoyldicare! When I get back to Paris I will make other films! My father is not going to be President!'

'When you get back to Paris?' Girland stubbed out his cigarette. 'What makes you think you are going back to Paris?' She stared at him: her eyes opening wide.

'Of course, I'm going back to Paris! What do you mean?'

'You can't be this dumb,' Girland said as he stared at a floating cloud. 'When von Goltz gets the films, he will make sure none of us leave here and neither you nor Rosnold ever make another stag film.'

Gilly lay for a long moment, frowning, then her eyes opened wide with shock.

'But he can't do that! How can he? He said once he had the films, we were free to go. As soon as I get back to Paris, I will make more films!'

'The trick with this is you don't return to Paris.'

Gilly began to say something, then paused. She lost colour as she stared at Girland.

'You can't mean...'

'Of course. When the films arrive, your nice, handsome count will get rid of us permanently.' Girland lifted his head and looked across the wide, immaculate lawns to the distant, dense forest. 'There are plenty of convenient places out there for a triple burial'

'You mean he will murder us?' Gilly sat up. 'I don't believe it!'

'If he is anything like his charming uncle... and I'm sure he is... he won't hesitate to wipe us out as you wouldn't hesitate to swot a fly.'

'But you can't kill three people ... just like that.' Her voice was husky and her eyes alarmed. 'I don't believe it! The hotel knows we are here. When - if- we are reported missing, there will be an inquiry. The police... he can't... he wouldn't dare.'

'I saw something interesting from my bedroom window before I came down here,' Girland said, closing his eyes against the sun. 'One of von Goltz's servants drove off in your T.R.4. Another of his servants drove off in my car. At a guess, the T.R.4 will be found at the Munich car park. My car could be found anywhere. Yes, of course the police will come here, but von Goltz is important in this district. He will tell them we were here for the night and then left for Paris. He has no idea what could have happened to us. You can't expect the police to dig up every metre of this enormous estate in the hope of finding our bodies, can you?'

Gilly shivered.

'I just don't believe it... you're trying to frighten me because you hate me!'

Girland shrugged.

'I don't hate you, Gilly. I just think you're a mixed-up kid and I must admit I'm so bored with mixed-up kids. Listen: the

messenger will arrive in Paris around 22.00 hrs. tonight. He will pick up the films tomorrow morning and catch the 14.00 hrs. flight back to Munich. He should be here with the films around 18.00 hrs. So we have from now until 18.00 hrs. tomorrow to dream up a way to get out of here alive.'

Gilly said, 'You really believe this man will kill all three of us when he gets the films?'

Girland got to his feet and draped his towel over his shoulders. He smiled down at her.

'Wouldn't you if you were in his place?' he said and walked across the terrace and up to his room.

Gilly looked across the wide sweep of lawn. At the edge of the forest she saw the two black alsatian dogs, their heads resting on their paws, staring towards her.

With a sudden sick feeling of fear, she scrambled to her feet, snatched up her towel and ran after Girland.

From the upper window, Lu Silk touched off the ash of his cigarette and stood up. He regarded the distant dogs, then crossed the room to where a .22 target rifle, equipped with a telescopic sight, lay on the table. He picked up the weapon and balanced it in his capable, killer's hands. He liked the feel of it. Carrying it to the open window, he aimed the rifle at one of the alsatian dogs. The cross hair line of the telescopic sight centred on the dog's head. Silk adjusted the sight slightly, bringing the dog sharply into focus, then satisfied, he lowered the rifle and put it against the wall.

There came a tap on the door and von Goltz came in.

'The two cars have gone,' he said as he closed the door. 'Are you satisfied that it will be safe to get rid of them here?'

'Yes... where else?' Silk sat down. He put a cigarette between his thin lips. 'Where can we bury them?'

'There is a rubbish tip in the forest that is permanently smouldering and white-hot,' von Goltz said. 'They can be thrown there. The morning's refuse will cover them.'

'You can trust your servants?'

Von Goltz hesitated.

'Yes... I think so.'

Silk stared at him. His one eye was probing.

'That's up to you ... if you are sure, then it's settled.'

Von Goltz took a turn around the room.

'How will you do it?' he asked finally.

'A little target practice... it could be amusing.' Silk went over to the .22 rifle and picked it up. 'This is a fine weapon. Send them out onto the lawn and I'll pick them off like rabbits.'

Von Goltz flinched.

'Be careful of Girland.'

Silk grinned.

'I'll take him first,' he said and put the rifle down on the table.

* * *

As Girland entered his bedroom, he knew instinctively that someone had been there while he had been in the pool. This he expected. After closing and locking the door, he went to his suitcase and tossed out its contents on the bed. He regarded the bottom of the empty case with a nod of satisfaction. Whoever had searched the case had been an amateur. He pressed the tiny spring, hidden under the lining of the case. The bottom of the case clicked open, revealing a tray in which were his professional weapons. They consisted of a Walther automatic pistol with a magazine capacity of 8 rounds, a razor-sharp double bladed stabbing knife and a tear gas bomb. When Girland travelled on business, he travelled well equipped.

Satisfied none of his weapons had been discovered, he shut the false lid and replaced his clothes in the suitcase.

Then he stripped off his wet bathing trunks, towelled himself and put on a wrap. He went out on to the balcony and sat in the basket-chair from which he could overlook the immaculate lawn. He sat there for some time, smoking and thinking and watching the two alsatian dogs as they prowled around the rough grass on the edge of the lawn and the forest.

When the light began to fail and the air became chilly, he returned to his room. He took a hot shower and then dressed for dinner. It was while he was knotting his tie that his door slammed open and Gilly rushed in: her eyes wide with fright, her face white.

'You've got to stop him!' she shrielled, reaching Girland and grabbing his arm. 'He's trying to get away!'

Girland's mind immediately reacted.

'Where is he?'

'He's climbing from his balcony down to the terrace!'

Girland moved swiftly out onto the balcony. He was in time to see Rosnold drop on to the terrace below. Rosnold held a medieval battle-axe which he had taken from the corridor wall. As Girland spotted him, Rosnold started across the terrace. 'Rosnold! Come back!' Girland shouted.

Gilly joined him on the balcony. She too screamed after Rosnold who paid no attention.

'Come back!' Girland bawled, but Rosnold kept on. He took the steps leading from the terrace to the lawn two at the time and then disappeared into the heavy shadows. They could hear the thud of his feet as he began to run across the lawn.

Suddenly, from the roof of the Schloss, a searchlight snapped on... a blinding ribbon of light. It picked up Rosnold as he raced across the lawn, giving him a grotesque shadow five times his own height that fled before him. From out of the darkness an alsatian dog appeared, moving fast and silently. Rosnold stopped short, turned and faced the dog as it sprang at him. The axe, the blade glittering in the beam of the searchlight, swung and there was a

crunching sound as the blade crushed the dog's head. As Rosnold began to run again, the second dog appeared. It sprang at him, his fangs bared. Rosnold swayed away, and the dog went past him, rebounded sprang again. Rosnold was ready, and again the axe swung. The dog gave a yelp of pain and rolled over, snapping at its damaged leg.

Gilly choked back a scream and hid her face. Girland leaned over the balcony rail, watching.

Still holding the blood-stained axe, Rosnold darted off to the left, and for a brief moment the finger of the searchlight lost him then it picked him up again as he continued on his way, running very fast, across the lawn. He was within four or five metres of the entrance to the dense forest when there came a snap of gunfire.

Lu Silk, standing on his balcony, immediately above Girland's balcony, felt a surge of satisfaction as he lowered the .22 rifle. Rosnold had jumped high in the air with the reaction of a shot rabbit as the tiny bullet had slammed into back of his head and through his brain. Considering how fast Rosnold had been running and also considering the poor light, Silk decided that this was the best shot he had made for a long time. He patted the butt of the gun to convey his appreciation. 'They've killed him!' Gilly moaned, staring across the lawn at Rosnold's still body, lighted by the searchlight. 'I told him! I warned him, but he panicked! He wouldn't listen to me!'

Girland paid no attention to her. He moved swiftly back into his room, ran to his suitcase and threw out the contents on the bed. He opened the false bottom and took the automatic pistol from its resting place and shoved it into his hip pocket. Then he threw the contents of the suitcase back in and slammed the lid.

Gilly came into the room from the balcony, white faced and shaking. 'Get hold of yourself!' Girland snapped. 'This is the crunch! Where's your passport?' She stared at him, dazed. 'Passport?' 'Where is it?' 'In my room.' 'Get it... hurry!'

'They've killed him!' She began to wring her hands. Girland grabbed hold of her and shook her. 'Get your passport!' Crying, she ran blindly from the room and into her bedroom. Girland went after her. He shut his door and as he entered her room, she was fumbling at her bag. He snatched it from her, opened it, assured himself the passport was in the bag, then grabbing Mr arm, he rushed her out into the corridor.

'Don't make a sound!'

Moving silently, he pushed her up the stairs to the upper floor, paused to look along the long corridor and then pushed her up the next flight of stairs. As they were stumbling up the stairs, Girland heard the thudding of feet as von Goltz's servants came running up the lower stairs.

Girland reached the third landing which was in darkness. He paused to lean over the banisters and peered down the well. He watched three liveried men come down the corridor on the first floor landing and charge into his bedroom.

He waited long enough to see one of the servants come out to the head of the staircase and shout, 'He's not there!'

Then as a bell began to dang, Girland took Gilly's arm and led her silently further down the dark corridor.

Seven

A Volkswagen 1500 stood by the roadside near the imposing entrance to the Obermitten Schloss. A silver-haired giant, wearing a shabby suit was working on the engine. Another nondescript-looking man sat on the grass bank, smoking. Occasionally a car roared by on its way to Munich. No driver stopped to ask if he could help. The dwindling rays of the evening sun came through the trees, making patterns on the roof of the car.

Malik loosened a sparking-plug for the fifth time. He wanted to give the appearance of a breakdown. Although he was sure he wasn't being watched, he was taking no chances.

As he began to tighten the sparking-plug, the wrought iron gates of the Schloss swung open and a scarlet T.R.4 came cautiously onto the main road.

Malik straightened up and looked at the car as it gathered speed, driving past him. He knew the car belonged to Rosnold, but Rosnold was not at the wheel. The car was being driven by a thick-set, blond man wearing an ill-fitting business suit.

Malik's mind worked swiftly. He made an instant decision. He slammed down the cover over the engine and said, 'Go after him!'

Lintz was already on his feet. He slid under the driving wheel. 'What about you?' he asked as he started the engine.

'Never mind about me!' Malik snapped. 'Go after him! Don't lose him! When you know where he has gone, report to Skoll.'

Lintz nodded, engaged gear and drove off after the fast disappearing T.R.4 which was heading for Munich.

Malik moved into the surrounding forest. He sat down on the dry, dusty ground, using a shrub as a shelter. Five minutes later a Mercedes car which he recognised as the one Girland had been driving, came through the open gates and turned left. A man Malik didn't recognise, who was wearing the same kind of shabby suit as the driver of the T.R.4, was at the wheel. The Mercedes headed towards Garmisch.

Malik rubbed his jaw as he thought. It now looked as if he had guessed right. Girland, the girl and Rosnold had walked into a trap. Getting rid of their cars was the first step towards getting rid of them. There was nothing he could do about this for the moment. He would have to wait until it was dark. With the patience a trained agent, he relaxed against a tree and waited.

Two hours later, it was dark enough for him to make a move. He got to his feet and silently left the forest. He began to walk around the high wall surrounding the Schloss.

Some four hundred metres from the entrance gates, he paused and looked up at the towering concrete and flint wall. He

studied the spikes set in the top of the wall. From his shabby jacket he produced a length of thin, nylon cord. At one end of the cord was a rubber-covered hook. He tossed the hook towards the spikes. The second throw succeeded. The hook settled silently around one of the spikes and held firm. Malik glanced from left to right. Satisfied there was no traffic, he caught hold of the cord, braced his feet against the wall and walked up, his strong hands hauling him effortlessly to the top. Here, he paused, and surveyed the dense forest below. He unhooked the cord, manoeuvred himself around the sharp spikes and then let himself drop on to the dry, mossy ground on the other side of the wall. He paused to coil the cord to a convenient size to fit his pocket, then drew from a shoulder holster a Mauser 7.63 pistol, fitted with a silencer. Moving like a shadow, he walked through the forest until he eventually reached the clearing between the forest and the wide, closely cut lawn.

The moon was behind the clouds, and Malik could just see the distant lights from the Schloss. He squatted against a tree, nursing

his gun and waited. An hour dragged by, then suddenly things began to happen.

From a first floor window, Malik saw a man appear on the balcony. There was a brief glimpse of a woman, but the man threw her violently back into the room. The man climbed over the balcony rail, hung for a moment, then dropped heavily to the terrace below. He recovered his balance and darted down the steps to the lawn.

Malik stood up, watching.

Suddenly a bright beam from a searchlight flashed on from the roof of the Schloss and picked up the running man.

Malik watched the brief, deadly battle between the man and the two alsatian dogs. He watched the man start to run fast towards him, then he heard the crack of a sporting rifle and saw the man drop.

Malik moved silently back into the darkness of the forest. He remained there, motionless while two men came across the lawn and carried the lifeless body back to the Schloss.

Lu Silk and von Goltz stood on the lighted terrace, looking towards the forest. Von Goltz held a microphone in his hand.

Speaking slowly and clearly, his voice picked up on the speakers in the forest and along the walls of the Schloss, he was saying 'You cannot leave the grounds. Don't go near the walls. A lethal electric current has been turned on. Please come back. Mr Rosnold is not badly hurt. He is recovering. Please come back.'

Listening to this, Silk moved impatiently.

'Are you sure they can't get out?'

Von Goltz switched off the microphone.

'Impossible ... no one can get out now. The walls and the gates are lethal, but it could take time to find them. If I had more dogs, I'd flush them quickly, but without dogs ...'

'Can't you get more?'

Von Goltz shook his head.

'Those two dogs that swine killed were trained to hunt men. The dogs belonging to my neighbours are sporting dogs. Besides, there would be questions asked. When it is light, we will have a hunt in the forest. It could be amusing. I am satisfied these two can't leave the estate.' He paused, then went on, 'But if they attempt to climb the walls . . .' He switched on the microphone and again repeated his warning that the walls were lethal.

In the shadows, Malik listened and grimaced. Girland, standing on the third floor balcony overlooking the terrace, concealed in the darkness, also listened and grinned. He moved back into the vast dark room that seemed to be full of heavy furniture. He closed the windows.

'It's working,' he said, joining Gilly. 'They think we are in the grounds as I thought they would.' He produced a tiny, powerful electric torch and swung the beam around the room. 'This looks big enough for a railway station.' He took her hand and led her down the aisle between the furniture until they reached a door. Gently, he opened it, listened, then threw the beam of his torch into what appeared to be a small retiring room. 'Let's settle here,' he said. 'It looks less grand.'

Breathing fast and shaking, Gilly followed him into the room and he closed the door. His torch directed her to a dust-covered settee.

'Sit down.'

They sat side by side.

'What are we going to do?' she asked. He could feel she was trembling. 'If they find us ... they'll murder us, won't they?'

'They have to find us first.' Girland leaned close to her. 'They won't start looking for us until tomorrow when it is light.'

With any luck, they will search the forest. While they are out there, I'll go down and find a telephone. I'll call the U.S.

Army in Munich. They'll arrive in force and we'll walk out. There is nothing to worry about. You'll just have to make up your mind to forget about having dinner and wait until tomorrow morning.'

'Call the army? Are you crazy?' Gilly tried to see Girland's face in the dim light. 'Why should they bother with us? You must call the police!'

'No... the U.S. Army,' Girland said. 'Because, my pet, you happen to be the daughter of the future President. When I tell them you have been kidnapped, the whole U.S. Army stationed in Germany, plus tanks and aircraft will come rushing to your rescue.'

'No!' Gilly said fiercely. 'I'll never trade on my father's rotten reputation!'

Girland sighed.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes... I'll never...'

'All right... all right... don't get so worked up. You have made your point.-So you don't want the U.S. Army to rescue you?'

'No!'

'A pity ... it could have been fun to have lots of tanks bashing down the gates and fat Generals rushing up the drive. All right, then here's what you do. Go downstairs and find the count. When you find him, tell him you won't accept your father's favours and would he please cut your throat'

Gilly sat for some moments, speechless.

'Oh, I hate you!' she exploded, thumping her fists on her knees. 'You are horrible . . . you don't understand!'

'I'm afraid I do ... the trouble with you is you have grown up physically too fast and mentally too slow. We're wasting time. Are you sure you don't want the army to rescue you?'

'I would rather die!'

'You probably could. All right... fair enough. Girls with principles bore me. They're always a nuisance. Well then, I'll run along. You stay right here until they find you. I don't need the U.S. Army to get me out of here. Since you are stuck with your principles, I leave you with them. So long... thank for the bed session which was wonderful.'

As he got to his feet, Gilly grabbed his arm.

'You're not leaving me?'

'Yes,.. reluctantly, but I am leaving you. I believe in looking after myself. Beautiful dumb girls with political ideas are always a hindrance. Give me ten minutes, then either sit tight or go down and talk to the count... who knows, he might just possibly marry you, but I suspect he will slit your pretty throat.'

'How I hate you!' Gilly exploded. 'How can you think of leaving me?'

'Don't get worked up, baby,' Girland said soothingly. 'It's your choice. There is another possible alternative.' He sat down again. 'You and I could make a deal. I could get you out of here without calling in the U.S. Army, but we would have to come to an agreement first'

'What do you mean? What agreement?'

'You would have to promise me to leave your father alone in the future. You would also have to promise me that you will give up running around with this half-baked Ban War organisation and you would have to promise me never ever again to make a stag film.'

She drew in a long, quivering breath.

'So you really are working for my father!'

'No . . . I'm working for myself. I am a mercenary. I took your father's assignment for the money. I don't give a damn about him, but

when I take an assignment, I deliver. You either give me your promise or I'm going to walk out on you. I can always take care of myself. Frankly, Gilly, I don't give a damn about you or your father. If you think you can take care of yourself and get to Paris and make more blue films, you go ahead and do it.'

'This is blackmail,' Gilly said, suddenly calm.

* So what? Is it against the rules to blackmail a blackmailer?' Girland asked. 'There is time... think it over... I'm going to admire the view.'

He crossed the room, opened the french windows and moved silently out on to the balcony.

The long searching finger of the searchlight was still probing the forest. He could see a group of men, wearing the count's livery, moving across the lawn towards the forest. He again heard the metallic voice of the count over the speakers repeating his warning that the walls were lethal.

He remained out in the darkness watching the activity below, glad now there were no dogs. However, there were plenty of men and he made a rough count . . . possibly twenty-six or even thirty. It was difficult to count them as they kept disappearing and reappearing in the light of the searchlight. Finally, he decided he had given Gilly long enough to make a decision. If he didn't get her promise - he wondered what her promise was worth - he wouldn't leave her, but he hoped his bluff had made an impression. He stepped back into the dark room, closing the french windows behind him.

'Well? Do we say good-bye?' he asked.

He could just see her, sitting on the settee. She was looking towards him.

'If I promise, what guarantee do I have that you will get me out of here?'

'What guarantee have I that you will keep your promise?' Girland came and sat by her side.

'When I make a promise, I keep it. All right... I'm a slut... I'm no good ... I have no morals . . . I'm an alley cat. . . but I do keep a promise.'

Listening to her strained, fierce whispering, Girland was impressed.

'If you don't keep this promise,' he said, 'then there is nothing in this world that can make any sense for you. You'd be better off dead.'

'Oh, stop nagging!' Gilly said angrily. 'When I make a promise I keep it! How many more times do I have to tell you! But can you get me out of here alive?'

'I can't swear to it, Gilly. Out there are some thirty armed men. We have an electrified wall. We have an expert marksman armed with a sporting rifle who knows how to shoot fast. We have the count who won't let us go easily. A lot of odds . . . but I will try. Without you, I could get out, but with you, the operation slows down, and it will be much more difficult, but not impossible. I'll get you out of this if I possibly can. You haven't any alternative. Without me, you

would never get out. With me you stand a good chance. If we fail... it won't matter about your promise. They have killed Rosnold... they have to kill us. It's as simple as that. You will have to do exactly what I tell you. You must try to keep your nerve. This isn't going to be easy ... but it is possible.'

'All right. . . when you get me out of here, I will give you my promise and I will keep it.'

'I'll accept that. Now let's do a little exploring. We have the night before us. Let's find a bed.'

'You don't mean you can even think of sleeping?'

'Why not? We have a long time ahead of us before we leave.'

'Why can't we go tonight?'

'I want those films. When I hand them over to your old man he is going to pay me ten thousand dollars. I need that money. So we stick around here until the films arrive. Then - and not before then - we'll leave.'

'You're crazy!' Gilly's voice shot up a note. 'You'll never get them! They'll never let us walk out of here!'

'Just relax, Gilly. You must have confidence in me. I'm not leaving here without those films. I've told you you have a good chance of getting out of here. Leave this to me. Now come on ... I want to find abed.'

Seeing the line of men coming towards the forest and towards where he was standing, Malik moved silently further into the undergrowth. Each advancing man was carrying a powerful flashlight as well as a shot-gun and the beams of light stabbed into the darkness.

This didn't worry Malik. He would never have ordered a search to be made in this forest in such darkness. To find any fugitive unless he betrayed his presence by noise was impossible in such surroundings.

He looked up at the tree against which he was standing. He could just make out a lower branch within his reach. He stepped back, jumped

and caught hold of the branch. Easily, he hauled himself up, and in a moment he was climbing the tree with the silent agility of a cat. He paused when he was half-way up the tree, straddled a branch and set his back against the trunk.

He waited, looking down, seeing the stabbing beams of the advancing flashlights, hearing the crashing of undergrowth as the men moved forward into the forest. They passed below him and sent on. He lifted his shoulders in contempt.

The search went on for an hour, then the leader of the party finally decided they were wasting time and energy. The men came back through the undergrowth. By now the time was 20.30 hrs and Malik, watching the men as they walked slowly across the lawn back to the Schloss, decided they were thinking of their dinner. He watched them disappear into a side entrance. A heavily-built man, wearing the count's livery, walked up the steps to where two men were sitting, waiting.

'Well?' Von Goltz snapped.

'It is impossible and useless, Excellency,' the man said. He was Sandeuer, von Goltz's trusted major-domo: a man of some forty years of age with a tanned, fleshy face and shifty, cunning eyes. 'We can't hope to find them in this darkness. Tomorrow ... yes, but not now.'

'Are you sure you will find them tomorrow?'

Sandeuer bowed.

'It will take a little time, Excellency, but they can't get away. Besides, by tomorrow, they will be hungry and thirsty.'

Von Goltz waved him away. When he had gone, Silk finished his whisky and soda and regarded von Goltz.

'You satisfied?'

Von Goltz shrugged.

'I have to be. They could be anywhere in the forest. Although my men know every centimetre of the ground, Sandeuer is right. In the darkness, it is impossible. When there is light, with the number of men I have, we will find them. Girland is unarmed. I had his clothes and his suitcase searched while he was in the pool. He has no weapons. So... it is a matter of time.'

One of the footmen came out on to the terrace to announce that dinner was served.

In the vast dining-hall, the two men sat down to a well-presented and cooked dinner. Von Goltz, who liked his food, noticed that Silk was merely toying with what was put before him, his thin, hatchet-shaped face expressionless, his one eye showing no animation.

'Have some more of this sole,' von Goltz said. 'I think it is excellent.'

'No ... I've had enough.' Silk pushed his plate away.

'It doesn't please you?'

Silk shrugged impatiently.

'Fine... fine...' he snapped. 'I'm not hungry.'

This remark irritated von Goltz who would have liked a second helping of the sole cooked with diced lobster tails and in a heavy cream sauce. Angrily, he motioned the footman to change courses.

'You are worrying about something?' he asked, staring at Silk.

'We will discuss it later,' Silk said as the second course of baby lamb was set on the table.

Now it was von Goltz's turn to be worried. He had been warned by Radnitz about Girland. For the moment, Girland had slipped through his fingers. Girland was out in the open with some two hundred acres of forest land to hide in. Although von Goltz was sure Girland could not get out of the estate and he was not armed, he might take a long time to corner.

The switch that operated the current to the walls was in the lodge at the entrance gates. In the morning when the tradesmen arrived it would be necessary to cut the current to let them in. Girland might discover this and make a break over the wall. But could he discover this?

Suddenly losing his appetite, von Goltz left; his meal half-finished. He turned to the footman standing behind his chair

and told him to get Sandeuer immediately.

Silk too had lost interest in the food and again pushed his plate away.

'What is it?' he asked, eyeing von Goltz.

'Girland...' von Goltz got to his feet. 'I don't like the idea of him being out there... free. I know he can't get away, but...'

The door opened and Sandeuer entered.

'What is happening at the lodge?' von Goltz demanded.

'It is all right, Excellency,' Sandeuer said, bowing. 'I have three armed men there. They will remain on duty all night.' Von Goltz relaxed.

'Good. Make sure they are continually on the alert.'

'Yes, Excellency,' and Sandeuer withdrew.

'A little cheese perhaps?' von Goltz said, sitting again at the table. The reassuring news had restored his appetite. He was now sorry to have dismissed the meat course.

'Not for me,' Silk said impatiently and walked across the room to the open french windows. He moved out onto the terrace and stared across the moonlit lawn to the dark forest.

Von Goltz regarded the basket of cheeses, hesitated, then with a muttered curse, shoved back his chair and joined Silk on the terrace. He disliked Silk. This tall, cold American had no manners and his ruthless face unnerved von Goltz. He knew this man had the ear of his uncle. He was sure a critical report from him would mean he would be turned out of the Schloss. He had no illusions about his uncle. When a man was found wanting by Radnitz he was either dismissed or worse, he disappeared.

'What is it now?' he demanded.

'I'm trying to put myself in Girland's place,' Silk said. He lit a cigarette. 'I'm beginning to wonder if we are being fooled. We are assuming because Rosnold tried to escape, Girland and the girl also made a break. We are assuming that while Rosnold killed the dogs, Girland and the girl got down on to the terrace and made for the forest to the right instead of crossing the lawn as Rosnold did. But suppose they didn't? Suppose instead, they went upstairs? If I had been in his place, I think that is what I would have done. There are many rooms in this place . . . many places to hide in.' He looked at von Goltz. 'We could spend days hunting for them in the forest while all the time they could be right here.' Von Goltz stiffened.

'Surely Girland wouldn't be so stupid as to let himself be trapped here?' he said. 'He had the chance to get into the open ... surely he would have taken it?'

'Would he? He isn't to know you have no other dogs. I think he could still be here... with the girl'

'We'll soon see. - I'll have the place searched.' 'Even if they are not here,' Silksaid, 'it will give your men something to do. Yes... have the place searched.' He returned to the dining-room. 'I think I will now have a little cheese,' and he sat down at the table. Von Goltz sent for Sandeuer.

This was the second time Sandeuer's dinner had been interrupted. When he received the message that the count wanted to see him immediately, he threw down his knife and fork with an oath. The five senior servants who were eating with him, concealed grins. Sandeuer was not popular. The chef said he would keep Sandeuer's dinner hot and Sandeuer, still cursing, hurried upstairs to the dining-room.

'It is possible,' von Goltz said as he cut a large wedge of cheese, 'that the fugitives have not escaped into the forest. They could be still here. Take men and search every room.'

Sandeuer thought of his unfinished dinner.

'Yes, your Excellency,' he said bowing, 'but may I suggest that as the top floors have no lighting and are crowded with furniture, a thorough search by flashlight would be difficult. If I may suggest the search could be much more thorough tomorrow morning when the shutters can be opened and every inch of the rooms upstairs examined.'

Von Goltz looked at Silk who shrugged.

'Very well, but post a man at the head of every landing. He is to remain there and keep watch. As soon as it is daylight, the search is to begin.'

Sandeuer bowed and returned to his dinner after giving instructions for the landings to be guarded.

* * *

Girland decided it would be safer to go up to the fifth floor of the Schloss. He had checked the number of floors ~ eight in all -when he had arrived. By going up to the fifth floor, he had three more floors in which to manoeuvre should the need arise.

Holding Gilly's hand and using his flashlight sparingly, he led her down the long corridor to the stair head. The thick carpet deadened their footfalls. All he could hear was Gilly's fast breathing, and very faintly, the clatter of dishes as dinner was being served below. He thought regretfully of the food he was missing.

They went silently up the long flight of stairs, paused for a moment, then continued on up another flight of stairs. This landing was in complete darkness. No light from the ground floor reflected up the stair well as far as this.

Girland paused to listen. He heard nothing and moving away from the stair head, he turned on the flashlight. A white druggot covered the carpet. There was a slight smell of damp and must. He led Gilly down the corridor. On either side were doors. He paused at the fifth door. Easing the door open, he peered into darkness, listened, then turned on his flashlight.

The room was large. Standing against one of the walls was a four-poster bed. The windows were heavily shuttered.

Girland moved into the room and Gilly followed him. He closed the door.

'This will do,' he said. 'Come on... let's go to bed.'

'You will tomorrow. Hungry?'

He felt her shudder in the darkness.

'No.'

'Lucky you... I am. Well, Dumas once said the man who sleeps, dines. So let's go to sleep.'

'I couldn't... I'm too scared.'

Girland stretched out on the bed and pulled her down beside him.

'It's a pity you didn't think of being scared when you made those films,' he said, sliding his arm around her. 'Couldn't you see you were sticking your neck out when you started this blackmail idea with your father... he's a toughie if ever there was one.'

'I'd do it again!' Gilly said but without much conviction in her voice... She pulled away from him. 'And stop nagging!'

'Sorry... I was forgetting you are a mature, well-balanced woman.'

'Oh, shut up! You madden me! Listen... suppose we go down to the count and tell him he can have the films and I promise not to make any more-if he will let us go ... suppose we do that?'

'A marvellous idea.' Girland laughed. 'He will have the films by tomorrow anyway. Why should he trust you? Why should he let you go?'

'But you are going to trust me.'

'Yes, but I have to... he doesn't. Go to sleep,' and Girland moved away from her, made himself comfortable and shut his eyes. In a few moments, he was in a light sleep while Gilly stared fearfully towards the invisible ceiling. After a while, she began to think back on her past life. Although still hating her father and mother, she was now regretting what she had done. She reluctantly admitted that Girland was right. The Ban War was a weak-kneed organisation. She had only joined because she knew it would enrage her father. She thought of Rosnold, now realising with a sense of shock that she wasn't sorry that she wouldn't ever see him again. He had been her evil influence, she told herself. Without his persuasion and his flattery, she would never have made those awful films. She felt hot blood of shame run through her. How could she have done it? Of course that massive dose of L.S.D. had made the films seem fun at the time. If Rosnold hadn't given her the L.S.D. she wouldn't have done what she had done. She was now sure of that.

If she ever got out of this mess, she told herself, she would begin a new life. To hell with her father! If he became President, then the American voters got what they deserved! She would have to leave Paris. The Ban War mob would never leave her alone if she stayed. She would go to London. She had a cousin there working at the American Embassy. He might help her find a job. She listened to Girland's gentle breathing and she envied him. She remembered their night of love-making. He was the sort of man she would like to hook up with, but she knew that was hopeless. He was a loner ... he had called himself a mercenary. He wouldn't consider having her around with him for long.

She thought of him with envy. Men had all the advantages.

Then suddenly she stiffened and her heart began to race. Had she heard voices? She half sat up and Girland's hand closed over hers. He had become instantly awake.

'What is it?'

'I thought I heard voices.'

'Stay here.'

Although she couldn't see him in the darkness, she felt the bed ease as he slid silently off it.

'Don't leave me!' she whispered urgently.

'Wait here!' His voice was the barest sound but there was enough snap in it to force her to remain on the bed.

Girland moved to the door and listened. Hearing nothing, he put his hand on the ornate gilt door handle and gently levered it down, then he edged open the door.

A faint glow of light met his eyes. It came from the head of the stairs. Then he heard a man, speaking in German, say,

'Are you all right down there, Rainer?'

A voice said something that Girland couldn't catch.

'Me?' The first voice said. 'How can I be all right... sitting on these stairs for the rest of the night?'

There was a laugh, then silence.

Girland edged open the door and peered down the corridor. He saw a heavily-built man, wearing the count's livery, sitting on the top stair at the head of the staircase. Between his knees, his hands clasped around the barrel, was a shotgun.

The sight of this man startled Girland. Why was he there? Girland asked himself. Could be that the count suspected that Gilly and he hadn't escaped into the forest but had remained hidden in the Schloss?

It seemed to Girland this must be the explanation why this man was guarding the staircase. But if the count thought they were still here, why hadn't a search been organised? Girland considered this and then realised the difficulties of searching such a vast place in darkness. It looked now that the count had sealed off the landings and was waiting for daylight.

Girland closed the door softly and returned to the bed. He sat beside Gilly and told her what he had seen and what he thought would happen in the morning.

'You mean they know we are here?' Gilly gasped fearfully.

'They can't know, but I think they suspect we could be here. Now just relax. We have a lot of space to manoeuvre in. If you do exactly what I tell you, they won't find us. But if you lose your nerve, they will find us.'

'What are we going to do?'

'We'll wait. We have lots of time.'

Gilly started to speak, then stopped. There was a long pause while Girland stretched out on the bed.

'Relax and let me think,' he said.

Gilly tried to relax, but it was impossible. She willed herself to remain still. Time crawled by. She became aware suddenly that Girland's breathing had changed slightly and she realised he was asleep. She lay by his side, miserable and envying him his complete indifference to the danger that was crowding in on them. Then she heard a sound that made her stiffen: a faint, but distinctive sound of snoring coming from the corridor.

Girland said softly, 'Hear that? The guard has gone to sleep.'

'Oh... I thought you were asleep.'

'So I was, but I sleep lightly.' She let him slide off the bed. He went to the door, eased it open and peered along the corridor. He saw the guard, sitting on the top stair, his head resting against the banister rail. From him was coming the gentle snoring sound.

Girland closed the door and switched on his torch. He crossed to the high windows.

'Come on, Gilly, we have work to do.'

She scrambled off the bed and joined him.

'Catch hold of these curtains and hold them together.'

When she had a firm grip on the heavy, velvet curtains, he took hold of the thick green and gold rope that opened and shut the curtains and threw his weight on it. For a moment it held, then came away from its fastening and dropped to the floor. He did the same with the other side of the curtain. Then he moved to the second window. Within a few minutes he had eight metre lengths of heavy curtain cord on the floor: these he began to knot together.

'What are you doing?' Gilly asked as she held the flashlight so he could see.

'Confusing the situation,' Girland said. 'When you're in a spot, confusion is your best friend.'

He opened one of the windows, unlatched the heavy wooden shutter and eased it back. Then he stepped out on to the balcony and looked down. There were no lights showing from any of the windows below. The light of the moon lit the vast expanse of lawn, and the distant forest was only visited by the outline of the tree tops.

He began to lower the knotted rope down the side of the outer wall, keeping the rope well clear of any window or balcony. The end of the rope finally dangled above the balcony on the second floor.

'We want two more curtain ropes,' he said. 'Wait here. I'll get them.'

'Let me come with you.'

'Do what I tell you!' Girland said curtly and moved to the door. He opened it, watched the sleeping guard for several moments, then slid out into the corridor. He entered the room next door. A few minutes later, he returned as silently as he had gone with two more lengths of cord. These he knotted to the end of the cord dangling from the window and then continued to lower the cord which now just reached the ground. He tied his end to the balcony rail and moved back into the room.

'It might fool them,' he said. 'Even if it doesn't, it will gain us time.'

'Can't we use those ropes? We could get out of here!'

Girland shook his head.

'I could, but you couldn't, so we don't go that way.'

She caught hold of his hand.

'Once we get free, I promise I'll leave my father alone. I won't ever bother him again... I promise.'

'All right, but first we have to get out of here. Now, let's get moving. Take your shoes off. I want to look at the other rooms. This one is too small'

They both took off their shoes, then Girland opened the door and watched the sleeping guard, then led Gilly out into the corridor. Silently, they moved away from the head of the stairs, down the long dark corridor to the far end. At the end of the corridor, double, ornate doors faced them. Girland briefly used his flashlight.

'Wait,' he said softly.

He went forward, listened against the door, turned a handle and eased the door open. He listened again, then put on the flashlight.

The beam scarcely penetrated the vastness of the room which appeared to be a banqueting hall. For a brief moment, Girland was startled to see shadowy figures lining the walls. A further probe of his light showed him this was a vast hall full of armour, fitted to stands and the walls covered with medieval weapons. He wasn't to know that in this room was one of the finest collections of Italian, German and English armour that Herman Radnitz had collected from all parts of Europe.

He returned to where Gilly was waiting.

'We have lots of company,' he said. 'Come on in. This looks as good a hiding-place as we can hope for.'

As he entered, Girland gently closed the door.

The guard at the head of the staircase continued to sleep.

From his tree-top perch, Malik watched Girland come out on to the fifth floor balcony and lower the knotted curtain cord until it reached the second storey. He watched him lean over the balcony rail, look down and then move back out of sight. Malik guessed he was getting more cord.

The bright light of the moon lit up the face of the Schloss and Malik found it unnecessary to use his night glasses. He eased his broad back against the trunk of the tree and waited. Girland returned and added two more lengths to the cord and then fastened his end to the balcony rail.

So they were going to make a break, Malik thought. The climb down would be dangerous: with the girl, doubly dangerous. He continued to watch with interest.

But nothing further happened. The wooden shutter remained half open; the balcony remained deserted. A half hour crawled by. Malik then decided that this length of rope was a red herring. He nodded his approval. He had come up against Girland several times and each time, his admiration for the way Girland handled a situation increased. So, after all, Girland had decided to remain in this enormous Schloss, but to give those who were hunting for him the hint that he and the girl had escaped into the forest. Malik approved of this plan.

He remained astride the thick branch of the tree for another half hour. All the lights of the Schloss had long gone out. It would be when the sun came up behind the hills that the hunt would begin.

He considered what he should do. Girland was in there on his own. The girl would be more a hindrance than a help. Malik remembered that moment when Girland could have had him shot, but instead, to Malik's amazement, Girland had handed him back his gun, saying to the girl who had wanted to shoot him: 'Don't get worked up, baby. He and I just happen to be on the wrong side of the Curtain. Both of us are professionals . . . working in the same dirty racket. There comes a time when we can forget the little stinkers at the top who pull strings ...' (see 'Have This One On Me')

Malik remembered this incident vividly. This, he knew was something he would never have said to a man he had in a hopeless trap. Girland's words had made a tremendous impression on him. There comes a time when we can forget the little stinkers at the top who pull the strings . . .

Malik thought of Kovski, plotting at his desk, his shabby suit food-stained, his energy and thoughts bent only on mischief... a little stinker... yes... Girland was right. But Girland, with this girl, was now trapped in the Schloss. Malik decided this was the moment to pay off his debt. He remembered a phrase that was drummed into him when he was learning English: One good turn deserves another. How often had he repeated this phrase while the gloomy, red-nosed teacher had corrected his pronunciation. This phrase was a cliché, but clichés often were true.

He swung himself down from branch to branch until he dropped on to the moss and the dead leaves of the forest. Then he moved off, silently, like a big, dangerous cat, skirting the forest until he reached the edge of the lawn. Here, he paused and studied the face of the Schloss. His next move would be dangerous. Although there were no lights showing, he wasn't to know if someone was watching. His thick fingers closed over the butt of the Mauser pistol. He drew the gun from its holster, then moving swiftly, he raced across the lawn and into the sheltering shadows of the Schloss. He paused at the foot of the steps leading to the terrace and waited. He heard nothing: no one shouted: no one raised an alarm.

Satisfied, he climbed the steps and reached the terrace, then made his way quickly past the tables and the folded sun umbrellas to where the curtain cord was hanging. He put his gun back into its holster and took hold of the cord. He pulled at it with his immense strength. It held. He pulled again: again it held.

Placing his feet against the face of the wall, he began a slow, steady walk up to the first balcony. Here he paused, gripping the balcony rail with his left hand, his feet wedged into the back of one of the dragon heads that decorated the wall. He listened and waited, then moved to the second balcony. The climb to him was easy. He was a man of tremendous strength and fitness. He was also nerveless. The thought that the rope might break and he would crash to his death meant nothing to him.

By stages, he finally reached the fifth floor balcony, swung his legs over the rail and paused before the open shutter and the open window.

He had come up silently, but he knew Girland had a highly developed sense of hearing. To walk into the black darkness of the room would be asking for trouble. He remained on the balcony, listening, but heard nothing. Girland could be near, out of sight, thinking one of the count's men had come up by way of the rope.

'Girland ... this is Malik,' Malik said in his guttural English. He pitched his voice softly. 'Girland... this is Malik.'

He waited. There was silence. Slowly, he moved forward, turning on his powerful flashlight. The white beam lit up some of the room. He stood in the doorway, sending the beam of the flashlight to the four-poster bed, then around the room. Satisfied the room was empty, he entered.

He stood in the middle of the room. So Girland had arranged his red herring and had left the room. Malik nodded his approval. But where was he?

Malik went silently to the door, eased it open and immediately stiffened when he saw a faint, flickering light in the corridor. He looked out, watched the sleeping guard for several moments, then moved silently into the corridor.

Doors faced him. Somewhere on this floor, Malik reasoned, Girland, with the girl, was hiding. He hesitated. He had to be careful not to wake the sleeping guard. He couldn't go from room to room, calling Girland. It would be unwise to enter any room, without first alerting Girland who he was. Finally, he decided to get as far away as he could from the sleeping guard and find himself a hiding-place.

He moved silently down the corridor until he reached the double doors at the far end. He looked back, assured himself the guard was still sleeping, then eased open the door. Here he paused, listened, heard nothing, then he stepped, into the darkness of a vast banqueting hall.

Eight

The sun came up from behind the hills, first lighting the tops of the trees and then the turrets of the Schloss.

Hans von Goltz had been shaven by his valet, and was now putting on a leather hunting jacket as he paced the vast floor of his bedroom. The shutters had been thrown open. The May air was sharp but pleasant. The first rays of the sun came into the room, lighting the tapestries on the walls and the splendid Persian carpet on the floor.

His breakfast, on a wheel trolley, stood in a ribbon of sun. Silver covers kept the two dishes warm. Von Goltz considered breakfast the most important meal of the day. As soon as he had shrugged himself into his coat, he went to the trolley and lifted first one and then the other silver cover: scrambled eggs, done lightly with plenty of butter, surrounded a fillet of smoked haddock. Lambs' kidneys with creamed potatoes in the second dish also pleased his eyes. He helped himself liberally and began his breakfast. While he was enjoying his kidneys, the fish demolished - there came a tap on the door. Frowning, he called to come in.

Sandeuer bowed his way through the doorway.

'Your Excellency... excuse me, please, but you should know there is a rope hanging from the fifth floor balcony.'

Von Goltz shovelled another kidney, covered with potato into his mouth as he glared at Sandeuer. When he could finally speak, he said, 'A rope? What do you mean?'

'A curtain rope... if your Excellency would look... you will see for yourself'

Von Goltz got to his feet, snatching up a square of buttered toast and moved on to the balcony. He bit into the toast as he regarded the knotted curtain cord. Then he returned to the room.

'Have you told Mr Silk?'

'No, your Excellency.'

'Then tell him. Ask him to come here immediately.'

Sandeuer bowed and withdrew.

Realising his breakfast was about to be interrupted, von Goltz proceeded to bolt down the remaining kidneys. Then buttering more toast, he spread the toast heavily with cherry jam and began to eat so rapidly he nearly choked himself. He was still munching when his door swung open and Lu Silk came in.

Silk was wearing a black shirt, black cotton trousers and black shoes. Von Goltz thought he looked like the impersonation of death. Silk paused in the doorway and stared at von Goltz with his cold, single eye.

'You have seen the rope?' von Goltz asked, gulping down the last of his toast.

'Oh, sure.' Silk moved into the room. 'I saw it half an hour ago.'

'So you were right! They were here last night, and now they have escaped into the forest.'

'Could be.' Silk sat down and lit a cigarette. 'It's light enough now. You had better get the search organised.'

Von Goltz moved around the room. His hurried breakfast had given him indigestion. He wished he hadn't eaten so quickly.

'As they are in the forest, there is no point wasting time searching here.'

'Go ahead,' Silk said, letting smoke drift down his nostrils.

Von Goltz stalked to the door, opened it and found Sandeuer waiting in the corridor.

'Begin the search,' he snapped. 'They are somewhere in the forest. Bring them back here. I don't have to tell you what to do. Find them!'

'Yes, Excellency,' Sandeuer said, but as he was about to leave Silk appeared behind von Goltz.

'Wait.' Silk put his hand on von Goltz's arm and drew him back into the room. He shut the door. 'I have an idea. I want you to go with your men. I want everyone out of here and into the forest.'

Von Goltz stared at him.

'What do you mean?'

Silk stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on the breakfast trolley.

'I think they are still here,' he said. 'The quickest way to find them is for them to think everyone here is searching the forest.'

'Still here?'

'Why not?' There was an impatient note in Silk's voice. 'Have you looked at the rope? A man could get down it, but no woman could. As we have already sealed off each landing, they will be up on the fifth floor. I take it there is no other way down from the fifth floor except by the main staircase.' 'That's right.' 'So they are still up there.'

Von Goltz rubbed the back of his neck while he thought. 'Then I will send my men to the fifth floor and we will get them,' he said finally. 'Why waste time searching the forest?' Silk smiled: it was an evil smile that made von Goltz flinch. 'We won't be wasting time... we will be taking precautions.' 'I'm afraid I don't understand. If you are so sure they are on the fifth floor, then with enough men, we will have them.' 'And then what?'

The two men looked at each other.

'I still don't understand,' von Goltz said after a long pause. 'You have a staff of forty men..., perhaps more?' 'The staff is thirty-eight men and five women. What does that have to do with it?'

'I want all your men out in the forest,' Silk said, lighting another cigarette. 'The women must also leave. I want this place completely evacuated.' His thin, cruel face was expressionless. 'What the eye doesn't see, a Judge doesn't know about.' 'What do you intend to do?'

'Get rid of Girland. We will keep the girl until the films arrive. It is possible Rosnold was lying. When we have the films, then I will get rid of her.'

'You mean you intend to stay here completely on your own?' von Goltz asked uneasily. 'Is that wise? We have been warned about Girland.'

Silk sneered.

'He is unarmed, I can handle him. All I have to do, once the place is evacuated, is to wait, out of sight. He needs two things: food and the possible use of a telephone. For both these, he has to come down the stairs. I'll be waiting for him.'

'Are you sure you shouldn't have two or three of my men with you?'

Silk studied von Goltz.

'Can you guarantee none of them would talk later?'

Von Goltz saw the point.

'I see . . . there is always that risk. When you have got rid of Girland... what do you do with him?'

'With the body?' Silk smiled. 'I have been studying the interesting plan of the Schloss you lent me. Is there water in the well in the rear courtyard?'

'Yes . . . it is never used, but there is quite a lot of water.'

'Well then, what better place? The girl, once we have the films, can go the same way.'

Von Goltz felt a little sick. He wiped his sweating hands on his handkerchief. The casual, cold-blooded way this man talked shocked him.

'Well... I - I will leave it to you.'

'How will you get rid of your women staff?'

Von Goltz hesitated while he thought.

'There is a fair on at Garmisch. I'll send them there.'

Silk nodded.

'Then let's get started. First, get rid of the women.' Von Goltz looked at his watch.

'It's not eight-thirty yet. This will take time. You know what women are.'

'Then get your men into the forest. Let's start something!' Silk said impatiently.

Von Goltz went into the corridor to give his orders to Sandeuer.

When Sandeuer heard that the women staff were to be taken to the fair at Garmisch, he gaped at von Goltz.

'But your lunch, Excellency ... the rooms are yet to be done.'

Von Goltz waved him away.

'Never mind! I want everyone out of here. Arrange it and arrange it quickly!'

Because he knew better than to argue with his master, Sandeuer hurried away to obey his orders.

There was an uproar and a great deal of heated talk from the chef and his staff when they were told that they were to go out into the forest to look for two missing guests. The chef, an enormously fat Frenchman, declared he was not going. He was about to prepare a complicated sauce and he had no intention of going out all day into the forest. It was only when Sandeuer threatened to call the count that the chef was finally convinced that for once his culinary expertise had to take second place. Red faced and furious, he tore off his white uniform and put on his green livery. Half an hour later the exodus from the Schloss began. From every quarter, men left and headed across the vast expanse of lawn towards the distant acres of the forest.

Later, five women, chattering and excited, left by car, heading towards Garmisch.

Sandeuer, sweating but triumphant, came up to the first floor to report that his master's orders had been obeyed.

Von Goltz told him to wait in the corridor. He shut the door and regarded Silk who was lighting yet another cigarette.

'Then I leave you?' he said.

'Yes. I have the place to myself?'

'All the staff has gone. You are quite sure you don't want me to stay with you?' von Goltz asked reluctantly.

Silk smiled mirthlessly.

'Do you want to?'

'I want this operation to be a success.'

'I didn't ask you that.' Silk lowered his voice and stared at von Goltz with his hard, single eye. 'Do you want to be an accessory to murder?'

Von Goltz lost colour. His mind went back into the past and the terror he had known until Radnitz had saved him. He turned and walked out of the room and joined Sandeuer.

'Let us see what the men are doing,' he snapped and strode down the stairs to the terrace.

Silk got silently to his feet. He went swiftly to his room. From his suitcase he took a 7.65 mm Luger automatic. He checked the magazine, then holding it in his hand, he went silently down the corridor, down the stairs and into the main living-room. He opened the double door leading into the hall and to the foot of the staircase.

Silently, he moved a chair so that he could just see the stairs when he sat in the chair without being seen himself. He guessed he would have a long wait, but he was used to waiting.

Sooner or later, Girland would come down the stairs and then he would have him.

* * *

Girland had heard the door of the banqueting hall ease open. It had opened so gently, Gilly didn't hear it. Girland put his hand on her arm and his left hand touched her lips in a signal to keep silent. He felt her stiffen against him.

He could see nothing in the darkness. His hand closed around the butt of his pistol. He heard the door ease shut.

There was a long pause, then a voice whispered out of the darkness:

'Girland... this is Malik.'

For a brief moment Girland was so startled, he remained motionless. Malik! Here? He had immediately recognised the guttural voice.

He pressed Gilly behind him. Then he thumbed back the safety-catch on his gun. The little snick of the catch made a loud noise in the vast silence of the room.

'Don't move,' Girland said. I have a gun in my hand.'

'Don't you recognise my voice, Girland?' Malik asked. 'You don't need the gun.'

Girland snapped on his flashlight. The small, powerful beam hit the double doors, shifted to the right and centred on Malik who was standing against the wall, his hands raised.

Gilly caught her breath at the sight of this giant of a man and she retreated.

Girland lowered the beam of his flashlight so it didn't dazzle Malik.

'You're the last person I expected to see, Comrade,' he said. 'What are you doing here?'

'It seemed to me,' Malik said, 'that you needed help.'

Girland laughed.

'An understatement.' He paused and looked thoughtfully at Malik. 'Since when have you wanted to help me?'

'I owe you something.'

Girland's puzzled expression cleared.

'I get it... last time we parted you promised to buy me a drink. Is this your idea of a drink?'

'Call it that if you like. I'm here to help.'

Girland walked down the vast room, keeping his flashlight's beam on Malik's legs until he reached him. He put his gun back in his hip pocket and offered his hand.

'It's quite a time ... I've missed you.'

The two men shook hands.

'I think I have also missed you,' Malik said. 'At least when we were fighting against each other, it was amusing. Since last time we met, life hasn't been amusing.'

They were speaking so quietly that Gilly who was crouched against the far wall, couldn't hear what they were saying. This silver-haired giant scared her. Seeing Girland walk towards him and then shake hands with him did nothing to allay her fears.

'You'd better meet Gillian Sherman,' Girland said.

They joined Gilly at the far end of the room. With Girland holding the flashlight so they could all see each other, he made the introductions.

'Gilly, I want you to meet an old enemy of mine of the Soviet Intelligence. His name is Malik: a name that is as infamous as it is famous.'

Gilly looked at Malik with horror. He regarded her with his flat evil green eyes with the indifference of a man regarding a hole in a wall.

'Malik, this is Gillian Sherman, the daughter of the possible future President of the United States,' Girland went on, enjoying himself. 'Shake hands nicely and let's be sociable.'

Gilly backed away while Malik thrust his hands in his pockets.

'I know all about her,' Malik said in German. 'I want to talk to you. * He paused, then went on, 'Can she understand German?'

'No... French but no German.'

'Good.' Malik took out his flashlight, turned it on and walked halfway down the room. He sat down in one of the high back leather chairs and lit a cigarette.

'He wants to talk to me,' Girland said to Gilly. 'There's nothing to be scared about. Sit there and wait for me.' He led her to a chair against the far wall.

I'm frightened of that man... he's evil.'

'Just relax. I know a lot more about him than you do.' The conversation was carried on in whispers. 'Sit down and leave this to me.'

'You're so goddamn cocky, aren't you?' Gilly exploded in a furious whisper. 'You're so sure of yourself? I tell you he's evil!'

Girland felt for her face, pinched her chin in his forefinger and thumb and kissed her. For a moment she tried to avert her face, then her lips met his and parted.

'Another time... another place,' Girland said, drawing back.

He again turned on his flashlight and made his way to a chair next to the one Malik was sitting in. He sat down beside him.

'Cigarette?' Malik asked, offering his pack.

Girland took the Russian cigarette and both men lit up.

There was a brief pause, then Malik said, speaking in soft German, 'I want you to know, Girland, I'm working with you. That's why I'm here.'

This statement didn't entirely surprise Girland. He had heard through his various contacts that Malik was out of favour and had been taken out of the active field. He was aware that Malik owed him his life. This man now appeared to be an

odd mixture: ruthless, dangerous and clever, but now it seemed there was a sentimental streak in him.

'I remember what you said when last we met,' Malik went on from out of the darkness, 'that we are professionals and the little stinkers who pull the strings are the amateurs. I've often thought about that. We both have to earn a living, do what we are told ... I much more than you, but there comes a time when it is possible to hit back at the little stinkers. You walked out on Dorey... I have my chance now to get even with Kovski.'

'Comrade Kovski... how is he?' Girland asked lightly.

'Better than he is going to be,' Malik said grimly. 'He has given me the assignment to find out why Sherman came to Paris, why Dorey gave you a movie projector and why you have come to Bavaria.'

'How are you progressing?'

'Well enough.' Malik drew on his cigarette, and for a brief moment the glowing end of the cigarette lit up his square, Slavonic features. 'This girl has made a pornographic film. With this film, she is blackmailing her father. She is a member of an anti-war organisation, run by Rosnold, a pornographic photographer who is now dead.'

Sherman went to Dorey for help. Dorey realised he couldn't make this official so he appealed to you. You followed these two to Garmisch. Somehow Herman Radnitz heard of this. This is his Schloss. You were invited... you fell for the invitation and now you are trapped here. I followed you here. I saw Rosnold shot. I saw a man leave in Rosnold's car. He is being followed. I climbed over the wall and here I am.'

Girland grinned in the darkness.

'Pretty sound work, Malik,' he said. 'You're right on the beam. The man using Rosnold's car has gone to get the films ... there are three of them. When they have them, they will knock the girl on the head and that will conclude the operation.'

'Knock you on the head too?'

'Certain to.'

'Why wait? We can leave now,' Malik said. 'We can get down by the rope. I came up by it. There are three men guarding the lodge at the gates. That is where the switch is operating the current to the walls. You and I could take them easily and we are away. My gun is silenced.'

'The girl couldn't get down the rope'

'Does she matter? Why not leave her?'

'No... besides, there is a slight complication.' Girland grinned in the darkness. 'I'm not leaving until I get those three films. The girl and I remain here until the messenger returns. He won't be back before 18.00 hrs. tomorrow.'

'I see. Sherman is paying you of course.'

'Why else do you imagine I'm sticking my neck out?'

Malik dropped the butt of his cigarette on the floor and put his foot on it.

'You have always been obsessed by money.'

'Aren't you?'

'No... because in my country you don't have much money... you don't get the chance to put a value on it. So you will stay here until the films arrive ... then what do you propose to do?'

'Get them and walk out.'

'Then what do you propose to do?' Malik repeated, a note of impatience in his voice.

'What I said. I'll stick a gun in the count's well-fed back and make him drive us out of here.'

Malik remained silent for a long moment.

'So I have to stay here with you until 18.00 hrs. tomorrow?'

'You don't have to.'

'I said I would help you. You can't do this on your own with the girl. You need someone to guard your back. A quick shot through the back of your head and the operation fails. There is an expert gunman here. Did you see how he picked off Rosnold? A perfect shot through the head. You wouldn't stand a chance.'

Girland rubbed his jaw.

'I'm going to get those films. They are worth ten thousand dollars to me. I'm going to wait for them to arrive.'

Malik flashed on his flashlight and looked at his cheap Czech watch. The time was 02.00 hrs.

'Then we have sixteen hours to wait,' he said.

'That's about right.'

'Without food?'

'I'll get some from downstairs later.'

'Don't under-rate that gunman. He is a first-class shot.'

Girland stood up.

'So you are sticking with me?'

'Yes.'

'I can use you... thanks. Let's get some sleep. There's a bed in the room next to this one. Sleep lightly.'

'I don't need sleep,' Malik said curtly. 'You take the bed. I'll keep watch.'

Girland wasn't going to argue about this. He liked his sleep.

He went down the room to where Gilly was waiting.

'Come on... we're going back to the four-poster. Malik will keep watch,' he said to her.

She followed him silently past Malik. They paused in the doorway, saw the guard was still sleeping at the head of the stairs and slipped silently into the room they had previously occupied. They stretched out on the bed.

'I don't understand,' Gilly said as she lay beside Girland. 'Is that man really a Russian agent?'

'He's probably the best of all their agents.'

'Then what is he doing here?'

'Russia wouldn't welcome your father as President. Don't bother your brains about it. I'm going to sleep.' Gilly half sat up.

'But how could the Russians get to know about me?'

'The Russians always make capital out of reckless and stupid acts,' Girland said. 'You've handed them something on a plate, but don't bother your brains about it. I'm going to sleep.'

He was asleep long before Gilly finally drifted off into an uneasy doze. The hours ticked away. At six-thirty, the first light of the dawn came through the slots in the wooden shutters and Girland came awake.

He yawned, stretched and slid off the bed.

Gilly started up.

'Wait here,' he said and moved silently to the door. He eased it open and looked down the long corridor. The guard was gone. He looked towards the double doors of the banqueting room. Malik was sitting in the half-open doorway, smoking.

'The guard left half an hour ago,' Malik said softly. 'There's a bathroom right opposite. I've been doing a little exploring.' He got to his feet and joined Girland.

'Nothing happened?'

Malik shook his head.

'That rope might not bluff them. They could search the whole place.'

'We'll wait until they do.'

Having made his toilet, Girland returned to the bedroom and led Gilly to the bathroom.

'The guards have gone,' he told her. 'Go ahead, but be quick.'

It was while she was in the bathroom, they heard sounds of activity going on downstairs. Girland went cautiously down the corridor and peered over the banister rail. He could see the fourth and third stair heads. No one was guarding them. He could hear the murmur of voices from the ground floor, but couldn't hear what was being said. He returned to Malik. Gilly came from the bathroom. In the dim light coming through the shutters, she looked pale and scared.

'They will find the rope pretty soon,' Girland said. 'Now the staircase isn't guarded, we'll go up to the next floor. They are certain to come up here.'

Malik nodded.

The three moved down the corridor, paused at the foot of the staircase leading to the sixth floor, listened, then Girland drawing his gun, went up silently. Edging around the bend in the staircase, he assured himself no one was up there and he signalled for Gilly and Malik to come up.

'We'll wait here and see what happens,' he said and sat down on the carpet, his back against the wall, just out of sight of the stair head. The other two joined him. 'I could do with a pint of coffee with eggs and lashings of bacon,' he went on. Malik eyed him, but said nothing. He disapproved of such weakness. Gilly grimaced. The thought of food, in her present state of panic, revolted her.

It wasn't until well after 08.00 hrs. that they heard a loud voice, speaking in German, come drifting up the well of the stairs. The man was saying: 'I want every one of you out into the forest. Take guns! These two must be found! Everyone is to go!'

Girland and Malik exchanged glances, then Girland got to his feet.

'Watch the stairs,' he said and moving along the corridor, he opened a door on his right and entered a small unfurnished room with a short spiral staircase, leading to one of the turrets. He climbed the stairs and moved into the turret. The slotted windows gave him a direct view down on the lawn and on to the distant forest.

He waited. Some five minutes later, he saw the first of von Goltz's men coming across the lawn, heading for the forest. He began to count them... fifteen... twenty-three... thirty... They broke up and formed a long even line, each man ten metres apart from the other. They entered the forest. Girland continued to wait. Another five men came across the lawn, slowly followed by an enormously fat man who Girland guessed would be the chef. He plodded forward slowly, followed by another man who kept waving his arms as he talked to the fat man.

Ten minutes later, Girland saw an estate car full of women drive down to the gates. He watched the gates open and the car move off along the main road to Garmisch. Still he waited. Then he saw von Goltz, carrying a shotgun, with his major-domo at his heels also cross the lawn and enter the forest.

After waiting another ten minutes, Girland decided there was no one else to come and he returned to the corridor where Gilly looked expectantly at him. Malik was leaning over the banister, listening and watching. He straightened when Girland came from the room.

'Well?'

'Thirty-eight men and a number of women have left,' Girland said. 'The count with his major-domo has also gone into the forest. Did you hear anything?'

'They sent three men up to the room below. They took away the curtain cord and then went down again.'

The two men looked at each other.

'This could be a trap,' Girland said. 'A bluff... like the rope. The gunman could have been left behind to wait for us to'

show.'

Malik nodded.

'Yes. Shall we go down and find him?'

Gilly listened, her eyes growing round.

'He might not be down there. We'll play it safe just in case he is. We have plenty of time. We'll give him an hour or so. He doesn't know for certain we are up here. Let's stretch his nerves a little.'

Again Malik nodded.

'I'll stay here . . . you watch from the turret. We want to be sure they don't give up the search in the forest and come back.'

'Yes.' Girland turned to Gilly. 'Come with me.' He led her into the turret-room. 'I'm going up into the turret. You sit on the floor. You may have a long wait, but try to amuse yourself. Think of all the nice things you've done in your life if you can remember them . . . that should keep you occupied.'

Gilly flushed.

There are moments when I could kill you!' she said fiercely. 'You treat me like a child!'

'No, Gilly... not a child.'

Girland regarded her for a long moment, then went up the turret stairs.

Gilly choked back a sob. That cool, indifferent look he had given her told her as no words could his opinion of her.

What really hurt her was that she knew his opinion of her was the same as her own.

* * *

Lu Silk sat motionless in his chair, his gun resting in his lap. The silence in this vast Schloss was depressing, but Silk was used to silence. He was also used to waiting. He was sure, sooner or later Girland would come down the stairs, and then he would have him.

While he sat there Silk recalled another long wait he once had -when was it? Three years back? He nodded to himself.

Yes, three years back.

There was an agitator, Jack Adams, who was stirring up trouble among the men working on one of Radnitz's big building projects. The work was slowing down and Radnitz could see he could get caught on the compensation clause: big money, so he had given Silk the signal to get rid of Adams.

Adams had lived in a two room walk-up in Brooklyn. He knew he was in danger, but he had a lot of confidence in himself which was a mistake when dealing with a man like Silk.

Silk had rented a room across the road, facing Adams' apartment block. He arrived there early one morning and took up a position on the hard kitchen chair, the curtains of the window half drawn. He had brought with him his favourite killing weapon: a .22 target rifle with a telescopic sight. He waited for Adams to show. He wasn't to know that Adams was in bed with flu. There was an important mass meeting being held at 21.00 hrs. that evening and Radnitz had ordered Silk to stop Adams from attending. Silk imagined Adams was certain to go out during the day, so he waited. He waited for thirteen hours. He hadn't brought food with him, and around 17.00 hrs. he was hungry, thirsty and viciously angry. He didn't dare leave the window for a second. He knew that when Adams moved, he always moved fast, and his shabby car was parked only a few yards from the entrance to the apartment block.

Sitting in his chair, now waiting for Girland, Silk told himself the Adams' affair had been the longest endurance test he had ever had, but it had taught him that if you wait long enough, were patient enough, you fixed what you were hired to fix.

Adams had finally shown at 20.30 hrs. The light was bad and he moved fast, running down the steps and heading for his car.

Because Silk hadn't relaxed for a moment during those long thirteen hours, he was ready for him. As Adams paused briefly to unlock the car door, Silk got his head in the centre of the cross hairs of the telescopic sight and squeezed the trigger. That had been the end of Adams' trouble making.

Because of this experience, Silk was prepared to wait all day for Girland. The count would keep his men out in the forest until dusk. Sooner or later, Girland would make his break. The success or failure of this trap depended on whether Girland believed the Schloss had been evacuated. If he suspected a trap, then he might remain out of sight in spite of hunger and thirst. Although he was unarmed, there were plenty of weapons to hand . . . swords, knives, battle-axes that adorned most of the walls, but these kind of weapons didn't bother Silk. He knew no man bom could compete with him with a hand weapon against his gun.

Silk would have liked to smoke, but that would be a give away. He crossed one leg over the other and relaxed, his ears pricked and his one eye on the half open door.

In the big hall was a splendid grandfather clock. During the steady swing of its pendulum, the lead weight slightly touched the case of

the clock, making a distinct and regular noise. After half an hour of listening to this noise, Silk found it was getting on his nerves. He wanted to go out into the hall and stop the dock, but this would be too dangerous. If Girland was somewhere upstairs, he too could hear the scrape... scrape... scrape from the clock, and he would be immediately alerted if the clock was stopped.

The clock suddenly struck nine: its soft mellow chimes startling Silk. Later, it startled him again when it struck ten. Although he imagined he had nerves of steel, he found the two hour wait had made him too tense. Twice during this time, he imagined he had heard another slight sound above the scraping of the pendulum and he had half-risen to his feet. Then satisfied that Girland wasn't creeping down the stairs, he sat back, his hand closing over his pack of

cigarettes, then remembering, had silently cursed. He was now longing for a cigarette. At least during those thirteen hours when he had waited for Adams, he had smoked incessantly.

He began to think of Girland. This man was a trained CIA agent. Silk's thin mouth formed into a wry grimace. His first murder assignment had been against a CIA agent, a man who had collected enough evidence to put Radnitz behind bars and had to be eliminated immediately. (see 'Believed Violent')

In those days, Silk had been very sure of himself: too sure. The agent had been almost too quick for him and had shot him in the face. Although he had finally managed to kill the agent, he had to spend six months in hospital and had come out with only one eye.

The experience had left him with a subconscious dread of facing another CIA man. But during his years with Radnitz, his victims had been easy . . . pigeons to be shot down without means, training or guts to protect themselves.

Radnitz had warned him about Girland. As he sat in the chair, he remembered von Goltz's consternation. Are you quite sure you shouldn't have two or three of my men with you?

Silk touched his forehead with the back of his hand. It infuriated him to find he was sweating.

The grandfather clock in the hall began to strike eleven.

* * *

Girland came down the turret stairs. For three weary, boring hours he had been watching the forest without seeing any of von Goltz's men.

'Gilly . . . make yourself useful. Go up in the turret and watch the forest. If you see anyone coming back, let me know. I want to talk to Malik.'

He left her and joined Malik in the corridor. 'I think it's time to start something' he said, keeping his voice low. 'You've heard nothing?'

'No'

'We could be wasting time. They may have completely evacuated the place, but I'm not taking chances. The gunman could still be here, waiting. If he's anywhere, he'll be in the main living-room. It's only from the door of that room you have a clear view of the stairs. I want to make sure he is there. I'm going down by the rope.'

Malik shook his head.

'It's too risky. You can't climb down without making some noise. If he hears you, he'll come out onto the terrace and you're a dead duck.' He paused for a moment, then went on, 'How far can you go down the stairs without being seen?'

'To the third floor.'

'Then let's go down. It's time to put pressure on his nerves,' Malik said. 'I'll go out onto one of the balconies and start tapping on the balcony rail. It's a trick I've used before, and it worked.'

This made sense to Girland. He nodded.

'What do I do?'

'Stay at the head of the stairs. If I spot him come out on the terrace, I'll rap twice quickly. If you move fast you can get down to the second floor before he gets back.'

'Right'

Both men drew their guns and moved down the stairs. Both of them were trained to move like ghosts and they reached the third floor landing without a sound.

While Girland remained by the stair head, Malik moved down the corridor. He spent some moments easing open one of the doors inch by inch until he had enough space to slide into the room. The shutters across the windows presented a problem. Would they creak when he opened them? With infinite patience he unlatched and opened the shutters. The operation took nearly five minutes but he got them open without a sound. He stepped on to the balcony and saw that the big windows of the main living-room were below and to his right. He lay flat on the balcony where he could peer through the balcony rails, yet squirm back instantly out of sight.

Using the barrel of his gun, he began to tap on the lower rung of the balcony rail. The silence, hanging over the Schloss, accentuated the sound.

He tapped at irregular intervals. Tap-tap-tap. A long pause; then tap-taptap-tap.

Silk heard the sound and stiffened to attention. He looked swiftly behind him as the sound came from that direction.

He came out of his chair like a cat, gun in hand. Standing motionless, listening, he looked what he was: a vicious, professional killer. The tapping sound stopped, and there was silence, except for the scrape-scrape-scrape from the grandfather clock.

A bird? Silk wondered. Water dripping?

He waited, listened, then decided the sound was of no importance. He wiped his sweating face savagely with the back of his hand and again longed for a cigarette.

Minutes dragged by. The pendulum of the clock continued its soft irritating sound.

Then the tapping began again.

Silk looked out on to the sunlit terrace. A branch of a tree? No. The sound was too metallic for that. The sound was coming from outside. Silk moved to the open french windows.

The tapping continued. Silk was now certain it was coming from the terrace. Someone out there? A trap? He edged closer to the window, paused to look back and through the half open door where he could see the stairs: nothing moved out there.

The tapping stopped, and again silence closed in around Silk. He edged further forward. Nothing happened. He felt a

surge of rage run through him, aware that he was jumpy and his nerves were crawling. Then just when he was deciding to return to his chair, the tapping began again.

He remembered von Goltz had assured him that Girland was unarmed. He decided he had to investigate this sound.

Moving like a black shadow, he stepped out on to the terrace, his gun ready.

Malik saw him and tapped twice fast, then squirmed back out of sight.

Girland heard the two quick taps and went down the stairs, fast and silently to the second floor. Now he could see the half open door leading into the living-room and caught a glimpse of the empty chair, pulled near the doorway. He stepped back into the corridor.

Silk looked up at the rows of balconies above him. He saw nothing suspicious. His nerves were now so taut that he became reckless with

rage. He stepped right out on to the terrace where he had a good view of the balconies.

Malik grinned and lifted his pistol. It was a difficult shot as the bars of the balcony obstructed his view.

Silk saw the movement although he didn't see the pistol. He fired instantly. The bullet slammed against the concrete just below Malik's head, spraying splinters, one of which hit Malik across the bridge of his nose. He started back, and Silk, now knowing where his opponent was, dashed back into the living-room.

He had had enough of this cat and mouse business. He knew Girland had no gun and he knew he was on the third floor. He didn't hesitate. Rushing across the hall, he went up the stairs two at the time, not caring about the noise he was making.

In the corridor on the second floor, Girland heard him coming and quickly stepped into a nearby room.

Silk came pounding up the stairs. As he started up the next flight of stairs, Girland went after him. Half-way up the stairs, Silk heard him. He stopped short and spun around, but Girland was on him, grabbing at his ankles. Girland heaved and Silk went over his head to crash down the stairs, his gun flying out of his hand.

Girland spun around and launched himself at Silk as Silk was struggling to his feet. Silk couldn't avoid the flying body and went down under Girland with a crash that set the weapons on the walls jangling.

With strength that startled Girland, Silk threw him off and the two men rolled apart. Girland was first into action. He was half up and slamming himself down on Silk before Silk could raise himself. Girland chopped with the side of his hand, smashing down on the side of Silk's neck. Silk went out like a snuffed candle.

Malik came leaping down the stairs as Girland bent over Silk. Seeing the blood on Malik's face, Girland asked, 'You hurt?'

'It's nothing.' Malik wiped his face with his handkerchief. He stared down at Silk. 'Who is he?'

'I wouldn't know... sweet looking specimen isn't he? You watch him. I'll get a curtain cord.'

Girland went into one of the rooms and broke off a length of cord. He returned and bound Silk's hands behind his back and his ankles together.

'Let's dump him out of the way.'

They carried Silk's unconscious body into the room and put him on a bed.

'He'll be out for an hour or so.' Girland tore off a piece of the dust sheet covering the bed and gagged Silk. 'Let's hunt up some food . . . I'm starving. Hang on a moment, I'll get Gilly.'

Ten minutes later, the three of them were sitting in the vast kitchen, hungrily eating cold chicken and thick slices of ham.

'I have an idea,' Malik said as he began to demolish another slice of ham. 'We don't have to stay here until the messenger arrives. We can meet him at the Munich airport. Between the two of us we can persuade him to part with the films. We could be back in Paris by midnight.'

'Too risky. We might not spot the messenger.'

'I had a good look at him... I'll spot him.'

'How about the electric fence?'

Malik wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'We'll take a car... there are four of them in the garage, go down to the lodge, take it, turn off the current and we're on our way.'

Girland considered this idea. He checked his watch. The next plane from Paris wouldn't arrive for another five hours. They had plenty of time.

'Okay... we'll do it.' He turned to Gilly. 'Can you drive, baby?'

'Of course... and don't call me baby!'

Girland laughed.

'Come on up and pack.' He turned to Malik. 'Will you get the car?'

Ten minutes later, Girland, carrying Gilly's bag and his own, followed by Gilly, ran down the steps to the waiting white Mercedes 200.

'You drive,' Girland said to Gilly as he dumped the bags in the boot of the car.

He and Malik got in the back. Gilly set the car in motion and drove down the long, twisting drive until Girland told her to stop,

'We'll go the rest of the way on foot. When I whistle, come on down to the gates.'

'Please be careful!' Gilly said. She was getting scared again.

'Oh, sure... just relax and listen for my whistle.'

He joined Malik, and together they went swiftly on down the drive. When in sight of the lodge, they paused.

'I'll go around the back,' Malik said, 'drawing his-gun.' 'Give me a couple of minutes.'

But they need not have taken precautions for the three guards in the lodge were having lunch. They were absorbed in a vast meal of white sausages with a mustard sauce and sauerkraut.

Girland kicked open the door and the three guards stared with stupefied eyes at his threatening gun. Malik joined him. 'Turn the current off!' Malik snarled and the threat of his green eyes so scared the head guard that he scrambled to his feet and pulled down a lever on the wall.

It took them a few minutes to tie each man securely to his chair, then Malik and Girland left the lodge.

While Malik ran to open the big gates, Girland went up the drive and whistled piercingly.

Later, as Girland drove the Mercedes into the crowded car park at the Munich airport, Gilly said, 'There's the T.R.4.' She pointed to where the scarlet T.R.4 was parked among other cars.

Malik, sitting in the back of the Mercedes, leaned forward.

'I'll handle this,' he said. 'The messenger may have seen you. He hasn't seen me. Here's what we do ...'

* * *

As the aircraft from Paris stopped at the arrival bay, Fritz Kirst reluctantly undid his safety belt. He wasn't pleased to be back, but it had certainly been marvellous luck to have been sent to Paris on such an easy mission. When he had arrived, the bank had been closed so he had the whole evening and half the night to explore this city which he had never had the good fortune to visit before.

Kirst had only been working for von Goltz for two years. He had a badly paid job as an assistant to the estate manager who constantly bullied him. Kirst was far from satisfied with his job and was planning to make a change as soon as something better came along. However, the Paris trip had made up for a lot of his past grievances, and although he had spent more money than he could afford, he told himself, as he walked through the Customs, that it had been worth it.

A silver-haired giant of a man approached him.

'Your name?'

The snap in the voice and the cold green eyes brought Kirst to attention. He was so used to being snapped at by his superiors he reacted automatically.

'Fritz Kirst, sir,' he said.

Malik nodded.

'Good . . . your master told me to pick you up. Follow me,' and without looking at Kirst, Malik, knowing the German weakness for obeying orders, turned on his heel and walked briskly to where the Mercedes was parked.

Kirst, a little bewildered, had to break into a trot to keep up with him. Who was this man? he was asking himself. Why had the count sent him? But when he saw the count's car, his uneasiness disappeared. Malik was already at the wheel, and Kirst had to scramble in as Malik eased the car out of the parking bay.

As Malik drove out on to the main road, Kirst said timidly, 'Excuse me, sir, but...'

'I don't like people talking to me when I'm driving!' Malik snapped. Kirst placed his brief-case on his knees and sat back, snubbed and silent.

This big man certainly could handle a car, he thought as Malik whipped the Mercedes through the traffic with expert ease. They quickly left Munich behind. As they reached the highway to Garmisch, Kirst happened to look in the off-side wing mirror. He stared... stared again, then stiffened.

Right behind the Mercedes was a small scarlet car. Kirst immediately recognised the driver and the girl beside him.

They were the two the count was keeping prisoners at the Schloss, and that car! It was the car he had been ordered to leave at the airport!

Sweat broke out on his face. He looked wildly at Malik who glared at him so evilly Kirst shuddered.

'Sit still and keep quiet!' Malik snarled.

Some way down the busy highway, there was a left turn: a narrow country road leading to a distant farmhouse. Malik slowed, swung the car down the road, drove until he reached a bend that would put the car out of sight from the highway and pulled up.

'You have a packet from a Paris bank I want,' Malik said. 'Give it to me!'

The T.R.4 pulled up behind the Mercedes and Girland slid out. He came to the off-side door of the Mercedes and looked through the open window at Kirst.

'Has he given it to you?'

'Not yet... but he will.'

Kirst hesitated for only a second, then with shaking hands, he opened the brief-case and took from it a square-shaped, sealed packet. Malik took it from him and examined it.

Girland quietly slid his gun from his hip pocket. He didn't trust Malik. He kept the gun down by his side, but the movement hadn't escaped Malik who looked up, stared at him and grinned.

'You take after me... you trust nobody,' he said and reaching across Kirst, he thrust the packet at Girland who took it with his left hand.

'I apologise ... force of habit,' Girland said and put the gun back into his hip pocket. He went over to Gilly who was waiting in the T.R.4. 'Is this it?' he asked showing her the packet.

'Yes' Gilly said and made a quick snatch at it, but Girland was too quick for her. She looked pleadingly at him. 'Please give it to me... it's mine!'

Girland shook his head.

'Don't let's go all over this again, Gilly. You gave me your word. This goes to your father.'

She went white.

'No! Please! I couldn't live knowing he had seen those films! If you give them to him, I'll kill myself! I swear I will!'

Girland studied her.

'But, Gilly, shouldn't you have thought of this before you made them? After all, you were going to send them to his enemies, weren't you?'

'Of course not! Please believe me! I was bluffing. Of course I wasn't going to send them to them. I Can't bear to think of anyone seeing them!'

'Oh come on, Gilly. You've already sent one spool to your father.'

'I didn't! It was Pierre! He sent it and then told me afterwards ! I could have killed him! Besides, these . . .' She caught her breath in a sob. 'They - they are much worse. I can't bear anyone seeing them. Don't you understand? I didn't know what I was doing as you or anyone else wouldn't have if you had had as much L.S.D. as I had.' Tears began to run down her face. 'You can't do this to me!'

Girland regarded the packet in his hand, then looked at her.

'This little lot is worth ten thousand dollars to me. Why should I care what it does to you?'

She hid her face in her hands and began to sob violently, rocking herself to and fro: a picture of misery. Girland became aware that Malik had got out of the Mercedes and was watching him curiously.

Still holding the packet in his hand, Girland said, 'What are we going to do with our friend?'

'Tie him up and dump him here,' Malik said. 'Someone will find him. It'll give us time to get back to the airport and catch the Paris plane if we hurry.'

Girland looked at Gilly who was rocking herself backwards and forwards and he shook his head.

'Gilly... cut the act. It's good, but it doesn't convince me. You are like a lot of people . . . when they are on top, they're fine. When the

cards fall wrong, they snivel I don't believe Rosnold was behind this. I think you were and now, without him, you've lost your guts. Here... take them.' He placed the packet on the hood of the T.R.4. Turning, he went to the Mercedes and took from the boot, Gilly's suitcase. This he dropped behind the driving seat of the T.R.4.

Gilly continued to sob, her face hidden in her hands.

Girland regarded her, grimaced, then shrugged. He walked back to the Mercedes.

'Let's drive further up the road to the next bend,' he said, getting into the car.

'You're forgetting the packet,' Malik said as he slid under the driving wheel.

'Don't be so obvious, Comrade,' Girland said. 'Let's move.'

Malik drove to the next bend and then pulled up. He told Kirst to get out. While he was tying Kirst's trembling hands behind his back, Girland lit a cigarette. He heard the T.R.4 start up.

Malik looked at him.

'She's going.'

'Yes.'

'She's taken the packet.'

'Yes.'

Malik tied Kirst's ankles together, then picking him up, dropped him over the hedge.

'I thought you were interested in money, Girland,' he said. 'Wasn't Dorey going to pay you for those films?'

'So he said.' Girland got into the passenger's seat of the car. 'Come on... let's move.'

With a puzzled expression, Malik started the car, reversed and headed down to the highway.

Although Malik drove fast, Girland saw no sign of the scarlet T.R.4. Gilly was driving even faster.

* * *

There were only six other passengers on the last flight to Paris and Girland and Malik sat together, away from the others.

Both men were silent: both occupied with their thoughts.

Girland said suddenly, 'You won't tell me unless you want to, Malik, but there's no harm in asking. Just why did you give up those films? I was anticipating trouble. With them, you could have made a big hit with your people. They wouldn't have hesitated to use them

and Sherman would have been sunk. Have you lost interest in your work?'

Malik stared broodingly down at his big hands. For some moments, Girland thought he wasn't going to reply, then he said, 'At last I'm following your example. Ever since I began working for security, I've never considered my own interests whereas you have always put yourself first and your job second. Now I've decided to do just that. As long as Kovski is in power, I will never be allowed to return to the active field where I belong. Sitting at a desk, handling paper is death to me. This is my chance to destroy Kovski and I am taking it. Once he is destroyed, I will get back to the active field.' He turned his head and his flat green eyes searched Girland's face. Then you and I will be enemies again.'

'Maybe we won't meet again,' Girland said, shrugging. 'It's only because Dorey keeps tempting me with money that I fall for his cockeyed assignments. He may get tired of it. How are you fixing Comrade Kovski? -

Again Malik took his time before answering. Finally he said, 'When I report tomorrow, I will tell him you destroyed the

films before I could get them. I will remind him that if he had acted on my suggestion and had cabled the American airport police that Sherman was returning on a false passport, Sherman would have been ruined by now . . . that the films meant nothing. We could have prevented Sherman becoming President by sending this cable. This Kovski stupidly refused to do. I will then tell him that a tape recording of our conversation is on its way to Moscow.' Malik looked down at his hands and smiled evilly. 'That will be the moment... when he realises what I have done... that I shall enjoy.'

Girland nodded.

'I can imagine. Dorey will be pleased.'

Malik shrugged his heavy shoulders.

'Many people will be pleased.' He looked at his watch. 'We will be landing in a few minutes. We must not be seen together. Drina will be on duty at the airport. Will you go first? I will follow after you when Drina is telephoning that you are back.'

'That's okay.'

As the plane began its descent, Malik looked directly at Girland.

'I'll say good-bye now. I hope we don't meet again. In a couple of months I'll be back in the active field. We are all square now... you understand?'

Girland laughed.

'I can take a hint. I hope we don't meet again and thanks for your help. Yes ... we're all square.'

He offered his hand and Malik gripped it, then as the plane touched down and began to taxi towards the arrival bay, both men unfastened their safety belts.

* * *

Girland was disappointed when he walked into Dorey's outer office to find Mavis Paul not at her desk.

He flicked down the switch on the inter-com connecting with Dorey's office.

'Yes?' Dorey's voice asked.

'This is your favourite ex-agent reporting,' Girland said. 'Did I wake you up?'

'Oh... you. Come in.'

Girland entered the big room, sauntered across to the visitor's chair and sank into it. He was wearing a lightweight grey tweed suit, a blood-red tie and dark-brown casuals. Dorey was surprised to see him so well turned out.

'Nice to see me again?' Girland asked with a jeering little smile.

Dorey regarded him over the tops of his spectacles.

'Did you get those films?'

Girland lifted his shoulders. He took his time before saying, 'Yes and no. I did have them, but the poor little girl sobbed so hard when I told her I was giving them to her old man that I gave them back to her.'

Dorey stiffened.

'Are you trying to waste my time?'

'I wouldn't dream of doing that. If you don't believe me, call up the Soviet Embassy and ask Malik. Without him, I doubt if I would have got the films. He was an eye-witness to the touching scene when I decided, not without pain to myself, that I would rather let the girl have them than her creep of a father.'

'In other words you haven't the films .. you have failed,' Dorey exclaimed, his face flushing with anger.

'I didn't fail. I don't fail. I got them and you can assure your pal that he can go ahead and run for office. The films have been destroyed. Gillian has promised to behave herself in the future. You can't call that failure, can you?'

'Do you expect me to believe any of this?' Dorey said furiously. 'Your assignment was to bring those films to me! Now stop this fooling! Have you got them or haven't you?'

'I know you are getting old, but I didn't realise you are also getting deaf, Dorey,' Girland said, looking sad. 'The girl has destroyed them. She has promised to leave her father strictly alone in the future.'

'How do I know she has destroyed them? A promise from a slut like that? What is that worth?' Dorey demanded, banging his fist on the desk.

'Did you know Sherman gave the green light to Radnitz to have her murdered?' Girland asked quietly.

Dorey stiffened and looked hard at Girland who had lost his bantering expression. There was a steely gleam in his eyes that told Dorey he was being deadly serious.

'I think you should tell me just what has been happening,' he said.

'I'll tell you... that's why I'm here. By the way how has your pal Sherman been getting along since I've been away?'

'What do you expect? Because of his daughter, he has had to remain at home. He's lost ground. You can't fight an election at home.'

Girland brightened.

'Well, that's good news. Perhaps Gilly has struck a mortal blow after all.'

'I'm not saying that, but he is now behind. Ten days are vital at this period of the election.'

'So the creep might not become President after all?'

'Never mind about him. What's been happening?'

Girland took one of Dorey's cigarettes, lit it and settled himself comfortably. He then proceeded to give Dorey a lucid report of the past events.

Dorey sat in his chair, his chin resting on his finger tips, his eyes hooded as he listened. When Girland described Rosnold's murder, Dorey's lips tightened, but he still didn't interrupt.

'And so when the girl started to cry her eyes out,' Girland concluded, 'I thought the gentlemanly thing to do was to give her the films ... so I gave them to her. Perhaps you wouldn't have?'

Dorey brooded for some moments.

'You have no real proof that Sherman is implicated with this kidnapping and murder?' he asked finally.

'I don't need proof. Sherman and Radnitz are buddy-buddies. Gilly made a nuisance of herself... Q.E.D. What's it matter anyway? She isn't charging the creep with attempted murder.'

Dorey winced.

'I find this difficult to believe,' he said slowly, but his shocked eyes told Girland he did believe.

'You don't have to ... it's over now ... who cares?'

'What has happened to the girl?'

Girland shrugged.

'You don't have to worry about her. She is capable of taking care of herself. She'll keep her promise... I'm sure of that.'

Dorey began to relax.

'You realise, Girland, that unless I give those three films to Sherman, he won't part with any more money?'

'I knew that when I gave Gilly the films,' Girland said and smiled wryly. 'I earned the first ten thousand dollars so I keep them but I intend to spend them as fast as I can. I wouldn't take any more money from Sherman if he offered it to me ... some money smells, but his money stinks.'

Dorey lifted his hands a little helplessly.

'There are times when I don't understand you,' he said. 'I was under the impression any money smelt good to you.'

'Well, we all live and learn.' Girland laughed. 'I have another choice item of news for you,' and he went on to tell Dorey that Kovski was heading for disgrace.

Dorey considered this, then shook his head.

'It isn't good news, Girland.' I would rather have a blustering fool like Kovski in charge of Security than a devil like Malik back in the active field. You're not using your head.'

Girland acknowledged the truth of this by nodding.

'Yes ... I must admit that fact had escaped me. Not that I could have done anything about it. It's Malik's private vendetta. Anyway, it doesn't matter to me. I'm distinctly ex now. I don't suppose I'll ever run into Malik again. You had better warn your boys. They have been having it too soft recently.'

Dorey rubbed his jaw as he regarded Girland.

'I don't believe you really want to leave us, Girland. Now there is an interesting little job in Tangier that would exactly suit you.' He reached for a file and drew it lovingly towards him. 'Plenty of action... two women ... pretty ones involved. Yes, it would exactly suit you and I know you could handle it.' Girland lifted his eyebrows. 'The old siren at work again. How about the money?'

This is an official job so you would be paid official rates,' Dorey said, a sudden waspish note in his voice.

Girland levered himself out of the chair.

'No, thank you. I have ten thousand dollars to squander. I've given up working for peanuts.' He lifted his hand and flapped his fingers at Dorey. 'So long. If anything crops up in the ten thousand dollar bracket, I might consider it. Think big is my motto: should be yours too.'

He wandered out, closing the door gently behind him. His face lit up with his charming smile as he saw Mavis Paul at her typewriter.

She looked up, flushed and then continued to type.

'Not a word of welcome?' Girland said, coming to the desk and smiling down at her. 'Not one glad little cry of pleasure?' Mavis hesitated and then stopped typing. She looked up at him.

'Did anyone tell you you have eyes like stars and lips made for a kiss?' Girland asked. 'I got that off a bottle of perfume.'

'The exit is behind you and to the right,' Mavis said without sounding very convincing.

'How about a dinner with me at Lasserre: soft music, beautiful food, velvety wines? I have lots of money I want to get rid of. Shall we say nine o'clock?'

Mavis regarded him. She thought he looked very handsome. An evening out with him couldn't fail to be exciting. She suddenly realised her life up to now had been all work and no play.

'Thank you... yes...'

'My mother once told me that if I didn't at first succeed... Girland laughed happily. 'This is going to be the most maddeningly exciting evening of my life... and your life. Then nine o'clock at Lasserre.'

She nodded and began typing again.

Girland wandered to the door. As he was about to leave, she stopped typing. He turned and looked inquiringly at her. Her eyes were sparkling as she asked, 'Do you still own that Bukhara rug?'

[Mission To Siena](#)

by James Hadley Chase

Chapter I

PRELUDE TO MURDER

Police constable Elliott stood in a shop doorway and surveyed the east side of the square with placid indifference. It was a dark, wet November night; the time was a few minutes after eleven o'clock, and because of the rain and the hour, the square was deserted.

It had been raining steadily for the past three hours. Water gurgled in the gutters and dripped from the street lamps that made yellow pools on the glistening pavement. A cold wind added to the misery of the wet, and Elliott thought longingly of his comfortable sitting-room, the bright fire that would be burning, and of his wife who he hoped would be thinking of him. He scowled up at the dark sky, looking for a break in the clouds.

A woman's voice said, "Can you please direct me to Polsen's hotel?"

Elliott lowered his gaze and regarded the girl who stood before him. Her back was to the street lamp and he wasn't able to see much of her. She was wearing a white mackintosh and a close-fitting black hat, and she carried in her right hand a canvas and leather hold-all.

She spoke with a foreign accent that could have been Spanish or Italian. Elliott, who was no language scholar, couldn't decide which it was.

"Polsen's hotel, miss?"

"Yes."

"A hundred yards up on the right."

He stepped out of the shelter of the doorway and pointed. The girl turned to look in the direction he indicated, and the light from the street lamp fell on her face.

Elliott decided she would be twenty-five or six. The first thing he noticed was her red gold hair that showed just below her hat: a tone of colour he had never seen before. Her eyes were set wide apart, and as far as he could judge in the uncertain light, appeared to be as green as emeralds. There was a sensual quality in her beauty that aroused the male in him, something that hadn't happened to him in years.

"Thank you," the girl said and made to move on.

"Just a moment, miss," Elliott said. "If you are a stranger to London, I ought to tell you that Polsen's hotel isn't much."

The girl looked away across the wet square. He wasn't sure if she were listening to what he was saying.

"It's got a bad reputation, miss," Elliott went on. "It's not the sort of place a young lady like you should stay at."

The girl looked at him.

"Thank you. I am not staying there," she said. "Good night."

She turned and walked quickly away into the rain and darkness, leaving Elliott looking after her, frowning.

He lifted his massive shoulders under his glistening cape. Well, he had warned her, he told himself. He couldn't do more than that. He wondered who she was and where she had come from. He wondered too why she was going to Polsen's hotel. Polsen's was one of the many room-by-the-hour-and-no-questions-asked hotels in the district: no worse than the others, but distinctly unsavoury and sordid.

He shook his head. You wouldn't have thought a girl like that... Then because he had been on the same beat for fifteen years and was utterly bored with the routine, he ceased to ponder why she should be going to the hotel. If he worried about the actions of everyone who asked him the way, he told himself, his life would become a burden.

He moved on, carrying the image of the girl's beauty with him on his lonely, wet patrol.

Jack Dale, the night clerk of Polsen's hotel, watched the fat, elderly man hurry across the dingy hall to the revolving door and disappear into the rain.

He shrugged his thin shoulders. He supposed the fat man had a train to catch. He grinned cynically, wondering what tale he would tell his wife to account for his lateness. It was the elderly and the married who came to Polsen's.

A girl, her shabby cloth coat showing large damp catches, came down the stairs. Any claim she had to prettiness was marred by granite-hard eyes and a thin, bitter mouth.

She came over to Dale and tossed a key on the ink-stained blotter. She dropped a crumpled pound note beside the key.

"Going out again?" Dale asked as he picked up the note and slid it into a drawer. "It's raining like hell."

"Of course I'm going out again," the girl said crossly. "I haven't made enough this week to pay the rent. If this rain goes on much longer, I don't know what I'm going to do."

Dale grinned.

"The same old story," he said, turning to hang the key on the key rack behind him. "If it's not the rain, it's something else."

"You can talk," the girl said bitterly. "You don't have to stand in the rain hour after hour."

"Go away," Dale said. "You're breaking my heart."

He watched her walk down the steps into the wet darkness, shrugged his shoulders and reached for the Evening Standard. He was reading the football news when the girl in the white mackintosh came in.

He looked up, wondering what she wanted. She was a new one to him, and what a looker! He straightened and showed his discoloured teeth in a leering grin.

"Is Mr Crantor in?" the girl asked, her green eyes looking straight at him.

Dale stared at her.

"Yes, he's in. Room 26, on the first floor. He said for you to go up."

The girl turned away, crossed the hall and walked briskly up the stairs.

Dale whistled silently.

What in the world did a piece like that want with Crantor? he asked himself. Crantor of all people. She had a hold-all with her. Was she staying? If she didn't come down in an hour, he'd better telephone Crantor.

The girl walked down the dimly lit corridor until she reached room No. 26. She paused outside the door and listened for a moment. Hearing no sound from within the room, she knocked with a gloved hand.

The door opened and Crantor stood in the doorway.

"There you are," he said, and his single eye moved over her. "I was beginning to wonder if you were coming."

She followed him into the large bed-sitting-room.

A shaded reading lamp made a pool of light on the large table on which lay a litter of papers. The rest of the room was in heavy shadows. Neither Crantor nor the girl could see much of each other.

"It's a filthy night," Crantor said. "Take off your mac. I'll hang it in the bathroom."

The girl took off the white mackintosh and her hat and gave them to him. She shook out her hair and crossed over to the mirror above the gas fire.

As Crantor carried the wet things into the bathroom that led off the bed-sitting-room, he thumbed down the light switch, lighting up the big shabby room.

He took his time hanging the wet mackintosh over a chair, then he came back and stood in the bathroom door and looked over at her.

Go on, he said to himself, take a good look at me. Let's see how strong your stomach is, you red-headed beauty.

The girl was wanning the back of her slim legs before the gas fire. She was fumbling for a cigarette as she glanced up and saw him in the full light from the overhead lamp.

It was during the battle for Cassino that Crantor received his face wounds. Red-hot splinters of a mortar shell had mangled his features almost beyond repair. Plastic surgeons had worked patiently on him, and considering what he had looked like before he passed through their hands, they succeeded in achieving a minor miracle in giving him some resemblance to a human being. His left eye was covered with a black patch; his thin, cruel mouth was twisted down, and showed some of his lower teeth, fixing his face in a ferocious snarl. The rest of his features looked as if they had been moulded by someone doodling in putty.

The surgeons had told him to let the scars heal and then come back for another series of operations. They assured him in a year or so they would make him a passable-looking guy.

But Crantor had never gone back. He intended to, but he never found the time, and when Alsconi made him his London agent he put the idea out of his head for good. He was certainly not going to spend unprofitable months in a hospital when he could pick up the easy money Alsconi put in his way. Money was more important to him than looks.

After the first bitter months, he took a perverted pleasure in watching people look at him, shudder and look away, and he studied the girl facing him, watching for her reaction.

He was disappointed. She didn't shudder nor did she look away. She examined his face intently with neither pity nor disgust.

"Couldn't they do better than that for you?" she said. "Or hadn't you the patience?"

Crantor felt a spurt of vicious fury run through him. He had wanted to make her cringe. Now he wanted to take her by her white throat.

"What's it to do with you?" he said. "I'll look after my mug, you look after yours."

"Don't talk to me like that!" the girl said sharply.

Crantor controlled his temper. What was he thinking of? He wanted to make a good impression on this girl, and snarling at her wasn't the way to do it. She was his first contact with Alsconi's organization. She had come all the way from Italy to discuss the arrangements he had made. If he gave satisfaction, there was a chance of promotion. He was ambitious.

He had worked for Alsconi now for two years and he had recently discovered the work he had been doing was of little importance to the organization: it was nothing more than a side-line. Now Alsconi had decided to begin real operations in London, and this was his chance.

"Sorry," he said and turned on the overhead light. "I'm still touchy about my face. Who wouldn't be? Here, sit down.

How about a drink?

"No, thank you."

She came over to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down. She was wearing a smartly tailored black frock. Around her throat was a thin gold collar of bay leaves.

Crantor also sat down. He kept back in the shadows, and when he lit a cigarette, he turned away so she couldn't see his face lit by the flame of his lighter.

"Have you found anyone yet to do the job?" she asked.

"I've found him," Crantor said. "It's taken time, but he's dead right for it." He glanced at his wrist watch. "He'll be along in a few minutes. I thought you'd want to see him."

"There must be no mistakes," she said, her green eyes searching out his single, gleaming black one. "This will be the first, and the first must always be successful." She tapped ash off her cigarette, and went on, "Who is this man you have found?"

"His name is Ed Shapiro," Crantor said. "He has no police record. He started life in a circus. Later, he became a knife thrower. He's good: that's why I've picked him. He chucked circus life after the war. He's done some smuggling for me, and he's now anxious to start up on his own. He wants to buy a fast boat. He jumped at the chance to earn the money

we're offering."

"He won't bungle it?"

"If anyone can do it, he can."

"What have you done so far?"

"The note for the money was sent on Tuesday. Tonight, Shapiro is going out to the house. He will put the tortoise in the breakfast-room with another note. At nine tomorrow night a messenger will call for the money..." He broke off and looked across the table at the girl.

"There is one point I am not clear about. Suppose he pays up?"

"You don't have to worry about that. He won't pay: that's why we have chosen him. He's not the type to be threatened."

"All right, if you are sure. It will come unstuck if he does pay."

"He won't."

"Then Shapiro will move in at nine-fifteen. You have brought the knife?"

She leaned sideways and pulled the hold-all that lay on the floor towards her.

He stared at the curve of her back as she bent to open the bag. He felt bitterness stir within him. A woman as beautiful as this one wasn't for him. He had to make do with the ugly ones.

She took from the hold-all a flat wooden box which she put on the table. She opened it and took from it a broad-bladed knife with a heavy, carved wood handle.

Crantor studied it.

"Isn't this dangerous?" he asked. "Won't the police be able to trace this?"

"It is one of a pattern we always use," the girl said. "It is specially made for us. There's no chance of it being traced."

"I suppose all this is necessary," Crantor said uneasily.

"All what?" the girl asked sharply.

"The tortoise, the knife and the warning notes."

"Of course. We want publicity. The tortoise will intrigue the press. This affair will be headline news, and that is essential. We have someone else lined up after Ferenci. When this other one gets our demand note he will know we mean business and he will pay up. The plan has worked successfully in France, Italy and America. It will work successfully here."

"And if it does come off, am I to handle the others?" Crantor asked.

"Of course."

"It will be successful. I promise you that." Crantor got to his feet, crossed the room and poured whisky into a glass.

"Sure you won't have a drink?" "No, thank you."

He stood in the shadows, looking across at her. "I don't even know your name," he said, "or shouldn't I ask?" "Call me Lorelli," the girl said.

"Lorelli..." Crantor nodded. "It's a pretty name. Have you been with the organization long?"

"I have been instructed to pay Shapiro," the girl said, ignoring the question. "Where will I find him after he has done the job?" Crantor felt the blood rush up to his head. "You pay him? Why? I engaged him. Give me the money. I will pay him."

"Where will I find him?" the girl repeated, looking steadily at Crantor.

"But I don't understand," Crantor said, coming back to the table. "Don't they trust me?"

"Am I to report that you are not willing to obey instructions?" the girl asked, her voice flat and cold.

"Of course not," Crantor said hastily. "It just seemed to me..." "Where will I find him?" the girl asked. "25, Athens Street. It's in Soho," Crantor said, making a tremendous effort to conceal his anger.

The telephone bell tinkled and Crantor answered it. "There's a fellow down here asking for you," Dale said. "Shall I send him up?"

"Yes," Crantor said.

"By the way," Dale went on, "is that young lady wanting a room? I can fix her up next to you." Crantor looked across at Lorelli. "Do you want a room here?"

She shook her head. "She won't be staying," he told Dale. "That's your bad luck," Dale said and laughed. Crantor slammed down the receiver.

Ed Shapiro was tall and lean, with a hooked nose, swarthy complexion and small restless eyes. He wore a black suit with a broad white stripe, a black shirt and a white tie. Cocked over his right eye, he wore a black snap-brimmed hat. He lolled against the reception desk, a cigarette hanging from his thin lips, and breathed whisky fumes into Dale's face.

"Go on up. Room 26," Dale said, drawing back and grimacing. "You're carrying a load, aren't you?"

Shapiro shot out a long arm and caught hold of Dale's shirt front, twisted it and gave Dale a hard shake, jerking his head back.

"Shut it, pally," he said. "Button it up unless you want to lose some of those dirty teeth of yours."

Dale stood very still, his face turning white. The vicious expression in Shapiro's eyes shocked him.

Shapiro released his grip, pushed his hat a little further over his eye and walked across the hall and mounted the stairs.

He had been drinking heavily most of the evening, bolstering up his shaky nerves. He had done most things, but up to now he had stopped short at murder. But he wanted the fast motor-boat with a want that had gnawed at him for the past two months. He knew it was a bargain. He knew he would never get one as good and as cheap again. Where else could he hope to raise the thousand pounds Crantor was offering him that would complete the purchase price? He had been

told that there was another buyer in the market.

"I can't hold it for you any longer," the owner had told him. "I'd like to do you a favour, but this other bloke has the cash. If you can't come across by next Friday, I'll have to let him have it."

That was unthinkable, but the thought of murder made Shapiro's nerves jangled. Crantor had assured him the set-up was foolproof, but Shapiro had a healthy respect for the police. He had a healthy respect too for his own neck. Murder had a nasty habit of backfiring on you, just when you thought you had got away with it.

Crantor had brushed aside Shapiro's doubts.

"Use your head," he had said. "You've never been through their hands. They haven't got your prints. You won't be seen if you handle it the way I've told you to handle it. You're not hooked up with this fellow in any way. So what have you got to worry about?"

But the more Shapiro had thought over the plan, the more doubtful he became. He might be seen leaving the house. The thought of being hunted for murder turned him cold. That was when he began to drink, but after a few double whiskies his nerve returned and he thought of the boat. He could drive down to Falmouth as soon as he had done the job, buy the boat and hop over to France.

By now, as he climbed the stairs, he was eager to get the job done, and he walked to room 26 with a swagger, pausing in the doorway to stare at Lorelli who had turned in her chair to look at him.

"Come in and shut the door!" Crantor barked.

Shapiro closed the door. He looked from Lorelli to Crantor and back to Crantor again. "What was this piece doing here?" he wondered. What smasher! He fingered his tie, took off his hat and gave Lorelli a leering grin.

Crantor got to his feet.

"Okay, Ed, cut that out," he said, a rasp in his voice. "She's working with us."

Shapiro came over to the table. His grin widened.

"Well, well, that's nice. Hello, baby. I can see you and me are going to get along fine together."

Lorelli's cold green eyes looked him up and down.

"Speak to me when you're spoken to," she said curtly.

"Hey, don't give me that stuff," Shapiro said, grinning.

Crantor's open hand smacked him on the side of his face, sending him staggering.

Shapiro recovered his balance, and he stared blankly at Crantor, careful not to move.

"Sit down and shut up!" Crantor said in a soft hissing voice, his single eye like a red-hot ember.

Shapiro pulled up a chair and sat down. He touched his face.

"You'd better not do that again," he said unevenly.

"Shut up!" Crantor repeated.

"I don't think much of him," Lorelli said. She spoke as if Shapiro wasn't in the room. "He's drunk; his nerves are bad and he's got no discipline."

"He'll do the job," Crantor said. "If he bungles it, I'll kill him."

Shapiro suddenly felt sick. He knew Crantor didn't threaten.

"Now wait a minute..." he began, but the words trailed away as Crantor turned to stare at him.

"You heard what I said! Bungle this and I'll kill you."

"Who said I'd bungle it?" Shapiro said hoarsely.

"You'd better not," Crantor said. He picked up the broad-bladed knife and held it out to Shapiro, holding the blade in his hand and offering Shapiro the handle.

"This is what you'll use. Now show her what you can do with it."

Shapiro took the knife and balanced it in his hand. An odd change came over him as he touched the cutting edge of the knife with his thumb. The looseness went out of his face, his movements became decisive; his eyes came alive.

"What a beaut," he muttered. "What a smasher."

He flicked the knife into the air, sending it spinning and caught it by its handle as it fell.

"Show her," Crantor repeated.

Shapiro looked around the room. Not seeing any target worthy of a throw he got up, took a deck of cards from his hip pocket, selected the ace of diamonds and crossing the room he fixed the card to the wall with a piece of gum he had been chewing, and which he had parked on the glass of his wrist watch.

He walked back until he was at the far end of the room. The card was in the shadow and Lorelli couldn't see it. She watched Shapiro, her elbows on the table, her face between her hands.

Shapiro balanced the knife on the flat of his hand, then with a quick throwing movement, he sent the knife towards the opposite wall with the speed and the force of a bullet.

Crantor turned up the reading lamp and sent its beam across the room.

The knife had cut through the centre of the diamond and was half buried in the plaster.

"You see," Crantor said. "He can do that twenty times out of twenty."

Lorelli relaxed.

"Yes, that is good enough," she said.

Shapiro swaggered across the room, jerked out the knife and came back.

"There's no one else in the country who could do that," he said. "So you think I'll do?"

"You'll do," Lorelli said without looking at him, "if you keep your nerve."

"Don't worry about that," Shapiro said. "My nerve's fine. But how about the money? I want some now."

She looked up at him.

"You will be paid when he is dead and not before," she said and stood up, "I will be at 25, Athens Street at half-past eleven tomorrow night. You will then give me a detailed report.

Shapiro started to say something, then stopped as Crantor made a threatening move forward.

"I have things to do now," Loreili went on. "I must go. I will see you tomorrow about midday. My mackintosh please."

Crantor went into the bathroom and brought out the mackintosh and hat. The two men stood silent as she put on the hat and arranged her hair before the mirror.

"There must be no mistake," she said as she slipped on her mackintosh.

"It will be all right," Crantor said. She picked up the hold-all and crossed to the door. "You are responsible," she said and went out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Chapter II

THE TORTOISE

As Harry Mason drove the black Bentley along rain-drenched Piccadilly, he thought gloomily that he would have to clean the car again, and that would be twice in a day. Once was all right; an accepted part of the day's work, but twice was laying it on a little too thick. Didn't it ever do anything else but rain in this perishing country?

Don Micklem, sitting at Harry's side, suddenly leaned forward.

"There's Mrs Ferenci," he said, breaking into Harry's thoughts. He lowered the window. "She may want a lift."

Harry swung the car to the kerb.

A girl in a black and white check mackintosh and a small black hat stood on the kerb looking vainly for a taxi. She was slight, fair with big violet eyes, and as Don waved to her, he wondered why she was looking so pale and worried.

"Julia!" he exclaimed, sliding out of the car into the rain. "I haven't seen you for weeks. Can I give you a lift anywhere?"

The girl's face lit up at the sight of him.

"Why, Don! I thought you were in Nice."

"Probably off in a couple of weeks. Hop in before you get wetter than you are." He opened the rear door and helped Julia into the back seat where he joined her. "What are you up to? Going anywhere in particular?"

"It's good to see you, Don," Julia said and her slim, gloved fingers touched his hand. "I thought you were away otherwise I would have called you. I want to talk to you. It's about Guido."

"Would you like to come back to my place?" Don asked, his steady grey eyes searching her face. "I'm free until one o'clock." He glanced at his strap watch. "It's only a quarter to twelve. Or shall we stop off at the Berkeley?"

"I'd rather go to your place," Julia said. "I mustn't be long. I'm lunching with Guido."

"Home, Harry," Don said, then as Harry whisked them towards the white-faced, olive-green shuttered house at the far end of Upper Brook Mews that had been Don's London home for the past six years, he went on, "Is Guido all right?"

Julia forced a smile.

"He's fine. He was only talking about you yesterday. You know about this company thing of his? He wants you on the board. But that doesn't matter right now. He'll talk to you about it. He has so many plans. He..." She broke off and looked out of the window, her hands turning into fists.

Don lit a cigarette, raised his eyebrows thoughtfully and wondered what was wrong. He hoped Guido hadn't been fooling around with some woman. He thought it unlikely for he knew how devoted Guido was to Julia, but one never knew.

Harry pulled up outside 25a, Upper Brook Mews, slid out of the car and held the car door open. He gave Julia a smart salute and her distracted smile disturbed him. Don led her into the big, restful lounge.

"Sit down, Julia," he said. "Have a cigarette and relax. How about a sherry or a martini?" "I'd love a sherry."

Don touched the bell and then carried a box of cigarettes over to Julia and put it on the table beside her.

He was lighting her cigarette when Cherry, Don's butler and major-domo, came into the room.

Cherry was tall and bulky with a pink and white complexion and several pink chins. He had often been mistaken for an Archbishop, and in spite of his sixty-odd years, he carried himself with surprising sprightliness.

"You rang, sir?" he said in his rich, fruity voice. "Mrs Ferenci would like a sherry," Don said. "I'll have a whiskey"

"Certainly, sir," Cherry said and inclined his head towards Julia. His fat, pink face showed reserved approval.

Suspicious of American women, he had long since decided that Julia was an exception. He was satisfied that she knew how to behave in any situation and also that she was wealthy. These two qualifications for Cherry's approval were essential.

When he had served the drinks and had silently departed, Don stretched out his long legs and smiled encouragingly at Julia.

"Well, let's have it. You're acting very mysteriously. Has Guido run off with some wild-eyed filly?"

"Of course not," Julia said. "That would be something I could deal with myself. No, I'm really worried, Den. He's received a horrible, threatening letter."

Don showed his relief with a grin.

"My dear Julia, you mustn't worry about that kind of thing. People with Guido's type of money are always getting threatening letters. The world is full of jealous crackpots. It doesn't mean a thing."

"But I'm sure it does. This - this creature is demanding ten thousand pounds. He says if Guido doesn't pay up tonight..." Her voice faltered. "He says he will kill him. It's horrible, Don."

Don frowned.

"Ten thousand? He's ambitious, isn't he? Have you the letter with you?"

"Guido threw it away. He just won't take it seriously. I wanted him to tell the police, but he won't hear of it. You know how obstinate he can be. He says this Tortoise is either a madman or someone pulling his leg."

"Tortoise? What tortoise?"

"That's how the writer of the letter signs himself."

Don laughed.

"Well, there you are. He must be a crackpot. Now if he had signed himself the serpent or the wolf or something like that, there might be something in it. But a tortoise! Look, Julia, you mustn't fuss about this. Maybe it's one of Guido's racing pals playing a poor kind of joke."

Julia shook her head.

"That's what Guido says, but I don't believe it. He received the letter last Tuesday. I've been getting more and more worked up.

The money is to be paid tonight. Well, this morning..." She stopped, biting her lip.

"What happened this morning?" Julia tried unsuccessfully to control a little shiver. "We were at breakfast. I saw something moving on the floor. For a moment I thought it was a rat. It gave me an awful shock. Then I saw it was a tortoise. There was a piece of paper pasted across its shell. On the paper was a typewritten message. It said the ten thousand would be collected by a messenger at nine o'clock tonight. If the money wasn't given to the messenger, Guido would die. Oh, Don, it really scares me. It's horrible."

"That seems to be carrying a joke rather far," Don said. "How did the tortoise get into the house?" "I don't know. I begged Guido to call the police, but he wouldn't. He said if it got into the papers, everyone would laugh at him. You know how sensitive he is." Don rubbed his jaw. "What are you two doing tonight?"

"Guido wants to listen to Otello from the Scala on the radio. Don't you think we should tell the police?" Don hesitated, then shook his head.

"I think it would be a mistake as Guido is so set against it, Julia. A thing like this could get into the press and that type of publicity wouldn't be good for Guido. Let's face it. Suppose he did tell the police. What would they do? They might send a constable to guard the house, but one constable isn't going to stop a determined blackmailer if this chap is a blackmailer, which I doubt. I agree with you we should take precautions. I don't think for a moment there is any danger, but I can understand how you feel. I'll come along tonight with Harry. I'll tell Guido I was passing and dropped in on the off chance you two would be in. I'm quite sure nothing is going to happen, Julia, but I want to set your mind at rest. Guido, Harry and I can more than take care of any crackpot. What do you say?"

Julia's face brightened.

"Of course. I know the whole thing is silly, but I would feel so much better if you did come. There's only Dixon and Ethel in the house. Perhaps you are right and nothing will happen, but if you were there..."

Don got to his feet.

"That's a bet. I'll be along soon after eight. Now don't worry any more. Have a nice lunch and put this out of your mind," he said as they walked into the hall. "I'll see you tonight."

Cherry appeared, pink and benign.

"I have ordered a taxi for Mrs Ferenci," he announced. "It is arriving now."

Julia gave him a bright smile. Watching her, Don was relieved to see how much better she looked.

"Thank you, Cherry," she said, and turning to Don, went on, "You don't know what a relief this is to me to know you will be with us tonight."

"You worry too much," Don said. "Put it out of your mind."

When the taxi had driven her away, Don went back to the lounge. He finished his drink and stood frowning out of the window.

The Tortoise.

Was there anything in this or was it a hoax? Were there any of Guido's friends capable of going to such lengths just to pull his leg? Don doubted it. A crackpot then?

After a moment's hesitation, he went over to the telephone and dialled Whitehall 22. It would do no harm, he told himself, to ask Chief Superintendent Dicks of the Special Branch if he had ever heard of anyone calling himself the Tortoise. When he finally got through to Dicks' office, he was told the Superintendent had just gone to lunch and was not expected back until six o'clock.

"Never mind," Don said. "No, there's no message."

Marian Rigby, Don's dark, attractive secretary, came hurrying into the lounge.

"There you are," she said. "You haven't forgotten you are lunching with Sir Robert at one?"

"I'm just off. Am I doing anything tonight, Marian?" "There's the film premiere. You promised to go." "Oh, that. Would you call them and tell them I can't make it?" He smiled. "I have a date with a gentleman who calls himself the Tortoise. That sounds more exciting than a premiere, doesn't it?"

Guido Ferenci, tall and fair, his handsome face still deeply tanned from the sun of Portofino where Julia and he had

been holidaying a few weeks previously, poured an 85 brandy into balloon glasses with a loving hand. "Don't think for a moment you are hoodwinking me," he said as he gave Don one of the glasses. "This rot about passing and looking in for a drink is so much eyewash. Julia brought you here to act as my bodyguard, didn't she?" Don grinned.

"For a foreigner, he speaks beautiful English, doesn't he?" he said looking over at Julia. "I only wish I could speak Italian half as well."

"You speak Italian like a native," Julia said.

Guido looked affectionately at her.

"And that won't wash either. Never mind how well Don speaks Italian," he said, sinking into a big lounging chair opposite the one in which Don was sitting. "Now admit it: Julia persuaded you to come down to guard me, didn't she? Well, it's nice of you to come, but don't tell me you take this joker seriously. How can anyone take him seriously? Ten thousand pounds! Where does Mr Tortoise imagine I can raise that a kind of money?"

Don lit a cigarette.

"I don't take it seriously, but on the other hand, there are a few dangerous crackpots around. This fellow seems to be carrying the joke rather far. What happened to the tortoise and the note on its back that arrived this morning? I'd like to have a look-see."

"So you shall. Dixon's looking after the tortoise," Guido said, getting up to ring the bell. "I have the note in my desk." As he opened a drawer in the desk, Dixon, Guido's manservant, came in. Powerfully built, with a hard, strong face, he looked what he had been during the war: a quarter-master of a destroyer.

"Bring the tortoise in, will you?" Guido said. "Mr Micklem would like to inspect it."

"Very good, sir," Dixon said and gave Don a respectful nod.

"Now where's that note?" Guido said as Dixon left the room. "I put it in this drawer, but it's gone. Have you moved it, Julia?"

"No," Julia said, getting to her feet, "Let me look. You know you can never find anything."

"When you get married, Don, acquire the reputation of never finding anything," Guido said, sitting down and smiling. "It saves endless hours of dreary searching. Julia always finds my things for me now."

"I'm not being very successful at the moment," Julia said. "It's not in the desk. Are you sure you didn't throw it away as you did the first note?"

"No. I put it in the top drawer," Guido said, frowning.

As he got to his feet Dixon came in.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but you haven't moved the tortoise, have you?"

Don felt the atmosphere suddenly tighten.

"Of course not," Guido said sharply.

"I'm sorry, sir, but it's no longer in the box."

"Perhaps it has crawled out," Don said quietly.

"It couldn't have done that, sir. I put a lid on the box. Someone must have taken it."

"All right, Dixon. It doesn't matter," Guido said. "Just make sure it isn't crawling about the house."

"Yes, sir," Dixon said and went out.

Don glanced at Julia who was sitting motionless, her face pale.

"Well, this is a turn up for the book," said Guido who prided himself on his grasp of idiomatic English. "It looks as if the evidence has been pinched."

Although he spoke lightly, Don could see he was startled.

"Someone's been here," Julia said breathlessly. "What do you think, Don?" Guido asked. "I think your practical joker is carrying this much too far," Don said. "It might be an idea, Guido, to have a word with the police now."

Guido hesitated, then shook his head.

"No, I'm not going to do that. I can't afford the stupid publicity that is bound to follow. I've got the new board to think of No, I'm not going to call the police."

"But you must!" Julia cried. "You should have told them in the first place. You're in danger..."

"Don't get excited, Julia," Don said quietly. "I can see Guido's point. The newspapers would love a set-up like this. After all, Guido is quite safe here. He's not alone. I'm here, and Dixon's within call. Besides, you forget Guido can more than look after himself. Hairy's outside watching the house. I told him what was in the wind, and he is keeping his eyes open. If we did call the police, they couldn't do any more than we are doing now..."

He broke off as the clock on the mantelpiece struck nine. Julia caught her breath sharply.

"The note said the messenger would come at nine!" she said, catching hold of Guido's hand.

"Darling Julia," Guido said. "There's nothing to be scared about. Of course no one will come."

Even as he spoke they heard the front door bell ring, and Julia jumped to her feet.

Guido put his arm around her. He glanced across at Don who had stiffened to attention.

The three stood motionless, listening. They heard Dixon cross the hall and open the front door. They heard a murmur of voices, then Dixon came into the room.

"There's a district messenger here, sir," he said to Guido. "He says he has come for a sealed package. What package would that be?"

Julia recoiled, her face going white.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Guido said angrily, and he took a step forward, but Don was before him.

"Stay with Julia," he said. "I'll handle this," and before Guido could argue, he walked into the hall, followed by Dixon. Standing under the hall light was a sixteen-year-old boy, wearing a District Messenger's uniform.

"Sure you haven't made a mistake, son?" Don asked.

"I don't think so, sir," the boy returned and brought out his book. "Mr Ferenci, The Crest, Spaniards Avenue, Hampstead. One package to be collected. This is The Crest, isn't it?"

"That's right. What are your instructions? Where are you supposed to take the package?"

"To the Piccadilly Hotel, sir. A gentleman of the name of Montgomery will be waiting for it. I'm to give it to him and get a signature for it," the boy said.

Don studied him. He decided he was telling the truth.

"How are you to identify Mr Montgomery?"

The boy began to look bewildered.

"He will be wearing a white mackintosh and a black hat. Is there something up?"

Don shook his head.

"No. I'll get the package for you. Just wait here." He beckoned to Dixon. "Let's go into the kitchen," he said.

Looking as bewildered as the boy, Dixon led Don into the kitchen.

When Don had shut the door, he said, "Wrap up some folded newspapers in brown paper: about the size of a book."

His face blank with surprise, Dixon quickly made up the parcel and gave it to Don.

"That's fine," Don said approvingly.

He went back to where the boy was waiting and gave him the parcel.

"Here's what you do," he said. "I don't want you to get to the Piccadilly Hotel before ten o'clock. That's important. Give this package to Mr Montgomery and get his signature, but not before ten, do you understand?"

The boy nodded.

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, you get off," Don said and slipped a pound note into the boy's hand. "That's for keeping you out of bed."

The boy grinned.

"Thanks, sir. I'll do just as you say."

When he had gone, Don returned to the lounge where Guido and Julia sat side by side on the settee. Julia still looked frightened, but she had herself under control. Her hand gripped Guido's tightly.

"Well, it looks as if we have a crackpot on our hands," Don said, closing the door and coming over to the brightly burning fire. "He appears to be a Mr Montgomery, and he is waiting in the lounge of the Piccadilly Hotel for a district messenger to make him a present of your ten thousand pounds. I've made up a faked parcel, and the boy is going to deliver it. We must get the police on to this, Guido. It's got to be done. This fellow mustn't be encouraged. He could make himself a nuisance to others unless he is stopped. I'll call Dicks. He'll take care of him."

Guido shrugged.

"All right. Go ahead."

Don lifted the telephone receiver. He held it to his ear for a long moment, then frowning, he tapped the crossbar, listened, then laid down the receiver.

He realized with a feeling of shock that he had taken this business up to now far too casually.

"I should have guessed it wasn't going to be as easy as that," he said, his face hardening. "The line's dead."

"You mean someone's cut the line?" Julia said, starting to her feet.

"I don't know. There's no dialling tone. Where's the nearest telephone, Guido?"

"About half a mile down the road," Guido said. "Will you go or shall I send Dixon?"

Don moved over to the fireplace and stood with his back to it. He stared down at the carpet for a long moment.

"Don't let's rush this, Guido," he said. "We haven't taken it seriously enough - at least we two haven't. We must be careful now not to be caught on the wrong foot again."

"Then you do think Guido is in danger?" Julia said, her eyes growing wide.

"I don't know," Don said, looking steadily at her, "but I think we should assume that he is and act accordingly. If this man really means business, it is quite unlikely that he will be at the Piccadilly Hotel. I was slow not to realize that when the boy told me where he was taking the package. If he does mean business, he'll probably waylay the boy before he reaches the station. I don't want to put the wind up either of you, but we must face up to the situation. One thing we must not do: we mustn't reduce our forces. This is a lonely spot; the road is dark and lonely and there are no other houses for quite a distance. If this crackpot is determined to make trouble he may try to stop us using an outside telephone. A lot depends on his mentality. What will he do when he finds the package contains useless newspapers? Will he give us rest and go home or will he try to make good his threat?"

Guido lit a cigarette. He seemed to be enjoying the situation.

"He would scarcely go to the trouble of putting the telephone out of order unless he intended to pay us a visit," he said. Don nodded.

"Yes, I think we should be prepared for a visit." He smiled encouragingly at Julia. "It's-going to be all right. Don't look so scared. There are three able-bodied men in the house and one outside."

"Yes," Julia said unsteadily. She tried to match his smile, but didn't succeed.

"Let's get Dixon in and tell him what to expect," Don said. "I won't go out to Harry. He knows he has to keep his eyes open, and if the house is being watched, I should only give away his position.

We can rely on him to do the right thing at the right moment. But let's get Dixon in."

Guido rang the bell and when Dixon entered the room, he explained the situation.

Dixon took the news calmly.

"Well, sir," he said, "I can't see him doing much damage with the three of us here, but if you like I'll have a crack at getting the police."

"No, we'll stick together," Don said. "The first move is to go over the house. We want to be sure no one has already broken in or can break in. Stay here with Mr Ferenci while I take a look around."

"I'm coming with you," Guido said.

"No, stay here with Julia, please," Don said firmly. "And you, Dixon, don't let Mr Ferenci out of your sight."

"Yes, sir," Dixon said.

Guido shrugged.

"All right I'll leave it to you, but watch out." He sat down, holding out his hand to Julia. "Come and sit with me, darling, and let's hold hands. We'll be laughing about this by tomorrow."

Dixon went across to the fireplace and picked up the poker. He balanced it in his hand, nodded his satisfaction and walked over to the door.

"No one will come in here, sir," he said to Don, "without an argument from me."

Don grinned.

"That's the idea. I won't be long. Keep the door closed. I'll call out when I come back."

He remembered there was a maid somewhere in the house and asked Dixon where she was.

"She's gone to the movies, sir. She won't be back until half-past ten."

"Right," Don said. "Then that leaves all the rooms except this one empty."

"That's right, sir."

Don closed the door. For a long moment he stood in the brightly lit hall and listened. The house was quiet. Faintly, he could hear the ticking of a clock somewhere upstairs and the irregular whirring

noise from the refrigerator in the kitchen. He went swiftly and silently up the stairs to the upper landing.

His examination of the six rooms that led out on to the gallery was thorough. As he left each room, he locked the door after him. He didn't expect to find anyone lurking in the rooms and nor did he, but a growing sense of uneasiness worried him. He opened the sixth door and looked into the luxurious bathroom. There was no place for concealment there. He stepped out on to the gallery and moved to the banister rail to look down into the hall.

Then without warning the lights in the house went out. For a moment he stood motionless in the black suffocating darkness, cursing himself for not having a flashlight with him.

Then with his hand on the rail to guide him, he started towards the head of the stairs. He had only taken a few groping steps when he heard Julia's wild, terrified scream.

In the garden, close to the window of Guido's sitting-room, Shapiro had been waiting for Crantor, a mile or so away, to touch the high tension wires with the insulated pole he had with him.

Sweat ran down Shapiro's face as he waited. In his right hand he held the broad-bladed knife. Then suddenly he saw the lights that gleamed faintly through the curtains go out. He hooked his fingers under the window frame and pushed it up, then stepped back and waited.

The light breeze moved the curtains. He waited for perhaps ten or twenty seconds, then suddenly the curtains were pulled aside.

A tall man in evening dress stood before the open window as Crantor had said he would stand. The dim light of the cloud-covered moon fell directly on his white shirt front.

Shapiro raised the knife and his hand shot forward, sending the knife flying through the air. It was the easiest target he had ever had to aim at.

He heard the knife thud home, saw the fair man reel back, then he turned and ran around the side of the house to where he had left his car.

As he bolted into the darkness and as Don began a reckless dash down the stairs, Julia screamed again.

Chapter III

VENETIAN RED

The big, beefy figure of Inspector Horrocks came into Guido's study where Don had been sitting for the past half-hour, a cigarette burning heedlessly between his fingers.

"Now, sir," Horrocks said, closing the door, "perhaps we can take this a bit further."

"Yes," Don said, woodenly. He was still badly shaken by Guido's death and he would have preferred to have been left alone.

"It would help if you went over the whole story again, sir," Horrocks said, coming over to the fire, and lowering his bulk into a chair opposite the one Don was sitting in.

"Yes, of course," Don said. He went on to give the Inspector a detailed account of how he had met Julia, of the threatening letter and how he had come down to act as Guido's bodyguard. "I just didn't take the thing seriously," he went on, staring into the fire. "I feel responsible for his death. It wasn't until I found the telephone had been tampered with that I thought it possible we might be in for trouble. Even then it didn't occur to me it would happen so quickly. I

thought Guido would be safe with Dixon and me to guard him. I left my chauffeur outside to watch the house."

"Where's he got to, then?" Horrocks asked.

"I don't know. I've been out to look for him, but there's no sign of him. I'm hoping he saw the killer and is after him."

Horrocks grunted.

"Is that likely?"

"I think it is. I'm anxious to get home, Inspector, in case he is trying to contact me."

"I won't keep you much longer, sir," Horrocks said. "I'd like to clear up one or two points. You didn't see the killer yourself?"

"No. I left Dixon with Mr Ferenci and I went upstairs to search the house. Then the lights went out and I heard Julia - Mrs Ferenci - scream. I belted down the stairs and rushed into the lounge. It was pitch dark in there. I had told Dixon I'd call out as I came in, but I forgot to do so. He took me for an intruder and closed with me. We had quite a scrap, and I had to

knock him silly before I could get free of him. By the time I had found a flashlight, the killer had gone. I found Mr Ferenci lying before the open window. Mrs Ferenci had fainted. Then two patrolmen came in. You know the rest of it." Horrocks nodded.

"The killer somehow fused the lights, then opened the window. Mr Ferenci either felt the draught or else heard the window open. He went to the window. The killer was ready for him. As Mr Ferenci pulled back the curtains, the killer threw the knife."

"How was it your men arrived like that? Did they hear Mrs Ferenci's screams?"

"It was the messenger boy. When he left here, a man came out of the darkness and struck at him with a club. The boy was too quick for him and bolted. The man went after him, but the boy got away. The attack was so quick, the boy didn't get much of a chance to see the man. All he can tell us is that he is tall and slimly built. As soon as the boy got clear, he dialled 999. One of our cars picked him up and brought him here. They arrived just too late." Don rubbed his forehead.

"Have you got anything from Dixon? Did he see anything?" Horrocks shook his head.

"I'm going to talk to him now. He's still groggy from the punch you gave him."

Don moved irritably.

"It was entirely my fault," he said angrily. "I told him I would call out when I returned. Naturally he went for me: he was like a wild cat."

A constable came in.

"Beg pardon, sir. There's a lady asking for Mr Micklem." "That'll be my secretary. I asked one of your men to telephone her. I want her to take care of Mrs Ferenci," Don said, getting to his feet.

"All right, sir. While you talk to her, I'll see how Dixon is getting on," Horrocks said.

Don found Marian in the hall.

"This is a frightful business," he said, going to her. "Poor Guido's been murdered. Julia's in a bad way. The maid's with her now, but

I don't think she's much use. Will you take charge, Marian? If she's as bad as I think she is, you'd better get the doctor. The maid will tell you whom to get. I'll leave you to handle it."

"Yes, of course," Marian said. "Where is she?"

No questions; no flap. Don never ceased to wonder at Marian's unruffled calm. No situation ever seemed, to throw her out of her stride. He knew he couldn't leave Julia in better hands.

"The door facing the head of the stairs."

Marian nodded and ran up the stairs while Don went into the library where Dixon was lying on the settee with Horrocks standing over him.

"I'm sorry about this, Dixon," Don said, going over to him. "It was entirely my fault. You put up a good show."

"Oh no, sir, I didn't," Dixon said, sitting up. "I got proper wind up. I should have known it was you. The fight going out."

"Well, never mind," Don said. He looked at Horrocks. "Go ahead, Inspector. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Will you tell me what happened from the time Mr Micklem left the room?" Horrocks asked, sitting by Dixon.

"Well, sir, I stood guard by the door. Mr Ferenci sat on the settee with Mrs Ferenci. All of a sudden the lights went out. I heard Mr Ferenci jump to his feet. He said something about the window being open. Mrs Ferenci began to scream. I heard Mr Ferenci pull back the curtains. It was raining outside and dark, and I couldn't see a thing. I just stood like a fool staring into the darkness. Then the door burst open. Mr Micklem had told me he would call out when he came in. I did remember that. I thought he was an intruder and I went for him. Then I ran into a punch that knocked me out."

"So you didn't see what happened to Mr Ferenci?" Horrocks asked, an exasperated note in his voice.

"No, sir, I didn't."

Don lifted his shoulders. They were getting nowhere, he told himself. He thought again of Harry.

"Has the telephone been fixed yet?" he asked.

"Not yet," HoiTocks said. "We can't find where the line has been cut."

"Then I'll get back to my place. If my chauffeur has had any luck he'll be trying to contact me. If I hear anything I'll let you know."

"I'd be glad if you would, sir."

Nodding to Dixon, Don went into the hall and up the stairs. He knocked on Julia's door. Marian came to the door.

"The doctor's coming," she told Don. "She's still unconscious."

"Stick with her, will you? I'm going home. There's a chance Harry spotted the killer and he may be trying to get me."

"I'll stay with her."

Leaving her, Don hurried to where he had left the Bentley and drove fast to Upper Brook Mews. As he pulled up the front door opened and Cherry appeared. Don leaned out of the car window.

"Any news from Harry?" he asked as Cherry came majestically towards him.

"He telephoned about half an hour ago, sir," Cherry said, coming to rest by the side of the car. "He wishes you to go to Athens Street which he tells me is the second turning on the left off Old Compton Street. He said the matter was urgent."

"Thanks," Don said and making a U-turn he sent the Bentley shooting down the dark, deserted mews.

Athens Street turned out to be a narrow cul-de-sac, dimly lit by one street lamp.

Keeping in the shadows, Don walked quickly down the wet pavement until he was within a few yards of the high brick wall that cut the cul-de-sac off from Dean Street.

He spotted Harry standing in the dark shadows of an archway and he moved into the darkness and joined him.

"Phew! I'm glad to see you, sir," Harry said feelingly. "I've been trying to get you for the past hour. I kept popping over to the phone box, but I couldn't get Mr Ferenci's number."

"What's going on here?" Don asked.

"I spotted a bloke coming from Mr Ferenci's house and I followed him. He's holed up in that house across the way."

Don moved to the entrance of the archway.

"Which house?"

"The one by the wall, sir."

Don studied the three-storeyed building. It was in darkness. He could see there were two windows to each floor and the front door was set back in an archway similar to the one in which he was sheltering.

"Any other way out, Harry?"

"No, sir. I checked that."

"So he's still in there?"

"He's in there all right. About five minutes ago a woman came along and went in. She was wearing a white mackintosh and slacks. It was too dark to see what she looked like."

"What's he like, Harry?"

"Tall and thin, dark, hooked nose, flashily dressed."

The District Messenger had said his attacker had been tall and thin. This sounded like the man all right.

"When did you first spot him, Harry?"

"About a quarter of an hour after the messenger boy had left the house. He came from the back of the house, crossed the garden, vaulted over the wall and bolted down the street to an old Buick that was parked under the trees. I went after him and managed to get in the boot. He drove fast, and it wasn't much of a joy ride for me. He parked the car in a bomb site in Old Compton Street and came here. I had a lot of trouble following him. He seemed jumpy, and kept checking to see if anyone was following him, but he didn't spot me. I'm sure of that. He let himself into the house with a key, and that's the last I've seen of him. The woman knocked when she arrived and he let her in."

"Good show, Harry. I'm going over there to have a look around."

You stay here and keep your eyes open. If I run into trouble, you know what to do. This fellow's dangerous. He killed Ferenci, so don't be fussy the way you handle him if you have to handle him."

"You mean Mr Ferenci's dead?" Harry asked, shocked.

"Yes. I'll tell you about it later. Just keep your ears and eyes open."

"Wouldn't it be better if I went instead of you, sir?" Harry said, trying to sound casual. "No point in dirtying up your suit climbing in and out of windows."

"Do what you're told," Don said curtly. "Watch out. If he makes a bolt for it, stop him."

"Right-ho, sir," Harry said. "The easiest way in is through that window by the wall. The door's got a bolt on it. I've tried it. I'll give you a leg up. Get up on the roof and it'll be a piece of cake to get in through the window."

They moved over to the wall. Harry locked his fingers and Micklem put his foot in the cradle thus formed. With a slight heave, he was within reach of the top of the wall. He caught hold of it, and another heave from Harry swung him onto the wall.

Harry waved to him and went back to the shelter of the archway.

Crouching, Don walked up the sloping roof. Just above him was an unlighted window. He peered through the glass into the darkness beyond and could just make out a dim, empty room. The window catch was back. He took out his pocket knife and gently levered up the window. Then he swung himself into the room, lowered the window and crossed to the door.

For a moment or so he stood listening, his ear pressed against the panel of the door, then hearing nothing, he turned the handle and pulled the door open.

He looked into a passage, dimly lit by a light coming from the hall. He moved out of the room, closing the door after him. Then he walked silently to the head of the staircase and again paused to listen.

From the room below he heard a man say, "It was easy. He came to the window and I nailed him."

Moving like a shadow, Don started down the stairs.

"Then he's dead?" a woman's voice said.

Don pricked up his ears at her accent: it was unmistakably Italian. He reached the foot of the stairs. The dim light that lit the hall was coming through a half-open door at the far end of the passage.

"Of course he's dead," Shapiro said. "Now look, let's have the money. I want to get the hell out of here."

"But can you prove to me that he is dead?" Lorelli asked.

Shapiro stared at her.

"What do you mean? If you don't believe me, go out there and take a look at him."

"Don't talk like a fool. When I have seen the morning papers, I'll pay you and not before."

Don edged forward so he could peer into the room. There were only a few sticks of furniture in the room: two chairs, a broken-down settee with some of the springs exposed and a tea chest on which stood a lighted candle stuck into a bottle. Across the two windows were nailed two grey, dirty blankets.

He took all this in with one swift glance. His attention then centred on the two people in the room.

The man sat astride one of the chairs. He was tall and thin: his dark, cruel face had a wolfish look. He was staring with angry intent eyes at the girl who leaned against the wall, the flickering light of the candle falling directly on her.

She was above average height and around twenty-five or six. She was beautiful in a cold, hard way; her face was pale and her full-lipped mouth in contrast looked startlingly red, but it was her thick wavy hair that attracted his attention.

The colour was Venetian red, a colour that's rarely seen these days in Italy.

A cigarette hung from her glistening lips. Her arms were folded across her breasts. Under the open white mackintosh she wore a white sweater and black slacks.

"You're not kidding, are you?" Shapiro asked, glaring at her.

"I have been instructed to pay you when the job's done," Lorelli said. "I'll know by the papers tomorrow morning if it has been done or not."

"I want the money now," Shapiro snarled. "I've got to have it. Look, I've a boat waiting for me. I need the money to complete the purchase. I can be in France by tomorrow morning if I buy the boat tonight."

"You heard what I said," Lorelli said coldly. Her hands slid into the pockets of her mackintosh. "I'm not going to argue with you."

Shapiro licked his dry lips.

"Now, look, baby, don't let's quarrel. How about coming with me? I'm starting a new racket when I've got the boat. I could use a smart kid like you."

"Could you?" Lorelli said, her eyes hard. "But I couldn't use a fool like you."

Shapiro grinned at her.

"Come off it. Let's be pals. Call me Ed. You and I could get places, working together. Let's have the dough' and come with me, Lorelli. What about it?"

"You'll have the money tomorrow morning and not before," Lorelli said sharply. "I'll bring it here at eight o'clock."

"That's what you think," Shapiro snarled, getting to his feet and kicking the chair out of his way. "We're going back to your place and we're going to collect that dough right now. I have ways of taming a twist like you."

She leaned against the wall, her green eyes watchful, her face expressionsless.

"Have you?" she said, "and I have ways of taming a rat like you." Her hand slid out of her mackintosh pocket. The .25 automatic she held pointed at Shapiro's face. "Get out of my way!"

Shapiro suddenly became deflated. He stepped hastily back.

Don didn't wait to hear any more. He went up the stairs, silently and fast, let himself through the window, closed it and within seconds had joined Harry in the archway.

"The woman's coming out in a moment," he said. "I'm going after her. Stay here and watch the house. I don't think our bird will move, but if he does, don't lose him."

"Okay, sir," Hairy said.

As he spoke the door of the house opened and the girl came out. She closed the door, then set off along the pavement towards the lights of Old Compton Street.

Keeping in the shadows and moving silently, Don went after her.

A half an hour later, Don was in a telephone box in Shepherd Market, speaking to Inspector Horrocks.

"This is Micklem," he was saying. "My chauffeur did spot our man leaving the house. He followed him to 25, Athens Street. There's a woman connected with this as well. She's at Market Mews. I'm watching her place and Mason's watching the other house."

"Well, I'll be hanged," Horrocks said. "Good work, sir. I'll have patrol cars sent to you both right away, and I'll be with you myself in ten minutes."

"Fine," Don said, and hung up.

He left the telephone box and returned to where he could watch the flat above a grocer's shop into which the redheaded girl had disappeared.

She hadn't been easy to follow. She had taken a taxi from Shaftesbury Avenue, and Don had been lucky enough to pick up another taxi before hers disappeared into Piccadilly. Leaving the taxi at Half Moon Street, the girl had walked along the park side of Piccadilly up Park Lane, looking back continually. Don had somehow managed to hang on to her without being seen, and he had finally spotted her entering the flat above the grocer's shop, using the side entrance. A moment or so later a light had come up in the upper window. He had waited for twenty minutes or so, and when the light had gone out, he had first checked there was no back exit to the flat, then had hurried to the telephone box that was

only a few yards from the grocer's shop.

He had scarcely got back to the wantage ground where he could watch the flat when out of the darkness came two police officers.

"Mr Micklem?" one of them asked.

"You've been quick," Don said. "She's in that flat up there."

"Okay, sir," the policeman said. "Inspector Horrocks is on his way. He asked us to stick around. Here, Bill, go into Hertford Street and make sure there's no back way to this place."

The other policeman nodded and went away.

Don lit a cigarette. He felt a little tired. The shock of Guido's death had been a stiff one and now the reaction was beginning to set in.

He and the policeman watched the darkened window for the next ten minutes. Then the big figure of Inspector Horrocks followed by three plain-clothes men came out of the darkness.

"Well, sir," Horrocks said, "this is a bit of luck. What's been happening?"

Briefly Don told him how Harry had seen the thin man leave Ferenci's house and had followed him to Athens Street.

"The woman joined him about two or three minutes before I arrived," he went on. "I broke in. This fellow - he calls himself Ed and the woman Lorelli - was demanding his money for killing Ferenci." He repeated "the exact conversation he had overheard. "She's paying him at eight o'clock tomorrow."

"I doubt it," Horrocks said. "That's nice work, Mr Micklem. I've sent Hurst and Maddox over to Athens Street. They won't make a move without my say-so. Now let's see what she has to say for herself."

He crossed over to the shabby front door that led to the girl's flat.

"Stand by," he said to his men and lifting the knocker, he rapped loudly.

No one answered.

He hammered on the door several times, then stepped back.

"Okay," he said, "see if you can open the door."

Two burly plain-clothes men came forward. Two shoulders crashed against the door, and under the third assault the door burst open. The detectives darted up the steep narrow stairs.

Horrocks and Don followed them.

"Unless she is a fresh air fiend, it looks as if she's skipped," Don said, pointing to the open skylight at the head of the stairs.

One of the detectives came out of the upper room.

"No one here, sir," he said.

Horrocks growled under his breath.

"Send out the alarm," he said. "I want that woman. Mr Micklem will give you a description of her."

The detectives jotted down Don's description, then ran downstairs to the telephone box.

"She must have spotted you," Horrocks said angrily. "Here you," he went on to the other detective, "get Hurst on the car radio and tell him the girl's gone. Tell him to watch out: she may try to warn Ed."

He and Don went into the flat that consisted of a bedroom, a kitchen and a bathroom.

Horrocks took a quick look round.

"We won't find much here," he said. "I'll have it checked for prints. Let's get over to Athens Street."

Leaving the two constables to guard the flat, Horrocks, Don and the three detectives got into the police car and raced down Piccadilly to Old Crompton Street. They found two policemen guarding the entrance to Athens Street. They stiffened to attention when they saw Horrocks.

"Hurst about?" he asked.

"He's down the alley, sir."

Horrocks entered the cul-de-sac, followed by Don. They found Harry still at his post, and in the company of Sergeant Hurst and Detective Constable Maddox.

"Our man still in there?" Horrocks asked.

"I think so, sir," Hurst said. "We haven't seen or heard anything from the house, but there's no other way out except this way."

"Let's get him," Horrocks said. "Watch your step, Hurst. He's dangerous. What is the door like?"

Hurst shook his head.

"Two bolts and a lock. It'd be easier to jump him through that window," and he pointed to the window Don had used to get into the house.

"Okay, you two, go and get him," Horrocks said.

Don joined Harry in the archway. He itched to go into action himself, but he knew Horrocks wouldn't stand for it.

They watched Maddox give Hurst a leg up on to the top of the wall. Hurst began to walk up the tiles as Maddox scrambled up after him.

Watching the dark window, Don suddenly spotted a movement behind the glass.

"Look out!" he called sharply. "He's seen you!" Hurst was by now half-way up the roof. There was no cover. He too had seen the movement. His hand whipped to his pocket for his truncheon. There came a flash and the bang of gun fire. The glass of the window smashed.

Hurst dropped his truncheon, slumped forward and rolled down the roof, nearly taking Maddox with him.

Maddox grabbed at him and managed to check his descent as Don and Harry rushed forward.

"Leave him to us," Don shouted.

Gun fire crashed again. A bullet smashed a tile within inches of Maddox, who let go of Hurst and swung himself with desperate haste off the wall. Hurst slid limply off the roof. Don and Harry grabbed him and lowered him to the ground. Harry's hand went to Hurst's neck. His finger found the artery.

"He's had it," he said in a shocked voice.

Horrocks joined them under the shelter of the wall. He paused only long enough to make sure there was nothing he could do for Hurst, then moving with surprising quickness for a man of his bulk, he ran back down the cul-de-sac.

Maddox joined Don and Harry in the archway where they had carried Hurst's body. Maddox was breathing heavily and his face was white and set.

"Shall we have a crack at getting in, sir?" Harry asked Don in a low tone, but Maddox heard him".

"You'll stay right here," Maddox growled. "You two keep out of this. This is police business."

Don said hopefully, "I could get that door open, sergeant..."

"You heard what I said, sir. You two keep out of it." There was a long pause, then Horrocks came back. "We'll have him in a few minutes," he said grimly. "He'll be sorry he started this." He turned to Don. "You've done more than your share in this, Mr Micklem. I'll be glad now if you'll go home."

Don stared at him.

"You're not serious, are you? Hang it, if it hadn't been for Harry and me..."

"I know that, sir," Horrocks said curtly, "but there may be more shooting, and I'm not carrying the can if you happen to stop a bullet. I'll let you know how it works out, but right now, you're going home."

Don saw the sense in this, and although he was reluctant to leave, he lifted his shoulders in a resigned shrug.

"Okay, Inspector; good luck and don't let him get away."

"He won't get away," Horrocks said. "I let you know how it works out."

"Come on, Harry, let's get out of here."

Leaving the shelter of the archway, Harry and he walked down the cul-de-sac into Old Crompton Street.

"That's a bit of a washout," Don said as they made their way to where he had left the Bentley. "I would like to have seen him caught."

"How's Mrs Ferenci?" Harry asked.

"She's pretty bad. Miss Rigby is looking after her."

As he paused to unlock the Bentley, two cars, packed with men, swept past.

"That's the end of Ed," Don said. "Let's get moving. As soon as the shooting starts, every street around here will be blocked."

It took them only a few minutes to reach Upper Brook Mews. During the drive, Don quickly sketched in what had happened at Ferenci's house.

"Looks like an organized gang, doesn't it, sir?" Harry said. Don pulled up outside No. 25a.

"That's what it looks like." He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was twenty minutes past one. "Okay, Hany, put her away and go to bed. We may be busy tomorrow."

He unlocked the front door and walked into the lounge. Some chicken sandwiches with a bottle of whisky, ice water and glasses stood on the table by the fire.

He poured himself a stiff drink and sat down. He sat for ten minutes or so, staring into the fire, thinking of Julia. It was hard to believe that Guido was dead. The whole nightmare thing was impossible to believe.

The sound of the telephone bell startled him. He picked up the receiver.

"Is that you, Mr Micklem?" Horrocks's voice boomed over the line. "Bad news: he got away."

"Got away!" Don exclaimed, starting to his feet.

"Yes. We broke in and found a tunnel in the cellar. It led to a builder's dump in Dean Street. He must have sneaked out that way."

"For the love of mike!" Don exploded. "That's not very bright, is it? So now both of them have got away."

"They won't get far," Horrocks said. "Every port, airport and station is being watched. We've got a good description of them. They won't get far."

"Like to bet on that?" Don said and slammed down the receiver.

A girl came across the hall of Polsen's hotel, hesitant and unsure of herself. Dale jerked himself out of a doze, looked at his watch and saw the time was fourteen minutes past four a.m. He got to his feet and leaning on the counter of the desk stared ill-temperedly at the girl as she came up to him.

Good grief! he thought. Where in the world has she come from?

The girl was dark and stupid-looking. She had buck teeth and she wore horn-rimmed spectacles. She had on a red and green tartan cloth coat that was slightly too large for her and her lank black hair was caught up in a pale blue silk scarf.

"If you want a room, it'll cost you a couple of pounds," Dale said, "and I want it in advance."

"Yes, I want a room," the girl said, opening her purse. "I lost the last train home."

"If you haven't any luggage, the charge is three pounds. That's the rule of the hotel," Dale said. "Take it or leave it." At that moment Grantor came in and up to the desk. "Gimme my key," he said curtly. The girl looked at him.

"Excuse me," she said, "he's charging me three pounds for a room because I haven't any luggage. Is that right?"

"Look, ugly," Dale snarled, "you heard what I said. Get out and stay out if you don't want to pay."

"Give her a room," Crantor said, picking up his key. "The charge is a pound." He looked at the girl. "Give him a pound."

Dale took a key off the rack and slid it across the counter. His thin, rat-like face was expressionless. "Room 24," he said and took the pound note the girl gave him. "I'm on the same floor," Crantor said, looking at the girl out of the corner of his eye. She was drab and dull, but he was used to the ugly ones. "I'll show you the way." The girl followed him obediently up the stairs. When they had rounded the bend and were out of sight of the desk, she said, "Have you heard from Shapiro?" Crantor started, turned swiftly to stare at her. It was only when she slipped out the buck teeth that he recognized her. "Lorelli! Well, I'll be damned!" "I asked if you had heard from Shapiro?" "I've heard from him," Crantor said. He paused outside his door, pushed in the key, unlocked the door and opened it. "You'd better come in." She followed him into the room and went over to the mirror above the fireplace. He shut the door and turned the key. "The police nearly nabbed him," he said, taking off his damp overcoat and dropping it on the chair. "He's in a hell of a state. Something must have gone wrong. He slipped up somewhere, but he wouldn't say where." "The fool was followed," Lorelli said. "The police nearly caught me." She took a packet of cigarettes from her purse, lit one and blew smoke towards Crantor. "When I left Athens Street I was followed by a tall, powerfully built man. He wasn't a policeman. I'm sure of that. I couldn't shake him off. I went back to the room I had rented in Market Mews. I saw him go to a call box. I changed into this rig-out and got away over the roofs. The police came a few minutes later. Have you any idea who he could be?" Crantor shook his head. "Shapiro killed a cop. He's yelling for his money. It's going to be tricky getting him out of the country." Lorelli came over to the table and sat down. "Where is he?" "He has holed up in his girl's flat. Maybe you remember her: Gina Pasero? Didn't she do a job for the old man in Rome some years ago?" Lorelli nodded. "I remember her. She's unreliable. I didn't know she was Shapiro's girl." "What do you mean — unreliable?" Crantor asked sharply. "If the police connect her with Shapiro, she'll talk. Has Shapiro told her anything about you?" Crantor stiffened. "I don't know. He might have." Lorelli opened her purse and took out a slip of pink paper. She pushed it across the table. "I left my bag at Euston station," she said. "There are two things in it that will interest you. One of them is a thousand pounds in five-pound notes. I was instructed to give that sum to the man who killed Ferenci... a man, you understand, not any particular man." Crantor stared at her. "What's the other thing then?" "A replica of the knife you gave Shapiro." Crantor took the slip of paper, folded it carefully and put it in his wallet. "The police have a description of Shapiro," Lorelli went on. "He can't get away. When he is caught, he will tell them about you." "Yes," Crantor said. "I don't think Shapiro is much use to us," Lorelli went on, looking at Crantor. "Do you?" "Not now," Crantor said and picked up his overcoat. He put it on. "You'd better get some sleep. Your room is across the way." "I'll wait here until you come back," Lorelli said. "We shall have to do something about Gina Pasero too. It won't take the police long to connect her with Shapiro. Do you know where she lives?" "No, but I will find out," Crantor said, moving to the door. He paused with his hand on the door knob. "What shall I do with the money?" Lorelli shrugged her shoulders. "It belongs to Shapiro," she said. Crantor's mutilated face lit up with a wolfish smile. "Perhaps I'll persuade him to leave it to me in his will," he said and went out, closing the door behind him.

Chapter 4

GINA

A little after twelve o'clock the following morning, Marian came into Don's study to announce that Chief Superintendent Dicks of the Special Branch was waiting to see him.

"Dicks? What's he want?" Don asked, signing the last letter of a number that lay before him.

"He didn't confide in me, but he did say it was urgent."

"I have half a mind not to see him," Don said, pushing back his chair. "I'm fed up with the police. They had those two just where they wanted them and they calmly let them get away." He reached

for a cigarette. "Any news of Julia? Have you phoned the Clinic yet?"

"Yes, just now. She is doing as well as can be expected, but she is still very ill. I'll go down after lunch and see if I can't get something less vague."

"I wish you would. I can't get her out of my mind."

"The Superintendent is waiting," Marian reminded him.

"All right, I'll see him now."

Chief Superintendent Dicks, a red-faced, jovial-looking man, was sitting comfortably in an armchair before the fire in the lounge. He was puffing placidly at his pipe; his shrewd eyes were half-closed as Don walked in. He and Don had known each other over a number of years and were old friends.

"There you are," Dicks said, looking up. "I bet you're hating the entire police force this morning."

"You're right, I am," Don said, sitting on the arm of a chair that faced the fire. "I have every reason to. The way your people let those two slip through their hands sticks in my gullet."

Dicks lifted his broad shoulders.

"We'll find them," he said. "At the moment they are lying low, but sooner or later they'll have to make a move into the open. They can't get away."

"I don't believe it," Don said irritably. "It wouldn't surprise me if they weren't already in France or Italy, laughing at you. What's the good of watching the ports and airports? You don't imagine they will go that way, do you? They've probably gone by fast motor-boat. It's easy enough and you know it."

"Fortunately for me," Dicks said, "catching them isn't my pigeon."

Don wasn't in a patient mood. He stared hard at Dicks. "Well, I can't imagine you're here to chit-chat about the weather, Super," he said. "I suppose something is your pigeon. What is it you wanted to see me about? I'm a little pressed for time."

Dicks lifted his heavy eyebrows.

"Sounds as if you're a little testy this morning, Mr Micklem," he said. "Can't say I blame you. This has been a foul-up. We should have had them by now. The Commissioner is raising all kinds of hell. Yes, I have a reason for seeing you. I thought you would like some information about the Tortoise."

Don looked at him, his angry expression fading. "What do you know about the Tortoise? What's he to do with your department?"

"I don't know much about him, and I'm afraid he is going to have a lot to do with my department," Dicks returned, settling himself more comfortably in his chair.

Don got up and as a gesture of peace went to the liquor cabinet, fixed two big whiskies and water and gave Dicks one of them. Dicks took it dubiously, sniffed at it and sighed with approval. "It's a bit early for me, but perhaps it won't do any harm. Thanks, Mr Micklem."

"Tell me about the Tortoise," Don said, sitting down. "I'd give a lot to get my hands on him."

"So would we, so would the French, Italian and American police. I know our people didn't come out of this business too well," Dicks said, "but you have to shoulder some of the blame. You see, Horrocks had never heard of the Tortoise while I had. If you had told me we might have had a very different story to tell."

"I did try to tell you," Don said shortly. "You happened to be out. I know it was careless of me not to try again, but I just couldn't take it seriously."

"I'm not saying we could have saved Mr Ferenci if we had known what was happening, but at least we would have had a good try. You aren't the only one who has looked on the Tortoise as a joke. The Paris police thought he was a harmless lunatic and Renaldo Busoni lost his life."

"Busoni? Wasn't he the Italian attache?" "That's right. He was fished out of the Seine after receiving threatening letters from the Tortoise. I got the report with a hint that Italian officials over here might be threatened in the same way."

"Who is the Tortoise?" Don demanded.

"He is a very dangerous and ruthless extortioner: a man who will stop at nothing."

"So Ferenci isn't his first victim?"

"Oh no; there have been nine others over a period of fourteen months," Dicks said. "Two of them were murdered in the States, three in France and four in Italy. Mr Ferenci is the first to be murdered in this country. The trouble is we have no idea who paid the Tortoise's demands. We feel pretty sure there must be a great number of men and women in Europe and in the States who are paying up and saying nothing. If you had told me Ferenci had been threatened by the Tortoise I would have advised him to pay up."

"You're not serious, are you? That's odd advice from a police officer."

"It happens to be good advice," Dicks said quietly. "His wife wouldn't be in the London Clinic now if he had paid up and he would be alive."

"But that's not the point. You are admitting the police would have been helpless to protect him."

"That's what I am admitting. Let's face it. We haven't enough policemen to shadow any but the V.I.P.s day in and day out. The Tortoise is patient. Sooner or later he gets his man. Mr Ferenci wouldn't have rated a day and night bodyguard. We would have to do something about the Italian ambassador's staff if one of them was threatened, but Mr Ferenci was an ordinary individual. We couldn't have looked after him for weeks on end. You've seen how the Tortoise works. You, Mason and Dixon were guarding Ferenci. That didn't save him, did it?" Dicks tapped out his pipe, blew noisily down it and began to fill it again. "The Tortoise knows that if he fails to make good his threat a crack will start in the racket he

has built up. Pay up or die is his slogan. People are paying up because they believe they haven't a chance to survive if they don't."

"But Ferenci didn't know that," Don said sharply. "The Tortoise meant nothing to him."

"That's true. The Tortoise is starting his racket over here. No one knew about him before Ferenci died, but they know about him now. After the way the newspapers handled the murder, no one can fail to know about him. The next rich man who gets a threatening note from the Tortoise will know it isn't a joke. I think Ferenci was deliberately killed to advertise the arrival in this county of the Tortoise."

"It's up to your people to catch him," Don said grimly. "That's what you are here for."

"It's not going to be easy. We have no lead on him. If we do catch up with the killer, he isn't the Tortoise. If we catch this redheaded woman, she isn't the Tortoise either. The French police did manage to catch one of the Tortoise's dagger-men and persuaded him to talk, but he didn't tell them anything of any use. He said he was hired by a man who made an appointment with him on a dark road. This man - he may or may not have been the Tortoise - arrived by car and stayed in the car. The dagger-man didn't see his face. He took his orders and did the job. So you see the Tortoise is quite a headache. The American, French and Italian police have been wrestling with the problem for the past fourteen months. Now it's our turn."

"You don't sound very confident that you'll catch him," Don said.

"I know how you feel, Mr Micklem," Dicks returned. "You have just lost a good friend, but we can't work miracles. You can be sure everything will be done that can be done. It is an international job, of course. It's my guess he operates from Italy."

"Why Italy?"

"Two reasons: every one of the Tortoise's victims have been Italians and this..."

He took from his pocket a flat box, opened it and produced a broad-bladed knife with an ornate wooden handle. "Take a look at this. It is the knife that killed Mr Ferenci. Make anything of it?"

Don took the knife and examined it.

"I don't pretend to be an expert," he said after he had turned the knife over, "but I'd say this is a copy of an Italian throwing knife of the medieval period: say about the thirteenth century. If I remember rightly I've seen something like it in the Bargello in Florence."

"That's correct," Dicks said, nodding. "Between them, the police in the States, France and Italy have nine such knives. They have all been taken from the bodies of the Tortoise's victims. Every effort has been made to trace the knives without success."

"The red-headed girl, Lorelli, is an Italian," Don said. "Her accent was unmistakable."

"That's another pointer."

"Well, surely we are getting somewhere," Don said. "Why does he only attack Italians? Is it possible there's a political hookup? I know Ferenci was a rabid anti-Fascist. Know anything about the other victims' politics?"

"They are a mixed bag: nothing to go on. Some were anti-Fascists, some Christian-Democrats, some Fascists. I've worked along that line but it gets me nowhere."

"Have you asked yourself why he calls himself the Tortoise?" Don asked. "It's not a name to strike fear into anyone - a most unimaginative name for an extortioner. Why the Tortoise? There must be a reason. A tortoise is slow and harmless: the exact opposite to this killer. There must be a reason."

"I wondered about that myself, but I haven't any bright ideas. It might be a deliberate smoke screen."

"I don't think so. And another thing - why go to the trouble of manufacturing a copy of a medieval knife? Why not use a knife without the elaborately carved handle? I have a hunch that the tortoise and the knife are something this killer has adopted as a trademark for a very positive reason. We might get somewhere if we found out that reason."

"It's possible, but I don't see how we do it."

Don tossed his cigarette into the fire.

"It's a thinking point. I don't want to hurry you. Super, but I have a lot of work to do. I take it you didn't come here just to give me information?"

Dicks rubbed the side of his nose with his pipe.

"Well, I did and I didn't," he said. "I have a lot of respect for your talents. You did a fine job on that Tregarth business last year. Ferenci's a friend of yours. I thought I'd put you in the picture in case you wanted to take a hand in finding the Tortoise. If we are going to catch him we will only do so by underground information. I know you have a number of contacts in Italy and over here. Every scrap of information we can get will be useful."

"All right," Don said. "I'll see what I can do, but I'm not very hopeful. I know a couple of birds in Rome who might have some ideas. I'll have a talk with Uccelli. I don't know if you've run into him. He owns the Torcolotti restaurant in Soho. He is a smart old scoundrel. I've known him for years. What he doesn't know about the Italian colony here isn't worth knowing."

"We nearly nabbed him on a big black-market deal during the war," Dicks said, "but he was just too smart for us."

"I'm surprised you got as far as nearly nabbing him. I'll have a talk with him. He may know something."

Dicks put the throwing knife into the box and the box into his pocket.

"You wouldn't feel inclined to go to Italy and see what you can pick up there? I have a feeling that's where the real information is if we could only tap it."

"My dear Super, I can't plod over the whole of Italy in the hope of running into the Tortoise. Can't we pin it down to a district or better still a town? If we could do that I'd go."

"The five men who were murdered in Italy died in Rome, Florence, Padua, Naples and Milan. That's a pretty wide territory. I can't do better than that."

"Let's see if either of us can narrow it down first," Don said as Dicks got to his feet. "Let me have any information you get and I'll pass on any I get."

When the Superintendent had gone, Don remained before the fire, thinking. He was still there when Cherry came in to announce-lunch was ready.

Taller than the average Italian, Giorgio Uccelli was still erect in spite of his seventy-five years and his shrewd deep-set eyes were alert.

Don's father had known him some twenty years ago in Venice where Uccelli had owned a small, but first-class restaurant in Calle de Fabori. As a boy of sixteen, Don had had his first Venetian meal at Uccelli's restaurant and had immediately taken a liking for him. When Mussolini had come to power, Uccelli had left Italy and had settled in Soho. Don had renewed their friendship and he often dined at Uccelli's now famous restaurant.

Having finished an excellent dinner, he had gone through to Uccelli's private room and was now sitting before a fire, a fine brandy in his hand and his face half-screened by the smoke of one of his cigars.

He and Uccelli had been chatting together for twenty minutes and Don decided it was time to get around to the reason for his visit.

"You heard about Mr Ferenci's death?" he said suddenly.

Uccelli's lined, swarthy face clouded.

"Yes. It was a great shock to me. Is Mrs Ferenci better?"

"She's still pretty bad. I guess you know the police aren't getting anywhere with the case?"

Uccelli lifted his shoulders.

"Police business doesn't interest me."

Don knew he was on touchy ground mentioning the police to Uccelli. He had heard rumours that Uccelli had been a big black-market dealer and now dealt in foreign currency on an extensive scale.

"Guido was one of my best friends," Don said. "I want to find the man who killed him. It's a personal thing."

Uccelli nodded. That was something he could understand.

There was a pause, then Don said, "I'm after information. Tell me what you know about the Tortoise?"

Uccelli shook his head.

"Very little. I know he exists and that he is dangerous. No Italian who owns more than five thousand pounds is safe from him," he said gravely. "He has a deadly reputation in Italy. Hundreds of people in Italy and France are paying him vast sums to keep alive."

"Does he live in Italy?"

"I don't know."

"He has people working for him: one of them is a girl with Venetian red hair. Do you know her?"

Uccelli shook his head.

"I don't know of any girl with Venetian red hair. That colouring has died out: you never see it these days."

"The other is a tall, thin man, dark, hooked nose, flashily dressed whose first name is Ed."

Uccelli stubbed out his cigar.

"Yes, that sounds like Ed Shapiro. He dines here sometimes."

Don sat forward.

"What does he do for a living?"

"He's a smuggler. At one time he was a knife-thrower in a circus."

"That must be the fellow!" Don exclaimed. "Where can I find him?"

"I haven't seen him for some weeks. Perhaps his girl can tell you."

"Who is she?"

"Her name's Gina Pasero. She is an Italian. She works at the Florida Club in Firth Street. She is greatly influenced by money. Offer her something: fifty pounds, perhaps. If she knows where Shapiro is, she will tell you."

"Right, I'll talk to her. Now about this girl with the red hair. Her first name is Lorelli. Will you try to get me information about her? It's worth a hundred pounds to anyone who can put me on to her."

Uccelli inclined his head. "I will do what I can."

Don got to his feet.

"I'll see if I can get anything out of Gina Pasero," he said. "What does she do at the club?"

"She is a dance hostess. You will be very careful," Uccelli said. "This could be a dangerous business. You are dealing with men who do not value life. Remember that. If it is thought you are showing an interest in their activities, they will wipe you out."

"Don't worry about me, I can look after myself," Don said. "Find out about this red-head for me."

"I will do what I can. Be careful of Shapiro. He is very dangerous."

"I'll watch out. Thanks for the wonderful dinner. I'll look in in a day or so."

"Leave it a few days. Information is not always easy to get." Uccelli looked at Don. "And it is understood that anything I have told you is for your own use and is not to be given to the police?"

"That's all right," Don said. "I'll keep it to myself."

Leaving the restaurant, he walked briskly up Firth Street until he came to a door, over which was a neon sign that spelt out in blood-red letters:

FLORIDA CLUB: Members only.

Having paid a pound for a temporary member's ticket to a flat-nosed doorman, Don descended a flight of dirty stone steps that led to a shabby bar. Beyond the bar he could see a dimly lit room containing thirty or forty tables, a three-piece band and a small space in the middle of the floor for dancing.

He paused at the bar as he knew it was expected of him and ordered a whisky. Two blondes and a long-haired man in a check suit with enormously padded shoulders were propped up against the bar, drinking neat gin. They stared at Don with undisguised curiosity.

Don ignored them. He lit a cigarette and toyed with his drink for a few minutes until two more men drifted out of the restaurant and joined the others at the bar. Then finishing his drink, he went into the restaurant.

The pianist, saxophone and drums combination was playing in a half-hearted way. Three couples were moving about the floor in time with the music, but with no other claim to dancing. One of the men held a glass of whisky in his hand as he shuffled around the floor. His partner, a hard-faced girl with copper-coloured hair, was smoking.

Don went to a table in a corner and sat down. Nearby was a small dais enclosed by a rail. Behind the rail were three girls who were smoking and staring with blank boredom across the room.

A waiter in a grubby white coat came over to Don.

"Straight whisky," he said.

The waiter nodded and went away.

The band stopped playing. The couples on the floor didn't bother to clap. They drifted back to their tables and a funereal hush fell over the room.

Don thought the Florida Club was in a class of its own as a sordid slice of dull night life.

He glanced again at the girls behind the rail and decided the dark girl with a rose in her hair could be Gina Pasero. She was small-featured and pretty in a hard, sophisticated way. The shadows under her dark eyes gave her an interestingly dissipated look. She was wearing a red and black evening dress cut so low Don could see the tops of her firm, young breasts. She sat motionless, her hands folded in her lap. If her eyes hadn't been open, he would have thought she was asleep.

The waiter brought the whisky and Don paid him. The two blondes came in from the bar and sat opposite Don's table. They stared fixedly at him.

Five leaden minutes crawled by, then the pianist began to play. After the third bar the saxophone and drums joined in as if they were doing the pianist a favour.

Don went over to the dais.

"Do you think you have enough strength left to dance with me?" he asked the girl with the rose in her hair.

The other two girls giggled, looking at him, crude invitation in their eyes.

The girl with the rose in her hair got up and came round the rail. She moved listlessly and she made no attempt to conceal her boredom. Don put his arm round her and moved her out on to the floor. He found it impossible to do more than shuffle around the

floor. The lagging beat of the drum made any attempt to dance a farce.

After a minute or so of shuffling, Don said, "I bet this is where undertakers come to relax."

The girl didn't say anything. Don could only see the top of her sleek head. She seemed content to let him push her before him and keep her nose close to his gold tie-clip.

They circled the room, then Don said, "Don't let me stop you sleeping. Just rest your feet on mine and have yourself a quiet time."

The girl leaned back to stare up at him. At that angle he could look down the front of her dress, but he was too well-mannered to stare. The girl's shadowy black eyes expressed irritation and weariness.

"Let it lie, Jack," she said in a cold, brittle voice.

"Certainly," Don said. "Just let me know if I'm driving too fast for you."

"If you don't like the way I dance you know what you can do about it," the girl said, her voice hardening.

Switching from English into Italian, Don said, "I know what I would like to do, but this is hardly the place."

Boredom, irritation and weariness went away from the girl's face. Her eyes became alive. Her red, sensual lips curved into a smile.

"How did you know?" she said. "No one has spoken to me in Italian for years."

"I'm psychic," Don said, smiling at her.

She pursed her red lips.

"I think you're tight."

"That's an idea. Shall we stop this depressing shuffling and see what we can do about it?"

"That's up to you. It'll still cost you a pound an hour."

"Think nothing of it," Don said, leading her back to his table. "I'm made of money. What'll it be?"

She ordered the inevitable champagne and Don ordered another whisky. When the drinks had been served, he asked her from what part of Italy she had come.

"I was bom in Naples," she told him. "I married an American soldier who brought me to London. We hadn't been here two weeks before a taxi knocked him down and killed him."

"Tough luck," Don said.

She shrugged.

"He wasn't much. I was glad to be rid of him."

"You must have been pretty young when you married."

She laughed.

"I was fifteen. There were eighteen in my family. We lived in four rooms. I was pretty glad to get out." She smiled at him. "You're American, aren't you? How did you learn to speak Italian so well?"

"My father lived most of his life in Florence. I spent a lot of time with him. What's your name?"

"CallmeGina."

She began to tell him about Naples. He could see she was badly homesick and he let her talk. After she had worked through half the bottle of champagne and the wine had relaxed her, he said casually, "By the way, how's Ed these days?"

She continued to smile, but the light went out of her eyes. After a second or so, the effort of keeping the smile on her lips proved too much of an effort. Her face reverted to a cold, expressionless mask.

"What do you know about Ed?" she asked harshly.

"I want to talk to him. I've been looking all over for him. Where's he got to?"

"How should I know?" She reached for her bag. "I've got to go. I can't spend all the evening with you."

"Don't be silly," Don said, smiling at her. "I've got a deal. I want to gut in Ed's way. It won't wait. It's worth fifty pounds to anyone who can tell me where he is."

Her eyes lost their cold look.

"You mean you'll give me fifty pounds if I tell you where he is?" she said, staring at him.

"I'll give you fifty pounds if you show me where he is," Don said. "I'm not parting with all that money for an address."

The tip of her tongue passed over her lips as she studied him. "Honest? If I had fifty pounds I could go home. I could go to

Naples."

"Show me where Ed is and you can go home. That's a promise." "I haven't seen him for weeks, but I think I know where he is. When will you have the money?" "In a couple of hours."

"All right. Meet me outside the Casino theatre at one o'clock. I can't get away from here until twelve, and I'll have to make sure he is where I think he is." "ThenyouTldoit?"

"There's not much I wouldn't do for a chance to go home," she said. "He's in trouble, isn't he?" "Would you worry?" She shook her head.

"Find out where he is, but don't tell him I'm looking for him," Don said. "That's important."

"I'm not likely to tell him," she said. "I'm not crazy. Ed's dangerous."

Chapter V

THE LONG SHOT

At five minutes to one, as Don walked briskly along Old Compton Street, his head bent against the driving rain, he could hear Harry's light footfalls behind him.

Although Don had promised Uccelli not to bring in the police, he had no intention of tackling Shapiro single-handed.

"This girl may not know where Shapiro is hiding," he told Harry. "She wants the money badly, and if she doesn't know where he is, she may be tempted to pull a fast one. So watch out. Keep out of sight, but move in if there's trouble."

He glanced over his shoulder as he neared the darkened Casino theatre and motioned Harry to stop. Harry slid into a dark doorway and out of sight.

Glad to get under the shelter of the Casino's canopy, Don glanced at his watch. It was now two minutes to one o'clock. There was no sign yet of Gina. He opened his coat and shook off the rain drops. Then lighting a cigarette, he leaned against the wall and settled down to wait.

After he had finished his second cigarette, he began to pace slowly up and down the length of the sheltered pavement. It was now quarter past one. He decided to give Gina another quarter of an hour before making a move. He continued to pace up and down, listening to the rain beating on the roof of the canopy. He remembered that Uccelli had warned him how dangerous Shapiro was. If Shapiro suspected Gina was betraying him...

Again Don looked at his watch. It was three minutes to half-past one. He looked up and down the deserted street, then crossing the street he joined Harry in the shop doorway.

"It doesn't look as if she's coming," he said. "I don't like it, Harry. She may have run into trouble."

"Do you know where she lives, sir?"

"No, but we should be able to find out. There's no point in hanging around here any longer. We'll go to the Florida Club. They may know where we can find her."

Stepping out into the rain, they hurried over to Firth Street.

The Florida's neon sign still blazed into the dark night, making a red pool on the wet pavement.

"Wait here," Don said. "I'll see what I can find out."

He went down the steps to where the doorman sat in his cubby hole.

The doorman looked up and scowled at him.

"We're shut," he growled. "The last lot are coming out now."

"Is Gina around?" Don asked.

"She's gone home."

"I have a date with her, but I've mislaid her address," Don said, taking out a pound note and letting the doorman see it.

"Can you give it to me?"

The doorman eyed the pound note, rubbed his jaw, then lifted his heavy shoulders.

"I could," he said and pulled a well-thumbed notebook out of a drawer, flicked through the pages, found an entry and scowled at it. "I've an idea she's moved from the address I've 'ere. If she 'as, then you've 'ad it. Want to try it, mister?"

"Sure," Don said.

"2a, Peters Road: know where it is?"

"That's off Charing Cross Road, isn't it?" Don said and slid the pound note through the window of the glass partition.

"That's right." The doorman snapped up the note. "Twenty yards past Cambridge Circus on the left."

Don nodded and climbing the steps, walked out into the rain again.

Harry joined him.

"We may be out of luck," Don said. "I have an address, but she may have moved. Let's go and see."

Five minutes' brisk walking brought them to Peters Road: a dingy street lined on either side by shabby warehouses, small factories and two or three Greek restaurants. No. 2 turned out to be the address of a firm dealing in bathroom fittings. A narrow alley ran down the side of the building. Harry threw the beam of his flashlight into the darkness.

"This is it: No. 2a," he said and moved into the alley.

Don joined him.

Shielding the light with his fingers, Harry let the beam play over the door. He put his hand on the cracked, shabby door panel and pushed, but the door was locked.

Don stepped back and looked up at the building. There were two windows; one on the first floor and another on the second. No lights showed: the lower window was without curtains.

"Let's see if we can raise anyone " he said.

Harry dug his thumb into the bell push. They could hear the bell ringing somewhere in the house.

They waited for a minute or so while the rain fell steadily on them.

"Doesn't look as if anyone's at home," Harry said. "What do we do now?"

"Let's see if we can get in. I want to be sure this is her place."

Harry examined the lock of the door.

"Nothing to it, sir, I've a bit of wire that'll fix it." He handed the flashlight to Don and inserted a piece of wire into the lock. He fiddled for a few seconds then twisted sharply. The lock clicked back.

Don turned the handle and pushed the door open.

They stepped into a musty-smelling passage and Harry closed the door. The beam of Don's flashlight lit up a flight of stairs leading to the upper landing.

Moving silently and followed by Harry, Don went up the stairs. His flashlight showed a door at the head of the stairs, a short passage and another flight of stairs.

Across the door was painted in white letters:

The Acme Manufacturing Co.

"Stay here, Harry," Don said. "If she's anywhere, she'll be on the next landing."

He went along the passage and began to mount the second flight of stairs. These, he noticed, were covered with a dusty, threadbare stair-runner that looked as if it hadn't been swept in months.

At the head of the stairs was a red-painted front door; its brass fittings tarnished. The card-holder screwed to the door was empty.

Don listened outside the door. He stood listening for some moments, but no sound came to him. Turning the door handle, he pushed, expecting to find the door locked, but to his surprise it swung inwards.

Holding the door open, and not moving, he swung the beam of his flashlight around the small hall. Facing him was a large gilt framed mirror. Below it a carved wood chest on which stood a vase of dead zinnias. Dust lay thick on the chest and obscured the mirror. On either side of the mirror was a door.

Don moved into the hall, leaving the front door open. He crossed to the door on the right, turned the handle and opened it.

Darkness and silence came out of the room. He groped for the light switch, found it and pressed it down. A shaded lamp in the centre of the room sprang alight.

The bedroom, Don found himself looking at was skimpily furnished. A small padded chair stood before a walnut dressing-table on which stood triple mirrors. A walnut clothes closet stood against one of the walls. A pale blue fitted carpet covered the floor. Against the wall, facing the window, was a wide divan bed, covered with a pale blue bedspread.

It was this bed that held Don's rigid attention.

Ed Shapiro lay across the bed in a dark puddle of blood, his lips drawn off his teeth in a wolfish snarl. His bloodstained fingers were curled round the wooden handle of a knife that had been driven with great violence to the hilt into his chest.

Don didn't have to touch him to know he was dead.

Leaning over the banister rail, Don called softly, "Harry! Come up."

Harry mounted the stairs, two at a time. The sight of Don's set face brought him up short.

"Shapiro's in there - he's dead," Don said. "Take a look at him."
They went into the bedroom.
Harry touched the dead man's hand.
"He's been dead some time."
"Look at the knife. It's a copy of the one that killed Guido." ,
"I bet his pals decided he wasn't any further use to them, and they knocked him off," Harry said, stepping away from the bed.
"Yes." Don glanced around the room, then went out into the hall. He crossed over to the door on the left and opened it. He looked into a small kitchen. On the table was a large stock of tinned food.
"Looks as if he had settled here until the police had given him up," he said. "Let's get out of here, Harry."
They left the flat and went down the stairs. Rain was still falling steadily. Harry closed the street door and he and Don walked quickly down the alley to Peters Road.
"Are you going to report this to the police, sir?" Harry asked.
"I'm finding Gina first," Don said. "Uccelli might know where I can find her." He peered at his watch in the light of the street lamp. "It's just two. Maybe he hasn't gone to bed yet. Let's see."
Uccelli hadn't gone to bed, and he answered Don's knock himself.
"I'm trying to find Gina Pasero," Don said after he had apologized for disturbing Uccelli. "Have you any idea where I can find her?"
"Come in," Uccelli said. "How wet you are. Have you tried the club?"
Don and Harry followed the old man into his room.
"I saw her at the club. I made a date with her for one o'clock. She hasn't shown up. Shapiro's been murdered. I'm worried about the girl."
Uccelli's eyes widened. "She used to live in a flat in Peters Road, but I did hear she had moved..."
"I've been there. That's where I found Shapiro."
"Why do you think the girl's in trouble?" the old man asked.
"I offered her fifty pounds for information. She said she would meet me later. She was anxious to have the money. She didn't turn up."
Uccelli pulled a little face.
"I don't know where she could be unless she's at the Miremare Hotel in Western Road. She often stayed there before she took the flat in Peters Road."
"All right, I'll try there." Don turned to Harry. "Get the car, will you?"
When Harry had gone, Don went on, "This is getting complicated, Giorgio." He sat on the edge of Uccelli's desk.
"Shapiro was hiding in the flat. Whoever killed him gave him a dose of his own medicine. The knife was thrown at him with tremendous force. It went into his body up to the hilt."
Uccelli lifted his shoulders.
"A good riddance. He was a bad and dangerous man."
"I must tell the police," Don said. "You understand?"
"Of course."
"You have heard nothing about the red-headed woman yet?"
"Not yet. I have already made one or two inquiries, but it may take time."
Don heard the Bentley pull up outside.
"You can rely on me not to tell the police where I got my information from."
"I know that," Uccelli said. "The night clerk at the Miremare may help you. His name is Cavallino. Tell him you come from me."
"Right," Don said. "I'll be in touch with you."
He went out into the wet night and got into the Bentley. A few minutes' fast driving brought them to Western Road.
"This is it," Harry said, slowing down. "Doesn't look much of a joint, does it?"
The entrance to the Miremare Hotel was sandwiched between a chemist shop and a petrol station. The name of the hotel was picked out in tarnished gold letters across two glass-panelled doors.
"Wait for me," Don said and slid out into the rain. He ran up the six steps, pushed open the door and walked into the dingy reception hall furnished with four shabby leather armchairs, a bamboo table and a fern in a tarnished brass pot. The reception desk faced him. A single light lit up a row of keys and a series of empty pigeon-holes at the back of the desk.
A white-faced, black-haired man sat behind the desk, yawning over a paper-backed novel. He looked up as Don crossed the hall, pushed aside his novel and stood up.
"Is Miss Pasero staying with you?" Don asked, coming to rest at the desk.
The clerk looked him over suspiciously.
"I'm sorry, but I can't answer that question at this time of night," he said. "If you will call tomorrow morning..."
"You are Cavallino, aren't you?" Don said. "Uccelli told me to come to you."
Cavallino's face brightened: the suspicion went away.
"Please excuse me. I didn't know," he said. "Uccelli is a good friend of mine. Yes, Miss Pasero is staying here."
Don drew in a sharp breath of relief.
"I want to speak to her," he said. "It's most urgent."

Cavallino spread his hands.

"If you would care to wait, sir, I don't think she can be much longer." He consulted his watch. "It is nearly half-past two. She is not usually as late as this."

"She's not in then?" Don said, his voice sharpening.

"No, she went out soon after twelve-thirty when her friend called for her."

"What friend?"

Cavallino frowned.

"Excuse me, sir, but you ask too many questions. It is not my business..."

"My reason is urgent," Don broke in. "Gina Pasero is connected with Shapiro. He was murdered in her flat and I think she is in danger. Who was the friend who called for her?"

"I don't know," Cavallino said, staring at Don in alarm. "A girl: I haven't seen her before. Miss Pasero returned from the club just after midnight. Someone called her on the telephone. At half-past twelve she came down from her room. I asked her if she were going out, but she acted as if she hadn't heard me. She went out. I went to the door. There was a car waiting. Miss Pasero was talking to this girl. They got into the car and drove away."

Don hunched his shoulders against the chill that crawled up his spine.

"What was the girl like?" he asked, and the tone of his voice made Cavallino stiffen.

"I couldn't see much of her, but I did notice her hair. It was an unusual colour: a Venetian red."

Don stared at him for a loag moment.

"Let me have your telephone'," he said curtly

Cavallino pushed the telephone towards him.

"There is something wrong then?" he asked anxiously.

"That's what I'm going to find out," Don said and dialled Whitehall 1212.

Lorelli sat in the driver's seat of the Humber, her hands over her ears, her eyes shut.

The old, battered car stood under the trees of the tow-path, a few yards from Risings Lock. It was dark, and the white, damp mist hid the river.

It had been too easy. She had traced Gina to the Miremare Hotel. Gina had recognized her at once, although it was now five years since they had met in Siena. She had accepted Lorelli's tale that there was work for her again in Italy. Excited and unsuspecting, she had got into the car to discuss the details.

Crantor had been hiding in the back of the car. He had risen up and hit Gina with a sock filled with wet sand. He had struck her on the top of her head, very hard and viciously. She had slumped against Lorelli. Shuddering, Lorelli had pushed her away from her, and Crantor, leaning over the front seat, had shoved Gina's unconscious body off the seat on to the floor.

"Okay," he said. "Straight ahead. I'll tell you where to go."

It had taken them half an hour to reach Risings Lock. It was now a quarter past one. The tow-path was deserted. Crantor got out of the car and stood listening for some moments to the sound of the rain, the gentle movement of the river and the wind in the trees. Then he dragged Gina's body out of the car, letting it slide on to the wet, muddy tarmac.

"Wait for me," he said and picking up the unconscious girl, he threw her over his shoulder and walked away into the darkness.

Lorelli waited, her hands pressed to her ears. She couldn't bear to hear the splash that she knew would follow when Crantor threw Gina into the river. After an interminable time Crantor returned to the car. He was breathing heavily. The front of his dirty trench coat was wet.

"Move over," he said curtly. "I'll drive."

Lorelli slid along the bench seat. Crantor got in under the steering wheel, started the car, turned on the parking lights and drove along the tow-path. After a hundred yards or so, he turned left on to the main road.

He drove fast, heading for London. Neither he nor Lorelli said anything until they came to the main London road, then Crantor said abruptly, "What will you do now?"

"The job's finished," Lorelli said. "I'll go back. I'll catch the ten o'clock plane to Rome."

"Is it safe? They'll be watching the airports."

"My papers are in order. They won't recognize me. Of course it's safe."

"Don't be too sure. The cops here are smart."

"They won't worry me."

"You'll tell Felix I did a good job?" Crantor said.

"Yes, I'll tell him," Lorelli said indifferently.

Crantor looked sideways at her.

"You don't sound enthusiastic. It is important he should know how I handled it."

"You were well paid," Lorelli said, staring through the windscreen at the beams of the car's headlights as they raced ahead of them.

Crantor grunted. He drove for ten minutes or so without speaking, then he said, "Do you want to stay at Polsen's for the night?"

"I may as well," she returned.

Again he glanced at her. Then his big, hairy hand dropped on to her trousered knee.

"You and I could be useful to each other," he said.

She hit the back of his hand hard with her handbag. The steel clip cut the skin. He jerked his hand away, cursing.

"Every man I have had to work with comes out with that proposition," Lorelli said angrily. "Can't you be different?"

"Why?" Crantor snarled as he sucked at his bleeding hand. "I'm a man, aren't I? Just because my face..."

"Oh, shut up!" Lorelli snapped. "You flatter yourself. What's your face got to do with it?"

Crantor's hands gripped the steering wheel viciously. He imagined his ringers' were sinking into her white throat. They drove on in silence.

It wasn't until half-past two the following afternoon that Don came down to his study.

Marian was sitting at his desk, busying herself with a pile of unanswered correspondence. She concealed a smile as she watched him amble to his favourite armchair and lower himself into it with a groan.

"What a night!" he exclaimed, clasping his head in his hands.

"I didn't get to bed until half-past eight this morning. If this goes on much longer I'll finish up in a home for incurables."

"It wasn't so long ago that you told me you didn't need any sleep," Marian said, getting up and coming over with a number of letters in her hand. "Will you see your mail now?"

"Most certainly not!" Don said firmly. "I'm not doing a stroke of work today. Put those letters away and sit down. I want to talk to you."

With a resigned sigh, Marian put the letters on the desk and sat down.

"How's Julia?" Don asked, struggling with a gigantic yawn.

"She's better. The doctor says she can see the police tomorrow, and if she continues to make progress she can go home in a week."

"That's fine. I'm going to offer her the villa at Nice. She shouldn't go back to the Hampstead house after what has happened. The change and sun will do her good. I won't leave London until this murder has been cleared up. Right now, we don't seem to be getting anywhere." He went on to tell Marian what had happened the previous night. "So now Gina has vanished. The police are hunting for her, but they haven't got a thing to go on. Except for the hotel clerk, no one seems to have seen her. This woman with the red hair haunts me. She turns up and vanishes like a ghost."

"Why was Shapiro murdered?" Marian asked.

"The police had his description. He had to keep under cover. Dicks thinks the gang - he's convinced there is a gang over here decided he was too big a danger, so they wiped him out." He reached for a cigarette and lit it. "I'm hanged if I can see how we are going to get anywhere unless we get a lead on the Tortoise himself. Dicks thinks he is in Italy, and I'm inclined to agree with him. The facts

point to it. He uses an Italian weapon. He only attacks Italians, and the red-headed woman is an Italian. Dicks wants me to go to Italy and hunt around for information. He has a pathetic faith in my abilities after the Tregarth business. It's a cock-eyed idea. I can't go tramping over the whole of Italy in the hope of running into the Tortoise. If I could narrow the hunt down to a town or even a district I'd go, but I just don't know where to start."

"I think Siena would be a good starting place," Marian said.

Don stared at her.

"Siena? Why Siena of all places?"

"I've been doing some research," Marian said quietly. "You told me you couldn't understand why this extortioner calls himself the Tortoise, and that there must be a reason. I began going through books on history and symbolism, trying to find a connection between Italy and a tortoise. In the history of Siena I found that the tortoise is the crest of one of the seventeen wards of Siena."

"Wards? What wards?"

"Siena is divided into seventeen districts or wards: each ward has its name, its chapel and its flag. Most of the wards are named after animals or birds. There's the she-wolf, the owl, the goose, and the tortoise..."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Don said. "Isn't this something to do with the festival of the Patio: the annual horse race?"

"Yes, that's right. There has always been rivalry between the wards, dating back to the tenth century. They keep up their rivalry by racing a horse blessed by their church, against the other horses representing the other wards."

"My stars!" Don said, starting to his feet. "This could be the clue we're looking for. It would explain why the knife is a copy of a medieval weapon. This killer could be a crackpot who has borrowed from medieval history. I must tell Dicks. He'll know if the Italian police have worked this line or not. Find out if he can see me right away, will you?"

Marian called up Dicks' office.

"He'll be waiting for you," she said when she had hung up.

"Then I'll get off. Marian, go and buy yourself a hat: money's no object and charge it to my account. You are an exceedingly bright and clever young woman."

"Thank you, but that's what I'm paid for," Marian said, smiling.

"I'll take you out to dinner tonight," Don said as he made for the door. "If you're not wearing that new hat, there'll be trouble."

Twenty minutes later he walked into Dicks' office.

"Any news of Gina Pasero?" he asked as he closed the door.

"Not yet," Dicks said. He looked tired and worried. "Have you something for me?"

Don straddled the office chair, resting his arms along its back.

"Are you still keen for me to go to Italy and see what I can dig up?" he asked.

Dicks lifted his eyebrows.

"I thought we had gone into that, Mr Micklem. You said..."

"I know what I said," Don interrupted. "That doesn't answer my question."

"Yes, I'm still keen," Dicks said. "I think you could easily find something that would put us on to the Tortoise."
"Good. I've decided to go," Don said. "But on one condition: I want a clear field for at least a week."
Dicks took out his pipe and began to fill it.
"I don't follow you," he said. "What do you mean - a clear field?"
"I'm backing a hunch. I don't want you to contact the Italian police until I have explored a little. Too many fish in the pond will stir up the mud."
Dicks looked doubtful. . "This is a murder case. If you have any information..."
"I said a hunch, not information. I'm not keeping it a secret. My secretary has been doing some research on the tortoise," Don said, "and she's turned up something that may give us the lead we're looking for. Ever been to Siena, Super?"
Dicks shook his head.
"Siena is a medieval town. They take a great pride in keeping it that way. Twice a year the festival of the Patio is held in the main piazza. It consists of a procession of men in fifteenth-century costumes and a horse race. Each horse represents a ward. For hundreds of years Siena has been divided into seventeen wards or districts. Each ward is a self-contained unit with its own crest, leader, church, traditions, and flag. The wards are named after animals, birds and reptiles. One of these wards is named after the tortoise."
Dicks' deep-set eyes showed his interest.
"I know it is a long shot: no more than a hunch," Don went on, "but it might easily be the lead we are looking for. We are hunting for a killer who uses a copy of a medieval knife, who calls himself the Tortoise and who is apparently in rivalry with other Italians. The facts can be made to hook up with Siena."
Dicks shook his head doubtfully.
"It is a long shot: overlong I think."
"That's why I'm justified in asking for a clear field," Don said. "It isn't more than a hunch, but it needs careful handling. If the Italian police started asking questions about the Tortoise in Siena, and if the Tortoise happens to be there, he'll vanish before they can get their hands on him. I could get information, if there is any information to get, without stirring up too much mud. Do you see what I'm driving at?"
Dicks rubbed his jaw.
"All right," he said. "Pm only agreeing because I don't think my opposite number in Italy would bother to investigate this line, Mr Micklem. He hasn't much imagination. If I haven't heard from you after a week, then I'll send him a report. How's that?"
"Fine." Don got to his feet. "I'll be leaving in three or four days. If I dig up anything, I'll let you know."
The telephone bell rang as Dicks was getting to his feet. He picked up the receiver and growled into it. His sudden change of expression made Don look sharply at him.
"Yes, all right," Dicks said into the receiver. "I'll be down." He dropped the receiver back on its cradle. "Gina Pasero has just been fished out of Risings Lock. She was hit on the head before being thrown into the river."
"Poor little devil," Don said. "I had an idea something like that had happened to her." .
"I've got to get down there. Do you want to come?"
"No. There are plenty of other people who'll identify her if that's what you want. I've got a lot to do if Pm to get off by the end of the week."
Dicks nodded over to a shabby suitcase standing against the wall.
"That belongs to her," he said. "We brought it away from the hotel. There was nothing in it to tell us anything. The only thing of interest are some snapshots of her taken in Italy. It proves my point again that the guts of this business is in Italy." He moved to the door. "Want me to drop you anywhere, ah, Micklem?"
"I've got my car. Would you mind if I had a look at those snapshots, Super?"
"Go ahead. I'll leave you to it. My chaps are waiting for me. Mind how you go in Siena and good luck."
When Dicks had gone, Don lifted the suitcase to the desk and opened it. He found an envelope lying on top of Gina's few possessions. He shook its contents on to the desk.
The snapshots were all of Gina, most of them taken against the background of Brighton. In one of them, she was standing arm-in-arm with Shapiro, and she looked very happy.
But the last half-dozen snapshots held Don's attention. They were of Gina somewhere in Italy. The Second one Tie looked at made him stiffen. She was leaning against a low wall that was covered with a bougainvillea creeper in flower. In the distance, forming a background to the picture, was a large, ornate building. Its familiar outlines and its black and white marble campanile were unmistakable: it was the famous cathedral of Siena.

Chapter VI

EBONY COLOSSUS

Satisfied that he was now on the track of the Tortoise, Don went into action with a whirlwind rush that completely disorganized the placid calm of 25a, Upper Brook Mews.
Three hours after he had returned from Scotland Yard, Marian had been rushed to the London airport to catch a plane to Rome. With her went Cherry, pop-eyed with excitement, and delighted to be at last escaping from the rain and fog of London. Their instructions were to find and rent a villa either in or near Siena.

Harry was left in charge of 25a while Don cleared up outstanding business, swept half his correspondence into the waste paper basket and cancelled the numerous invitations that were the bane of his life during the London season. On Thursday morning, two days after her departure Marian telephoned to tell Don she had found a villa and he could move in when he was ready.

"It's on a hill a mile outside Siena," she told him. "There's a wonderful view, no neighbours and the villa is completely screened from the road. The rent is horrifying, but I didn't think you would want to cut corners so I've taken it for a month with an option to run another three months if we want it."

On Saturday midday, a dusty Bentley nosed its way up a twisting lane, lined on either side by olive trees, through a massive archway, up a drive of flowering shrubs to a villa, red-roofed with dark-green shutters, that stood on rising ground overlooking Siena.

As Harry pulled up before the front entrance, Cherry appeared, his pink and white face wreathed in smiles. He came down the wide stone steps and opened the car door, giving Don a dignified bow.

"You look pretty pleased with yourself, Cherry," Don said. He stared at the villa. "My, my, this is quite a place."

"It is eminently satisfactory, sir," Cherry said. "Miss Rigby is waiting for you. Lunch will be ready in ten minutes."

An hour later, Don, Marian, Cherry and Harry were on the veranda that overlooked a magnificent view of Siena. They had just finished a lunch prepared and cooked by Cherry: a lunch of ravioli, veal steaks with white truffles and ice-cream encrusted with candied fruits.

Don and Marian sat in basket chairs. Cherry rested his large haunches against the balustrade of the balcony: the furthest he would go to sitting in the presence of his employer. Harry was perched on the balustrade, his hands gripping his knees.

"You've done a good job," Don said, fanning aside the smoke from his cigar. "This is just the place for our headquarters. Somewhere in Siena is the man we are looking for. I'm sure of it. Now we've got to find him. It might not be too difficult if we could go around asking questions haphazardly, but we can't do that. He's bound to have a grapevine and he'd know fast enough we were making inquiries. Once he does know, we're sunk."

"So what do we do?" Harry asked, shifting impatiently.

"You and Cherry don't do anything for the moment. You'll run the villa and keep up the standard that's already been set." Don looked over at Cherry. "That meal was right out of the book, Cherry. It's obvious you haven't lost your continental touch."

Cherry preened himself and coughed behind his hand.

"If either of you could speak Italian," Don went on, "I'd let you loose in the city to see what you could pick up, but as you don't, the spade work must be done by Miss Rigby and myself." He turned to Marian. "We're going to dig into the history of Siena again. We'll go to the local bookshop and get all the books on the history of Siena they have in stock. I want to find out a lot more about the ward that represents the tortoise than we know already. When we have some facts, I can then ask questions, but they have got to be the harmless kind of questions a tourist interested in the history of Siena would ask, and not the kind of questions a policeman would ask."

Marian nodded.

"There's a bookshop in Via Pantaneto. They should have all we want."

"Okay, let's make a start. Harry, keep out of town. The less anyone sees of you the better. There may come a time when a new face will be useful, and that goes for you too, Cherry. Sooner or later, the Tortoise will find out, I am after him. What I don't want him to know is I have you two helping me. Do you follow?"

Cherry, who hadn't forgotten the part he played in the Tre-garth affair, leaned forward, his fat face alight with excitement.

"I have come prepared, sir," he said. "I have my sword stick with me. If you will remember it came in useful in Venice last year."

The picture of fat Cherry tackling an armed thug with his sword stick jumped into Don's mind and he had to make an effort to suppress a grin.

"I remember all right. Keep it handy, Cherry. You never know. You may need it."

Marian and Don spent the next two days poring over the dozen or so books they had found at Pedoni's bookshop.

They sat together hour after hour on the veranda in the warm sunshine, oblivious of the view, searching for some clue that might lead to the Tortoise.

Harry busied himself in the garden and helped Cherry run the villa. Both he and Cherry cast anxious eyes at the other two as they turned page after page, waiting hopefully for a discovery that would give them some action.

On the evening of the second day, Don laid down his book and suppressed a yawn!

"Phew! I'm getting bored with this," he said. "Let's give it a rest. I'm going for a stroll in the town. Come on, Marian, keep me company."

Marian shook her head.

"I've nearly finished," she said, patting the large, dry-as-dust tome she held on her knees. "Another couple of hours and I'm through. I really can't face it again tomorrow. I must finish it."

"Your appetite for work is horrifying," Don said, heaving himself out of his chair. "All right, I'll go and find a nice blonde and paint the town red. Don't say you didn't get the first offer."

Marian waved him away.

"Some chance you've got to find a nice blonde in Siena," she said.

"Well, okay, I'll settle for a brunette. Come on: change your mind."

"Don't tempt me, please," Marian said firmly. "I intend to finish this tonight."

Shaking his head, Don went down to the garage and got out the car. Harry came out of the darkness and looked hopefully at him.

"You're out of luck, Harry," Don said. "I can't take you with me."

Harry rubbed his nose with the back of his hand.

"Okay, sir; just as you say."

"Go and play gin-rummy with Cherry. You might win some money off him."

Harry snorted.

"Some hopes," he said in disgust. "He's got that sword stick out and he is cutting and thrusting like someone on the movies. I told the old goat if he didn't watch out, he'd have a stroke."

Don laughed.

"Leave him alone, Harry. He has an adventurous spirit. He did damn well last time he produced that sword stick."

He drove down the drive and out into the lane. A mile of moonlit road brought him to the Porto Camollia over which was the inscription in Latin: Siena opens her heart still wider to you.

Leaving the car, Don walked towards the Piazza del Campo. It was just after half-past nine, and the narrow streets were already thronged with people aimlessly walking, filling the night air with the sound of their voices, moving aside indifferently as the cars with an impatient bep-bep on their horns forced their way through the solid crowd.

Don found his way to the Campo and over to a cafe where he sat down.

A brilliant scene lay before him. The shell-shaped Campo around which, twice a year, the Patio was raced for, was floodlit. The twelfth-century Palazzo Pubblico with its three hundred foot tower formed an impressive Hollywood-like background to the piazza.

Looking at this scene, Don thought how easy it was to put the clock back in Siena. He wouldn't have been the least surprised to see men in helmets and breastplates, arquebusiers and halberdiers, march into the piazza.

* A harassed waiter, carrying a laden tray, paused to take his order for a coffee espresso.

While waiting, Don glanced at the people sitting around him. There was the inevitable quota of American tourists, a number of Italians discussing politics at the tops of their voices, and two tables from him, a gigantic negro.

The negro held Don's attention. He had never seen a man built on such a colossal scale. He was a Michelangelo creation carved from ebony with a muscular development much larger than life.

Although he was seated, he was a good foot higher than the waiter who was placing before him an enormous pile of pink icecream. His bullet-shaped head grew out of shoulders as wide as a barn door without any apparent neck to join one to the other. There was a brutish, alert expression on his face that made Don think of a gorilla. His bloodshot eyes were constantly on the move. They flickered in Don's direction, ran over him with an insolent, inquisitive stare, passed on and came back to him and repeated the stare.

Don stared back and the negro shifted his glance. He picked up a spoon that seemed like a toy in his enormous hand and began to shovel ice-cream into his thick-lipped mouth.

What a beauty! Don thought. My goodness! I wouldn't like to tangle with him. He's the stuff nightmares are made of. He lit a cigarette and shifted his attention from the negro to the slow-moving crowd walking to and fro across the Campo.

He was worried. Nothing had been achieved yet, and he had now only four more days before Dicks sent his report. Somewhere, he was positive, in this ancient city, was the headquarters of the Tortoise. So far the books he and Marian had been studying had yielded no clue. Was he going about this search the right way? he asked himself. Should he take a risk and make some direct inquiries? Whom should he ask? If he went to the police, he would have to explain why he wanted the information, and he could imagine the reaction he would get. There was Pedoni, the bookseller. While Marian and he had been choosing books, they had talked with the old bookseller. He had told them he had lived in Siena all his life. He might be the man to consult.

Don finished his coffee. He glanced towards the negro who had suddenly risen to his feet. As he raised his great bulk to its full height of over seven feet, he seemed to enjoy the sensation he caused. The party of American tourists all stopped talking to stare at him. Even the Italians paused in their wrangling to gape. Slowly and with a jeering expression, the negro put a white slouch hat on his massive head, shot the cuffs of his cream silk shirt and strolled off into the crowd. Head and shoulders above the crowd, it was easy to watch him cross the Campo until he disappeared through one of the dark archways that led into the labyrinth of the city's streets. Don signalled to the waiter, and while he was paying for his coffee, he asked casually, "Who was that negro? He looked like a prize fighter."

"For six months now," the waiter said, "every night without fail, he comes here to eat ice-cream. He works at one of the villas, so I am told. Some American perhaps employs him. He never speaks and I take care not to ask questions. To me he is a bad man."

Don grinned.

"You could be right," he said and got to his feet.

Deciding to explore the back alleys of the city, he left the Campo. He wandered through the narrow, crowded streets for an hour or so; aware that he was wasting time and that he should return to the villa and finish the book he was reading, but he was reluctant to leave the fascination of the pinched alleys, the massive Gothic-styled buildings that frowned down on him and the aimless, congested throng of people who surged around him like a sluggishly moving river.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when he began to make his way to where he had parked the Bentley. Cutting down a side

alley to get away from the crowd, he came upon a steep dark hill that led to the Cathedral. He walked up the hill, relieved to find that he had the place to himself. Ahead of him was a solitary street lamp that made a pool of yellow light on the cobbled road. Out of the shadows and into this pool of light a girl suddenly appeared. Fifty or sixty yards behind her, Don was surprised to see her. He guessed she must have been moving ahead of him, but keeping to the dark shadows made by the high massive buildings. He had a brief glimpse of her as she walked through the pool of light before she disappeared again into the shadows.

Brief as the glimpse was, he recognized the Venetian red hair and the compact slim figure in its white sweater and black slacks. With his heart thumping with excitement, he lengthened his stride, his rubber-soled shoes making no sound. Although he couldn't see the girl now, he was sure she was still ahead of him and unaware he had recognized her. At the top of the hill was an arch through which Don could see the lights of the piazza, del Duomo. Moving out of the darkness the girl passed under the arch and once again in the light from the piazza, Don caught the glint of her red hair. She turned left and disappeared from Don's sight. He broke into a run, covering the last yards in five long strides. As he entered the archway, an enormous figure stepped squarely in his path and brought him to an abrupt standstill. Steady as Don's nerves were, the sudden appearance of the giant negro startled him. He took a step back and looked up at the shadowy colossus who loomed before him.

"Got a match on you, bud?" the negro drawled.

Knowing that the girl was slipping through his fingers, Don attempted to sidestep the negro, but the negro moved the same way, again blocking his path.

Don had an alternative. He could give the negro a light and probably lose the girl or he could hang a punch on his jaw. It occurred to him that he might easily break his fist against that massive jaw and there was no guarantee that he would knock the negro out. He decided to accept the situation. He took out his lighter and flicked up the flame. The negro dipped a brown cigarette into the flame that lit up his face. His eyes looked like knobs of ebony dropped into the white of an egg.

"Thanks, bud," he said and chuckled. "Sorry if I held you up." His chuckle was the ugliest sound Don had ever heard. Moving to one side, the negro went past Don and down the hill into the darkness.

As Don drove up the narrow lane towards the villa, his headlights picked out two figures sitting side by side on a low wall that overlooked the moonlit hills surrounding Siena.

He slowed down and leaned out of the window.

"Isn't it time you two were in bed?"

"Miss Rigby's got something," Harry said, an excited note in his voice. "We've been waiting for you."

He came over with Marian to the car.

"And I've got something too," Don said. "Hop in and let's get back. Where's Cherry?"

"We left him coping with his blood pressure," Harry said, as they got into the car. "I reckon he doesn't know his own age."

"Not entirely a bad fault," Don said and sent the car racing up the lane and to the villa.

A few minutes later, he pulled up outside the villa. "Go and get him," he said as they got out of the car. "This calls for a general conference."

As Harry hurried away, Don went on to Marian, "Have you really found something?"

"Yes, and just when I was giving up."

Cherry, looking hot and flushed and breathing heavily, came out on to the veranda, followed by Harry.

"Let's all sit down," Don said, sinking into a lounging chair. Seeing Cherry was about to prop himself up against the balustrade, he patted a chair near him. "Sit down here, Cherry."

"If you say so, sir," Cherry said and lowered his bulk into the chair, his back stiff with disapproval.

"Okay, Marian. Let's have it. What have you found?"

"I'm hoping this will be the lead we're looking for," Marian said. "The information I found is very scrappy, but it seems that in 1465 there were two powerful and rich families living in Siena. The heads of these two families were Niccolo Vaga and Jacopo Genga who were bitter enemies. They were chosen as candidates for the leadership of the Tortoise ward. The election was carried out with violence and hatred - I'm quoting from the book. Vaga won by a narrow majority. Genga plotted against him, and by some means not explained, succeeded in disgracing Vaga who was thrown into prison, his money and lands confiscated and his family exiled. Genga took over the leadership of the ward and had Vaga brutally murdered. Vaga's eldest son, Daniello, who had taken refuge with the other members of the family in Florence, vowed that neither he nor any male member of his family for generations to come would rest until his father's death had been avenged, the family fortune restored, and - and I think, this is important - the name of his family had become so powerful that it would strike terror into the heart of every Italian."

"Yes," Don said. "That could be it. It's just the kind of background a crackpot might pick on. If the Tortoise is related to the Vaga family, this could be his idea of levelling old scores. What happened to the family, Marian?"

She shook her head.

"I can't find any other reference to them in any of the other books."

"Well, okay, tomorrow we'll try the Records office and see if we can trace the Vaga family further." Don lit a cigarette and went on. "Lorelli is in Siena. I've seen her." He told them about the negro preventing him from going after Lorelli.

"I can't make up my mind, if he is one of them or if it was a coincidence that he appeared as he did. I think it is likely he is one of them, but we've got to make sure. This is where you two come in." He looked over at Cherry and Harry. "From now on, the villa is going to look after itself and we're going to take our meals out."

Harry's face lit up.

"That's the best bit of news I've heard since we came here, sir," he said. "What do we do?"

"This negro apparently goes every night to the cafe. There's no reason why he shouldn't be there tomorrow night. I want you two to find out where he goes. That's the first move. I don't have to tell you that it's essential he shouldn't know you are following him. You two get together and work out a plan. I suggest Cherry parks himself at the cafe, and you, Harry, at the other cafe across the Campo. When the negro leaves, you go on ahead of him and follow him from the front. Cherry will follow him from behind. Get a street map and study it. He's no fool, and if he gets an idea he's being watched, he'll try to shake you off; knowing all the alleys and side streets will be a help. Make sure he doesn't give you the slip and make doubly sure he doesn't spot you."

"We'll handle him," Harry said.

"Watch out. He could be a nasty customer," Don said, then turning to Marian, he went on, "We'll continue our research tomorrow. Both of us and also Harry and Cherry will be on the look out for Lorelli. She's also easy to spot. If any of us sees her, drop everything and go after her. She's much more important than the negro. If you do have to follow her, you'll find she's up to every trick. When I was shadowing her in London, I was certain she hadn't spotted me, but she had."

"This should be a most interesting experience," Cherry said, beaming.

"I hope it's no more than interesting," Don said and got to his feet. "Well, let's break it up and go to bed. Tomorrow we'll really start work."

In spite of spending practically the whole of the next day in the Records office at Siena, neither Don nor Marian found any further information about the Vaga family. All trace of the family ceased at Florence.

Straightening his aching back, Don looked with exasperation at Marian.

"It certainly looks as if no member of the family ever came back to Siena," he said. "I think the next step is to check the records in Florence. Do you feel like having a crack at it?" Marian nodded.

"Of course. There's a train to Florence in an hour. If I hurry I can catch it."

Soon after six o'clock Don drove back to the empty villa after seeing Marian on to the train. Cherry and Harry had already gone separately into the city and were ostentatiously sight-seeing while keeping their eyes open for any sign of Lorelli or the negro.

Don booked a call through to Chief Superintendent Dicks, and then settled himself down with a highball and a cigarette to wait for Dicks to come on the line. After a twenty minute wait, the telephone bell rang.

"We're getting somewhere," Don said when he heard Dicks' voice. He went on to tell him about the Vaga family. "Can you get into touch with the Italian police without saying why and find out if there is any male member of the family still alive? It's my bet if there is, he's the Tortoise."

"I'll see what I can do," Dicks said. "I like the idea. It hooks up with the facts."

"Although I'm making progress I'm not moving as fast as I had hoped. I want you to hold off that report for another week. If the police move in at this stage, our bird might vanish. If I locate him, I let you know at once and they can collar him."

He purposely didn't tell Dicks that he had seen Lorelli nor did he mention the negro. He knew if Dicks learned just how far he had progressed, he would be certain to call in the Italian police, and Don was equally certain this wasn't the way to play the hand.

"All right," Dicks said. "It's not as if you have any evidence I can act on yet."

"Fine," Don said. "I'll let you know how it goes. Find out about the Vaga family for me as fast as you can and call me here before ten o'clock in the morning. So long for now," and he hung up.

He sat for some minutes, thinking. He felt he could safely leave Harry and Cherry to take care of the negro. He decided it would be safer to keep clear of the Campo himself in case the negro became suspicious of him. A cautious talk with Pedoni, the bookseller, might be worth while.

Leaving the villa, he went down to the car. It took him twenty-five minutes of slow driving to reach Via Pantaneto, and then nearly as long again to find a place where he could leave the car.

It was getting on for half-past seven by the time he pushed open the bookshop door and stepped into the brightly lit, well-stocked bookshop.

The shop was empty, and Don wandered over to the history section and began to examine the titles.

"Good evening," Pedoni said, coming from behind a partition that screened the office from the shop. He spoke Italian.

"Is there something I can show you?"

Pedoni was a small fat man, swarthy and on the wrong side of sixty. His small eyes, half-hidden behind thick-lensed spectacles, reminded Don of two glistening black olives.

"I'm looking for a detailed history of this city from 1400 to 1600," Don said. "There doesn't seem anything here."

"There's Cozarelli's history," Pedoni said. "That deals with the period or there's Mariano's history which also covers the period, although not in such detail." He fetched a short ladder, set it against one of the shelves and clambered up it. He found the volumes and brought them down. "Cozarelli is the better of the two."

"I'm interested in the history of the wards," Don said, taking the book. He examined the index. There was no mention of either Genga nor Vaga. "I want to find out how the wards acquired their names, who their leaders were and so on."

Pedoni pushed his glasses more firmly up his fat nose.

"Mariano has a chapter covering that, I believe."

Don began to examine the second volume.

"I was in the Cathedral library yesterday," he said casually, "and I was surprised to see a picture there depicting Piccolomini at the court of James I. How was it that Piccolomini got over to Scotland?"

Pedoni beamed. Don had already discovered, the little bookseller liked nothing better than to air his knowledge' of the great men of Siena, and for the next twenty minutes, he gave Don a detailed history of the life of Piccolomini.

"It was when he was elected pope in 1458 that the Sienese noblemen were re-admitted to a share in the government," Pedoni was saying when Don, seeing his opportunity, interrupted him.

"That would be in Jacopo Genga's time, wouldn't it?" he asked. "I was reading in one of the books I got from you that he grabbed power from a rival."

Pedoni's little black eyes turned cloudy.

"I don't recall Jacopo Genga," he said.

"He and this other fellow were candidates for the leadership of the Tortoise ward. He wasn't elected and he plotted against this other fellow - Vaga I believe his name was."

Pedoni shook his head.

"An obscure piece of history, signore. I know nothing about it"

"It doesn't matter," Don said, concealing his disappointment. He picked up Mariano's history. "I'll take this. It may give me what I'm looking for."

"I may be able to find exactly what you want," Pedoni said as he gave Don change from a five-thousand lira note. "If you will let

me have your name and address, signore, I will send you a card if I am successful."

"Don't bother to do that," Don said, moving to the door. "I'll be in again."

"It is no bother, signore," Pedoni said, opening the door. "Besides I would like to send you my monthly lists. You are staying at the Continental Hotel perhaps?"

Don looked at the little man. There was a scarcely concealed tenseness about him that put Don on his guard.

"I'll be in again," he said. "Good night."

Pedoni stood for a long moment watching Don edge his way through the slow-moving crowd that packed the narrow street, then he shut the door, pulled down the blind and turned the key in the lock. He went quickly down the aisle to his office.

The office was small and lined with books from floor to ceiling. A desk, littered with papers and books and lit by a green-shaded lamp, stood in the middle of the room.

Pedoni paused in the doorway and looked at the girl with the Venetian red hair who sat behind his desk, her face white and tense.

"That could have been the man who followed me last night," she said.

Pedoni flinched.

"Do you think he is from the police?" he asked, coming over to the desk.

"Don't talk like a fool. Does he look like a policeman?" She got to her feet and began to move slowly about the crowded room. "He may be the man who followed me in London. He has the same build." She paused, then picked up the telephone receiver. She called a number, waited a moment, then said, "Willie, there's a job I want you to do. Look out for a tall, heavily-built American, about thirty-five, dark, small moustache and a Z-shaped scar on his right cheek. He's wearing a bottle-green linen suit: no hat. I want to know who he is and where he is staying. Keep with him. Find out if he is alone or with others. If you are quick you might pick him up right away. He's only just left the shop."

She replaced the receiver, snatched up her coat that was lying on a chair and slipped it on.

"I must get back," she said. "This could be dangerous." The alarm in her eyes sent a twinge of fear through Pedoni that quickened the beat of his heart.

Chapter VII

CORNERED

Felix - no one except the French police knew him by any other name - was indulging in his favourite pastime. He was standing before the big mirror above the fireplace, admiring his reflection. He was as handsome as any movie star could hope to be. He had dark, glossy hair, wide-set, dark-blue eyes, clean-cut features, a deeply tanned complexion and magnificent teeth that he took trouble to show when he laughed; a difficult feat as his upper lip was a shade too long, and unless he made the effort to curl it back, the effect of his gleaming white teeth was lost. His mouth was thin and cruel and this, combined with his better features, gave him a reckless, dashing appearance that most women found irresistible.

He was thirty-two years of age. Six of these years had been spent in prison. Before he was caught, he had roamed the French Riviera, plundering the villas of the rich. His success had been phenomenal. In sixteen months he had cleaned up fifty million francs, most of which he had lost at the Monte Carlo Sporting Club in two feverish and spell-binding sessions at the roulette table. To recoup his losses, he had gone after a diamond necklace reputed to be worth twenty-five million francs. He succeeded in stealing it although he had been forced into a hand-to-hand fight with a night watchman whom he was fortunate enough not to kill. The fence to whom he had taken the necklace refused to pay more

than seven million francs for it, explaining at length the risk involved and the fact that when the necklace was broken up, its value was negligible. Knowing the police would have a description of him from the night watchman and that he would have to get out of France, Felix endeavoured to persuade the fence to raise his offer. His method of persuasion consisted of beating up the fence with fists carefully protected by leather gloves, the knuckles of which were ornamented with brass studs.

This was an error of judgment, for while the beating was in progress, the fence's wife alarmed by the uproar, called in the police, and for the first time in his life, Felix found himself inside a French prison.

Identified by the night watchman and betrayed by the fence, Felix was sentenced to fifteen years on Devil's Island. He spent six of these years in the steamy hell of the island before managing to escape. Taking refuge in Rome and knowing that a single false move would send him back to the island, he lived cautiously, getting himself a job as a tout for a shady nightclub. It was at this club that he met Lorelli.

Before meeting her, Felix regarded all women as amusing toys to be brutally used, discarded and forgotten. Lorelli, he quickly discovered, had other ideas in her beautiful head besides satisfying his physical needs. It was she who had suggested he should offer his services to Simon Alsoni, and it was she who had arranged the first meeting.

He was adjusting his tie in the mirror when the door opened and Lorelli came in. He turned to smile at her, but his smile froze when he saw her expression and how white she was. "What is it?" he asked sharply.

Lorelli shut the door, slipped off her coat and came over to the fire.

"You remember I told you about the man who followed me in London and put the police on to me?" she said a little breathlessly. "And I told you I was followed last night? The same man was in Pedoni's shop just now. He asked Pedoni for a book on the history of Siena that would explain how the wards acquired their names. He mentioned the Tortoise ward."

Felix stiffened.

"Sure it's the same man?"

"Almost sure. He's the same build. I didn't see his face in London or last night, but I'm practically sure."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know. I gave Willie a description of him and he's looking for him now."

Felix lit a cigarette and sat down by the fire.

"Is he from the police?"

"I shouldn't think so. He's certainly not a policeman. He is an American and he looks wealthy. He mentioned Genga and Vaga: he seems to know their history." She clenched her fists. "I've always thought this was dangerous. We're giving too much away. I had a feeling sooner or later someone with a few brains would get on to us."

"Take it easy," Felix said. "You're getting into a panic. Let's face it: up to now it's worked like a charm. Okay, I admit I was doubtful myself at one time that this set-up did give too much away, but Alsoni insisted on playing it that way or not at all. He genuinely believes he is levelling old scores. We couldn't have worked up a racket like this on our own. It's the publicity that's done it. Look at the way the suckers have paid up: we scarcely have any trouble. Look at the money we're making."

"The money won't help us if we're caught," Lorelli said. "This has gone on long enough, Felix. I'm sure this American is on to us. He'll tell the police. It's time for us to quit."

"Quit? What do you mean?" Felix demanded, his eyes hardening.

"You know what quit means, don't you?" Lorelli said, her voice rising. "We've got to get out of here before we're caught! This has gone on long enough. I was so sure of myself before I went to London. I must have been mad to have had anything to do with Gina's murder. They could hang me for that! I didn't realize what I was doing until we had her in the car, then it was too late to back out. I can't sleep at night, thinking of what happened. Now this American is on to us. He'll tell the police. I know he will!"

"Stop it!" Felix said angrily. "You've got cold feet. Pull yourself together!"

"How can you talk like that?" Lorelli said wildly. "Can't you see...?"

He got up and took hold of her.

"Shut up," he said violently and gave her a little shake. "Listen to me: you play your cards according to the cards you hold in your hand. If you win you win; if you go down, you take it. Right now you and I have a straight flush. We have never been so well off. No damned American is going to make you or me chuck in a hand as good as a straight flush." She pulled away from him.

"You stupid fool!" she said angrily. "I've been waiting for this. I knew sooner or later someone would get on to us. I knew it! We have had our run; now it's time we got out. We've got to get away from here before the police move in! We could go to Buenos Aires."

Felix stared at her.

"Gould we?" He smiled unpleasantly. "Is that what you have been hopefully planning when you couldn't sleep? It's a charming thought. Can you imagine Alsoni's delight when we announce we are leaving him?"

"Oh stop it!" Lorelli said angrily. "He wouldn't know until it was too late to do anything about it."

Felix flicked his cigarette into the fire.

"Do you imagine he would shrug his shoulders and forget about us?" he asked. "You must be suffering from a touch of the sun, my beautiful nit-wit. He would find us wherever we went. We wouldn't have a moment's peace, and when he did find us..." He shrugged his shoulders. "But for the sake of an argument, just suppose a miracle did happen and we did manage to lose ourselves in Buenos Aires. How long do you think we would remain unrecognized? He has agents in

every country in the world. They would be hunting for us. And just in case it enters your pretty head to go without me, let me remind you that you would never feel safe for a moment. Every step you heard behind you would turn you cold with fear. Every man who looked at you would make your heart skip a beat. You should know as I do, the last thing Alsconi would do is to let any of his organization walk out on him. There have been other fools who have tried to break away - look what's happened to them."

"So what are you going to do?" Lorelli asked, staring at him.

"I'm not going to panic," Felix said. "This American isn't going to rattle me. If he looks dangerous, I'll fix him."

"It might be too late."

"Now look," Felix said, "go to bed and relax. You're worked up. Maybe he has an idea we are here, but he hasn't found us yet. You seem to forget we'll need some finding."

"So you won't come away with me?" Lorelli asked, looking strangely at him.

"There's no question of going away," Felix said curtly. "We're in this to the end. You might as well make up your mind about that. Now go to bed."

"Are you going to tell Alsconi?"

"Not yet. I want some more information first."

She picked up her coat and moved to the door.

"Willie will be telephoning."

"Okay, I'll stick around until he does."

When she had gone, Felix lit another cigarette and moved about the luxuriously furnished room, his brows drawn down in a frown.

If this American thought he was going to bust up a racket as good as this one, Felix thought, he had another think coming. Maybe the best thing to do was to move in quickly and wipe him out before he made any more of his clever discoveries. He was still pacing the floor when Willie came through on the telephone.

"I lost him," Willie said. "He wandered around the streets for a while, then he went back to Via Pantaneto where he had a car. That beat me. He headed out of the city."

"Get the car number?" Felix snapped.

"I got that," Willie said. "It's registered in England." He gave Don's car number and Felix wrote it down.

"So it doesn't look as if he's staying at any of the hotels?"

"He left the city," Willie said.

"Then find out from the agents if anyone has recently rented a villa. I want to know where this guy hangs out. It's urgent."

"Can't do anything until tomorrow morning," Willie said sulkily. He hated any form of work.

"Get something for me by tomorrow," Felix returned and cut the connection. He called the operator.

"Give me Museum 11066, London," he said.

A half an hour later he was speaking to Crantor.

"Find out who owns car number PLM 122," he said. "It's urgent. Call me back as soon as you know."

Crantor said he would have the information in an hour.

As Felix replaced the receiver he heard the alarm bell in the hall start up. For a moment, he stood motionless, his hand still on the receiver, his heart hammering. The bell told him someone was in the grounds: someone who had no business to be there.

He jumped to the desk by the window, jerked open a drawer, snatched out a .45!, then opening the casement windows, he stepped out on to the terrace.

It was after eleven o'clock before Don returned to the Trioni villa. He had wandered the streets and alleys of Siena in the hope of finding Lorelli again, but finally, realizing the futility of such a hunt, he had returned to see if Harry and Cherry had had better luck.

He had been unaware of a small, swarthy man, dressed in shabby black with a black slouch hat pulled down over his eyes to shade his white, pock-marked face, who had followed him like a shadow wherever he went. He was still unaware of him when he had slid into the Bentley and had driven out of the city, leaving the pock-marked man glaring balefully after him.

As Don pulled up outside the villa, the front door jerked open and Harry came down the steps to meet him.

"Any luck, sir?" Harry asked.

Don could tell by the tone of his voice he had had more success than he had.

"Nothing really," Don said, entering the lounge with Harry at his heels. "Where's Cherry?"

"Gone to bed, sir. That nigger nearly walked him off his legs'. He led us a proper dance all over the city. He takes about three times the normal stride and Cherry had to run most of the time to keep him in sight."

Don went over to the bar, poured two beers and gave one to Harry.

"Where did he go?" he asked, sitting on the arm of a chair.

Harry took a long pull at his beer, sighed, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Well, sir, after taking enough exercise to tire a horse, he got into a Citroen and belted off. Even if I had had the car, I couldn't have followed him without giving the game away. The road was straight for miles, and that was "a bit of luck. I watched his headlights for a couple of miles, then he suddenly turned off the road, and it's my bet he turned into the drive of a house. How would it be if we took the car now and investigated? I'm pretty certain I could find the spot where he turned off."

"Right," Don said, finishing his beer. "Come on; let's go then."

They went down to the car, Don slid under the driving wheel.

"I'm still trying to make up my mind if I dropped a brick tonight," he said, as he drove down the drive to the lane. "I was fishing for information. I thought that bookseller fellow might have some knowledge about old man Vaga. His reaction was most odd. I had an idea I scared the life out of him. He wanted my name and where I was staying. Maybe I'm getting too suspicious-minded, but it struck me il signor Pedoni might not be such a white-washed lily as he looks."

"Well, you can't call that nigger white-washed," Harry said. "Cor! What a size he is. The way he worked through that icecream made Cherry's eyes pop. I wouldn't like to have a scrap with him."

"Nor would I. He didn't spot you?"

Harry shook his head.

"He never looked around once. He just kept on walking like he was exercising himself. He certainly exercised Cherry. Turn left here, sir," he went on as Don drove through the old gateway of the city. "That's where he parked his car, under those trees. He went up that road on the right."

Using his fog lights in preference to his tell-tale headlights, Don drove up the straight road that climbed steadily, passing on his left the Franciscan monastery. Beyond the monastery they came to hilly, open country.

About a mile further on, Harry said, "It can't be far off now, sir. Would it be an idea to leave the car and walk?"

Don nodded and pulled on to the grass verge. He turned off the lights and leaving the car, they started up the hill on foot. The road continued without a sign of any building, and after walking ten minutes, Harry said, "We couldn't have passed it, could we? I didn't think it was this far ahead."

"It's hard to judge from where you were. Let's go on for another mile," Don said. "I'm sure we haven't passed any side road."

A few minutes later, Harry said, "Here it is. Look, just ahead."

In the bright light of the moon, they could see a narrow lane that made a T-joint with the main road. It went straight for a hundred yards or so, and then disappeared around a curve into a wood.

"No sign of a house. Looks as if we've still got some walking to do," Don said and moved on, keeping to the grass verge to deaden the sound of his footfalls.

Harry followed him, and in single file they walked to the curve in the lane and into the wood.

It was almost pitch dark in the wood, but Don kept going, moving more slowly, just able to see the dim outlines of the tree trunks.

Ten minutes' walking brought them out of the wood to the foot of a hill, and ahead of them, seeming to rise out of ground to confront them was a massive stone wall, some fifteen feet high that ran along the edge of the lane and out of sight into the darkness.

Clear of the trees, the bright moonlight lit up the wall as if it were daylight. Don paused. Some fifty yards further on he could see double iron-studded wooden gates set in a massive stone archway. The gates were closed.

"I bet this is the place," he said. "Looks right out of the Middle ages, doesn't it?"

Harry stared up at the high wall

"Can't see much from here. Shall I give you a leg up, sir?"

"That's the idea." Don moved close to the wall. He put his foot in Harry's hand and Harry heaved him up towards the top of the wall. Don's clutching fingers got a grip, and another heave from Harry gave him a safer purchase. He hooked his leg over the wall and clung on, balancing himself, keeping low so as not to be seen against the skyline. He looked over the tops of the trees to where he could see a big Gothic-style building set in a wide expanse of closely cut lawn.

"Looks like an old palace," he said and leaned down, offering his hand. "Catch hold. I can heave you up."

Harry gripped his wrist and he pulled him up. After a moment's struggle, Harry got his leg over the wall. He too stared across the garden at the building.

"It's big enough, isn't it? Shall we hop down and have a look-see?"

"I'm going, but you're staying here," Don said. "If I have to leave in a hurry, I'll want you up here to heave me up and over."

"How would it be if I went, sir?" Harry asked, hopefully. "I'm a bit more used to moving in the dark than you are."

"That's what you like to think," Don said, grinning, and holding on to the wall, he lowered himself as far as he could, then dropped.

"Watch your step, sir," Harry called softly.

Waving to him, Don set off towards the house. The first two hundred yards were easy as all he had to do was to follow a path through flowering shrubs that afforded plenty of cover, but when he came to the edge of the big lawn, he paused. He looked to right and left, reluctant to cross such an expanse of ground without any cover. Anyone looking out of one of the windows couldn't fail to see him cross in the hard light of the moon.

Keeping to the shrubbery, he went around in a half circle in the hope of finding cover on the far side of the house. He moved silently, and it was as well that he did, for suddenly ahead of him he saw a movement, and he hurriedly ducked down behind some bushes.

Out of the shrubbery, not thirty yards ahead of him, came a thick-set man, an automatic rifle under his arm, and walking at his side, a ferocious-looking wolf-hound.

Don felt the hairs on the nape of his neck prickle at the sight of the dog. The big brute was on a chain that encircled the man's wrist. It slunk along, the moonlight accentuating the rolling muscles under its glossy coat.

Don remained motionless, watching these two as they walked quietly on, and until they had disappeared into the

darkness.

He drew in a breath of relief, thinking that if he had taken the risk and had crossed the lawn, the dog would have been savaging him by now.

He looked again towards the house, reluctant to retreat, but baffled as to how he could get near it without being seen. Refusing to give up, he started forward, moving this time much more cautiously and examining every yard of the ground before leaving cover to dart to another shrub. Moving in this way, it took him some minutes to get around to the east side of the house. Here the lawn narrowed, and the shrubs encroached. There was only forty yards or so of open ground to the house. Keeping behind a tree, he looked up at the house. On this side, all the windows were in darkness, but he couldn't tell if someone was in a dark room, looking down on the lawn.

A wide, ornate terrace with a marble balustrade and wide marble steps leading to the garden ran the length of this side of the house. Don saw that he would not only have to cross the lawn, but would also have to run up the steps on which fell the light of the moon if he were to get close to the house.

It were not for the wolf-hound, he would have gone ahead, but the thought of the dog made him decide against taking the risk.

The next step was to find out who owned the house. It shouldn't be difficult. The great thing was not to show his hand before he was ready.

Crouching, he began to make his way through the shrubbery to where he had left Harry. He hadn't gone more than thirty yards or so when looking back, he saw something that pulled him up short.

Standing on the edge of the lawn was a wolf-hound, looking directly at where Don crouched. The dog's ears were pricked and its head was on one side as if it were listening.

Don remained motionless, his heart thumping. Had the dog heard him? The slight breeze was blowing from the dog to Don: it was unlikely the dog had picked up his scent.

He saw the dog lower its head and come forward slowly until it reached the middle of the lawn, then it stopped.

Don felt a trickle of sweat run down his face, but he was careful not to move. He and the dog remained motionless for at least a minute, and it seemed to Don to be an hour.

Then from out of the shadows around the house, the thick-set man with the automatic rifle under his arm appeared. He came out into the moonlight and paused, watching the dog.

The dog looked back at him and whined, took a couple of steps forward, then stopped to look back again.

"Come here!" the man shouted roughly. He spoke in Italian.

The dog hesitated, then turning it slunk towards the man who snapped on the chain to its collar.

Don watched the man walk away towards the west side of the house, the dog obediently slinking at his heels.

When they were out of sight, Don began to move again. He was now anxious to get out of these dangerous grounds, and he increased speed. He didn't realize that as he moved from one shrub to another he had stepped on a concealed metal plate that touched off the alarm bell in the house.

He kept on, looking for the path along which he had come, but not finding it. He paused to check his position, knowing that the path had to be somewhere close by. It was then that he heard the alarm bell ringing. The sound came to him faintly, but it was unmistakably an alarm bell.

He straightened up and looked to right and left, guessing that somehow he had touched a hidden connection that had set off the alarm. Then he saw the gigantic negro coming across the lawn and he caught the glitter of a knife the negro held in his hand.

The sight of the negro, moving across the moonlit lawn with the speed of a black panther, would have unnerved most people, but Don refused to give way to nerves. He ducked down behind a shrub and waited.

The negro entered the shrubbery fifty yards or so from the point where Don crouched. He paused to listen.

Out into the moonlight came the thick-set man and the wolfhound. He caught sight of the negro and stopped, dragging the straining dog back on to its haunches. The dog was snarling and barking-and trying to get off its chain. Three other men appeared from around the back of the house, each with a struggling wolfhound on a chain.

The negro waved to them, motioning them to wait. Then he began to walk very slowly towards the spot where Don was hiding.

Through the shrubs, Don could see the four men and the dogs,-standing in a line looking towards him. He could hear the gentle swish of leaves, as the great, muscular body of the negro came towards him. Peering up, he caught sight of the negro, now within six feet of him, his brutal black face alert, the knife gripped between his thick fingers.

Don held his breath and waited. There was a long pause. He could hear the wind sighing in the trees, the heavy breathing of the

negro and the snarling of the dogs as they strained on their chains. Then he heard the negro move on, passing him by a few yards. Still Don waited. He guessed his slightest move would be heard by the negro.

The negro covered several yards of the shrubbery before it occurred to him that he was wasting time. If anyone were hiding here, the dogs would hunt him out. He stood up to his full height and shouted, "Let the dawgs in here."

Even before the four men could unfasten the chains from the collars of the dogs, Don was running for dear life through the shrubbery towards where he thought the wall must be. He ran as if the devil was at his heels, crashing through shrubs, his only thought to reach the wall and grab at Harry's welcoming hand. He could hear the savage barking of the dogs as they streaked across the lawn after him. With a gasp of relief, he blundered out of the shrubbery onto the path he had been looking for. He hurtled down the path, running as fast as he could.

He could hear the dogs coming up. Their low savage snarls sent a chill up his spine. They were close, too close and he

realized he was losing the race. In another few yards they would be on him, dragging him to the ground and savaging him. Just off the path and ahead of him was a big tree. One of the dogs came rushing up alongside him. It sprang up and snapped at his sleeve. Don's fist slammed against its head, sending it rolling over, yelping but he knew the race was over. He swerved, spun around and set his back against the tree.

The other dogs swerved away, pulled up and then with the precision of sheep dogs, they spread out, crouching down and completely encircled him.

Breathing heavily, Don looked at them. He knew if he made a move in any direction the nearest dog would spring at him. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. The dogs growled at the movement and edged closer.

The soft pad-pad of feet made him look beyond the dogs. The negro came running down the moonlit path, the glittering knife in his hand. He stopped short when he saw Don.

Don took out his cigarette case, selected a cigarette and put it between his dry lips. Then imitating the negro's slow drawl, he said, "Got a match on you, bud?"

Chapter VIII

ALSCONI

Simon Alsoni, known to the police in Europe and America only as the Tortoise, sat in a padded armchair before a blazing log fire, his feet resting on a footstool, a large black Persian cat on his lap, the picture of domesticity.

His round, fat, swarthy face, his small full-lipped mouth, his blunt fleshy nose, his deep-set dark eyes were deceptively nondescript. He could have been fifty, but in actual fact he was well past sixty. He was in evening dress and between his long, well-shaped fingers he held a cigar. With his other hand, he stroked the cat's glistening fur while he stared into the fire.

Felix stood opposite him. He was telling Alsoni of Don's capture.

Although Felix was responsible for running Alsoni's organization and was in a position of power and control, he never entered Alsoni's private suite without a feeling of uneasiness that bordered on fear.

He had repeatedly told himself that so long as he made no mistakes and carried out his orders he had nothing to fear from Alsoni, but he could not entirely convince himself of this. He could not get rid of the uneasy knowledge that he was dealing with a ruthless and dangerous lunatic who might at any moment turn on him and wipe him out as other members of the organization in the past had been wiped out.

"Don Micklem?" Alsoni said. "How very extraordinary."

"You know of him then?" Felix said. "Crantor says he is one of the richest men in England..."

"Of course I know of him," Alsoni said. "He is worth two million pounds sterling. Astonishing." He put his finger on the cat's silky nose and rubbed it gently. "What have you done with him?"

"I've put him in the cave."

"Was he alone?"

That was the question Felix hoped Alsoni wouldn't ask.

"His chauffeur was with him. He got away."

Alsoni's fingers paused in their rhythmic stroking of the cat's nose.

"Why did he get away?"

"We didn't know he was there. Willie spotted him driving away in Micklem's car."

Alsoni continued to stare into the fire. His expression was still benign, but his fingers remained still and from experience Felix knew this was a sign of danger.

"He shouldn't have been allowed to get away," Alsoni said at last. "No doubt you will take the necessary disciplinary action. However, no damage has been done. The chauffeur will, of course, go to the police. It would seem we have now reached a phase in the progress of our organization that was bound to be reached sooner or later. For the past three years I have been preparing for such an emergency. It will be interesting to see if the yearly donations I have made to the church, the police and to the various charity organizations will now bear fruit. It will be the chauffeur's word against mine. You will take all necessary precautions. I shall invite the police to search the house: in fact, I shall insist on them doing so. Make sure you don't cause them any embarrassment. They must not find anything: you understand?"

"Yes," Felix said.

Alsoni looked at him.

"A visit from the police doesn't alarm you?" he asked.

"Of course not," Felix said.

"That is as it should be," Alsoni said, nodding his head. "You and Lorelli will not be seen. But it is possible that she might be alarmed. She is highly strung. It might even occur to her that this is the end of the organization. You will see she doesn't panic?"

"Yes," Felix said stonily, his mouth turning dry.

"She is an attractive young woman," Alsoni went on. "I have known her longer than you and I know her weaknesses. She is inclined to lose her nerve in an emergency."

"The Pasero girl's death has upset her," Felix said, trying to keep his voice steady. "She'll get over it."

Alsoni nodded.

"Yes. Since you and she have formed an alliance perhaps you will make yourself responsible for her actions?"

"She'll be all right," Felix said, feeling sweat on his face.

Alsoni looked at him.

"Or perhaps you would prefer me to talk to her? I hesitate to interfere between the two of you. A man should be able to control his mistress."

"I can take care of her," Felix said curtly.

"That is as it should be. Enjoy women, Felix; they are given to men to enjoy, but don't let them control you. It is quite fatal. I found it necessary to give up the pleasures of women years ago. They have a dangerous way of sapping one's will power, diverting one's aim in life and causing trouble."

Felix didn't say anything.

"We have rather lost sight of Micklem, haven't we?" Alsoni said, after a pause. "Did he say why he was in the garden?"

"Carlos was a little rough with him. He hasn't yet recovered consciousness."

"Not too rough, I hope? He represents a very valuable investment."

"I've asked Englemann to have a look at him. He'll be all right."

"So he asked Pedoni about the Tortoise ward?" Alsoni went on.

"Yes. He also mentioned Genga and Vaga to Pedoni."

"Did he? Now how-did he get on to that? Have you any ideas?"

"Crantor says Micklem was a close friend of Guido Ferenci."

"Ah! So that's it. You should have told me before. That would explain why Micklem has been making inquiries. He is a persistent busybody. He has too much money and too little to do. Never mind, we have him now, and we can turn that to our profit. I will see him at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning. In the meantime you must

find out where he is staying and who his companions are. The police are certain to visit us, but can handle that." He ran his fingers through the cat's fur. "Crantor appears to be quite a discovery, doesn't he?" he went on. "I like the way he handled the Ferenci affair. A ruthless man: a man after my own heart." His deep-set black eyes rested on Felix's face.

"You must be ruthless too, Felix. Up to now you have had an easy, comfortable time here. Don't let it soften you. You have known hardship; you have an impressive reputation. Don't let the two years you have spent here spoil that reputation."

"If you're not satisfied with my work," Felix said, stung to reckless anger, "say so."

Alsoni smiled at him.

"That is not my method, Felix. You should know that by now. I expect the people I employ to give me their best; if they don't I get rid of them." He waved his hand towards the door in a gesture of dismissal. "Bring Micklem to me at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning."

Felix went out of the room. He took with him a sick feeling of fear.

The dull, throbbing ache in his head jogged Don back to consciousness. He half opened his eyes and shut them again as the hard, bright light from an overhead lamp dazzled him.

He lay still for some minutes, then his mind began to function again. He remembered the swift rush of the negro towards him and his own body swerve. He remembered punching at the negro's throat as the great hands reached for him and the professional way the negro had shifted to avoid the punch. Then something that felt like a hammer had smashed against the side of his head and the ground on which he had been standing seemed to split open and he dropped into darkness.

He touched his aching head and felt dried, hard blood just above his right ear. He thought it was a wonder the negro hadn't broken his skull.

He made an effort and forced open his eyes. He blinked around in the hard light. He seemed to be in some sort of cave: the walls were of rock and they were damp. He found himself lying on a concrete floor on which was a thin covering of straw. When he moved he heard a rattle of a chain and looking down, he saw he was chained by the ankle to the wall.

He rested his back against the wall and waited until the pain in his head receded.

What had happened to Harry? he wondered. He had told him to remain on the wall, and Harry would obey orders. By now he was certain to have gone for help. But how would he make himself understood to the Italian police? Would he think of telephoning Dicks? If he had already done so, the police might be on their way to look for him. Did the gang know that Harry had been with him? That was an important point. If they did, they must realize that sooner or later the police would raid the building. He looked around the cave again. The single hard light in the roof of the cave shone down on him, but the rest of the cave was in heavy shadow. Was he under the house or had they moved him to another hideout?

He looked at his watch and was surprised to see it was half-past ten: presumably half-past ten in the morning. Although the blow he had received from the negro had been a violent one, Don was sure it alone would not have kept him unconscious for so long. He pushed back his right sleeve. On his forearm he could just make out the tiny scar from a hypodermic needle and he grimaced.

He now turned his attention to the band around his ankle that was fastened to a chain that was stapled into the face of the rock. The band around his ankle was of steel. It fitted tightly and was fastened by a snap-lock that didn't look to Don particularly complicated. He was an expert on locks and he was sure that if he could find a piece of wire, the lock wouldn't present any difficulties. There was time for that, he decided. Even if he was free of the chain, it didn't mean he

could get out of the cave.

He was suddenly aware of a light that seemed to be far off, coming towards him, out of the shadows of the cave and it was only then that he realized that across the far side of the cave was the mouth of a tunnel. It was only by the length of time it took Carlos, the negro, to come into the cave that Don could judge how long the tunnel was. He guessed it must be at least a hundred and fifty yards long.

The negro came into the light and looked down at him: his thick lips peeled off his teeth in a jeering grin.

"How are you, bud?" he said. "You and me are going for a little walk. Take it easy. Don't start anything you can't finish."

Don looked beyond Carlos to the mouth of the tunnel. He caught sight of two of the wolf-hounds standing in the shadows watching him.

Carlos looked over his shoulder and grinned.

"Those dawgs are cute," he said. "They'll have your throat out in a flash if you start something. They're real smart. They'll walk along as quietly as a couple of lambs, but start something and see the trouble you'll be in."

He came over and kneeling beside Don, he unlocked the band around his ankle. Don could have taken him in a ju-jitsu hold, but the dogs were too much of a handicap.

"Come on, bud," Carlos said. "Doc wants to look you over, then the boss wants to talk to you."

Don got to his feet. He felt shaky and he realized he was in no condition to start anything even if the dogs weren't there to guard him.

"Maybe you and I can get together without the dogs to help you," he said. "I have an idea for all your size you can hand it out a lot better than you can take it."

Carlos laughed, showing pink gums.

"Don't kid yourself, bud," he said. "You ain't got nothing I couldn't take." He snapped his fingers at the dogs who moved into the cave, looking at Don. "Come on; straight ahead."

Don walked into the tunnel, the dogs at his heels. Carlos sent the beam of his powerful flashlight ahead so Don could see where he was going.

"Turn left ahead, bud," Carlos said and directed the beam of his light on to a narrow opening that had been hacked out of the rock.

Don found himself on a narrow ramp that led steeply upwards. He climbed the ramp and came to a steel door.

"Shove it open, bud," Carlos said.

Don pushed against the door that swung inwards. He came out into a narrow, brightly lit corridor, the walls painted a glistening white.

A door faced him; another- door was a few yards down the corridor.

"In there bud," Carlos said, reaching over Don's shoulder and pushing open the first door. "Go ahead and tidy yourself up. I'll wait here for you."

Don entered the luxuriously equipped bathroom. He first attended to the broken skin on his forehead, then, using the electric shaver, he shaved himself smooth again. Stripping off his clothes, he took a shower, and twenty minutes later he stepped out of the bathroom, feeling and looking a lot better, to find Carlos lolling against the opposite wall, smoking.

"You look more like your old self, bud," the negro said.

"Now come and see the Doc. Don't get snooty with him. He can be tricky if he doesn't like you."

He ambled down the corridor, rapped on the further door, turned the handle and pushed it open. He jerked his head at Don and stood aside.

Don walked into a large room that was equipped as an operating theatre. He could see at a glance that the equipment was up-to-date, extensive and expensive.

A tall, elderly man, wearing a white coat, sat at a desk. His lean grey face was lined and coldly impersonal. He looked up at Don and there was something in the washed-out blue eyes that sent a prickle crawling up Don's spine.

"I am Dr Englemann," the man in the white coat said and got to his feet. "The wound you have is superficial, but it should be dressed. Sit down, Mr Micklem."

"No, thanks," Don said. "I've fixed it. It is fine as it is."

Englemann shrugged his shoulders.

"You must please yourself," he said and his eyes travelled over Don. "Would you like me to give you something for your headache?"

"No, thanks," Don said.

Englemann sat down at the desk.

"Then I won't detain you, Mr Micklem. We shall be meeting again I understand; only next time you won't be a voluntary patient."

"What does that mean exactly?" Don asked.

"It will be explained to you" Englemann said and waved his hand at Carlos who had moved into the room. "Take Mr Micklem away."

Carlos touched Don's arm.

"Come on, bud," he said.

Don went into the passage. Carlos followed and closed the door. The two wolf-hounds got to their feet, their ears pricked.

"The boss'll see you now," Carlos said. "Watch your step with him: he's another guy who can get tricky if anyone treads

on his toes."

"What a fascinating bunch of crackpots you seem to house here," Don said.

Carlos laughed.

"Boy! you never said a truer word."

He led the way down the corridor. He paused outside a massive steel door, touched a rubber-headed button on the wall and waited. After a few moment's delay the door swung open. Facing them was a flight of stone steps that led upwards. Carlos stood aside.

"Go on up, bud."

Don mounted the steps. He counted them as he climbed. When he reached the thirty-second step, he came to another steel door.

Carlos came up behind him, pressed on another rubber-headed button.

"I've got Micklem here, boss," he said.

Don saw then the negro was speaking into a microphone let into the wall. A moment later the door swung inwards and Carlos gave him a little push forward. He walked into a large, airy, luxuriously furnished room. The sun came in through the big open casement windows. Beyond the open windows, Don could see the wide terrace and stretching away into the distance file ornamental garden with its flowering shrubs, conifers and cypress trees. It was a tempting sight, and for a very brief moment, he had to resist the urge to dart forward and through the casement windows to the garden below, but the dogs, as if anticipating such a move, brushed past him and went out on to the terrace where they lay down in the sun, blocking the exit. Simon Alsoni, wearing a fawn linen coat, sat in his padded chair. The Persian cat lay on his lap; its blue eyes stared at Don with inquisitive insolence. The sun caught the sparkle of a large diamond on Alsoni's little finger as he waved his hand towards a chair opposite him.

"Come in, Mr Micklem," he said. "This is a great and unexpected pleasure. Forgive me for not getting up. You see I am encumbered by Balthazar. We must, I feel, always show consideration to the feelings of animals. Please sit in that chair where we can see each other in comfort."

Don crossed the room and sat down in the big lounging chair. He looked at Alsoni with interest. Was he the Tortoise? he wondered. He looked harmless enough - or did he? There was something odd about his eyes perhaps. Don was puzzled for a moment why Alsoni's eyes should strike him as odd, then he realized they were flat like the eyes of a snake: flat, glassy and as dark and as expressionless as pools of Indian ink. A door opened at the far end of the room and a short, stocky Italian in a white mess jacket came in carrying a tray. He set the tray down on a table between Alsoni and Don, poured out two cups of coffee and then silently left the room.

"You must need some coffee, Mr Micklem," Alsoni said. "We have had rather a busy morning, and I am afraid we have neglected you. Help yourself to a cigarette too."

Don wanted the coffee badly and he didn't hesitate to accept the invitation.

Carlos was standing by the window, watching him, and Alsoni waved him away.

"I'll ring when I want you, Carlos," he said.

The negro went out on to the terrace. The two wolf-hounds edged forward. They stared through the open casement doors at Don, their eyes watchful and alert.

Don looked into the big hearth before the empty fireplace. His eyes alighted on a heavy steel poker. He would have to get to his feet and take two quick steps forward to grab it. He would have time to do it before the dogs reached him. He had no doubt he could settle the dogs before they could do him much damage, but what then? How far away was Carlos? Were the four guards with their automatic rifles still in the garden? Even if he laid out the dogs, knocked this fat, smiling Italian over the head and reached the garden, he would still have over a thousand yards of lawn and shrubbery to negotiate before he reached the fifteen-foot high wall. There would be no Harry waiting for him to swing him to the top. By then the other two dogs would be after him. He reluctantly decided the chances of failure were too great.

Alsoni who had been watching him said, "Very sensible of you, Mr Micklem. For a moment I feared you were going to give way to an impulse. That poker is tempting. One of my other visitors attempted to make use of it. Jacopo who sits behind that tapestry on the wall - a really splendid example of the best Florentine work, don't you think? - had no alternative but to shoot him." The white fingers fondled the cat's head. "Enjoy your coffee; have a cigarette, but please don't do anything foolish."

Don lit a cigarette. He looked over at the tapestry on the wall facing him. Then he shrugged.

"Are you the man who arranged Guido Ferenci's death?" he asked quietly.

Alsoni smiled.

"I suppose you might say I was indirectly responsible. I have people who attend to the details of my organization. Perhaps I had better introduce myself. My name is Simon Alsoni. I am the last surviving male member of the Vaga family. I understand you have been investigating our sad history."

"The police are investigating it too," Don said.

Alsoni chuckled.

"I have been disappointed that they have taken so long to discover the connection. No doubt you gave them the clue. I have never made any secret of my connection with the Vaga family. In actual fact this palazzo is built on the original site of the Vaga home. My mother was the last of the women Vagas. But your discovery is of no value either to you or to the police, Mr Micklem. There is no evidence to connect me to the organization I have built up nor can the money I have made from the organization be traced. The people I employ don't

know me: the few who do can disappear and reappear at a moment's notice. Even if I admitted I was the Tortoise, there would be no evidence that would convince a jury." "Most murderers are confident they can evade the police," Don said. "There's always the give-away, the false move or the squealer. You're just kidding yourself if you think you're going to get away with this for much longer." Alsoni laughed: he sounded genuinely amused. "My position of safety has had an interesting test this morning," he said. "I have been hopefully waiting for such a test for the past two years. Until one's plans and security measures are submitted to a worth-while test, there is always an element of doubt. This morning six police officers have been here, looking for you. You should be flattered. Rossi, who is the head of the Rome police and an extremely clever man, flew up here and conducted the search in person. He conducted it under considerable opposition from the Sieneese authorities. I happen to be an important person in Siena. I am regarded by the authorities and the church not only as a benefactor, but also as a pillar of Society. When Rossi appeared at police headquarters with a search warrant, the authorities were horrified. The circumstances were, of course, fantastic. An Englishman in the lowly position of a chauffeur was complaining that I - one of the most influential as well as the most wealthy citizens of Siena - had kidnapped his master. Unbelievable and incredible. However, Rossi is a man who is not easily put off. He has been trying to break up my organization for the past three years. The arguments the authorities raised against disturbing me were brushed aside. He came here with three detectives from Rome and three from the Siena police. Naturally I gave him every facility to satisfy himself that you were not hidden here." Alsoni thrust his fingers deep into the cat's fur, and the cat opened its eyes to look lazily up at him and it stretched, its paws opening and closing.

"I have spent a considerable sum of money constructing a system of underground rooms here, Mr Micklem, where people I don't wish to be seen, can shelter. The entrance to these rooms has been so cleverly made that the police failed to find it. I was, of course, in a stroitig position. Why should I be held responsible for an American who breaks into my garden like a common thief? I have hundreds of acres of garden. I suggested it was possible that this American had met with an accident and was concealed somewhere in the garden. A considerable time was spent searching the garden, but the American was not found. It was then that I lost patience. I had been sympathetic, I had been co-operative, I had permitted six heavy-footed policemen to tramp over the whole of my house. I had answered questions. But now I became angry. Who was this man who complained that his master had been kidnapped by me? I asked; could it be possible that he is a maniac? Or perhaps a practical joker? Did the police know for certain if this American really was missing? What was this nonsense about me being the Tortoise? What proof had the police to offer to support such a suspicion? I worked myself up into a royal rage - and the result? Rossi apologized." Alsoni laughed. "A fascinating morning; a morning I have to thank you for."

Don concealed his dismay as best he could.

"It may have been fascinating to you," he said, "but how does it affect me? I must admit I should be depressed if I thought I was going to spend the rest of my days here."

"You are at liberty to leave whenever you wish, subject to two conditions," Alsoni said. "The first is you give me your word you will cease to bother me and you will tell no one what I have told you. You are a man of honour, and I am prepared to accept your word. The other condition is the payment of a ransom for your liberty. You are a rich man and I think it is only fair that you should pay for the trouble you have caused me. I think a contribution from you of five hundred thousand dollars would meet the case. I am in need of dollars at the moment. No doubt you could arrange to transfer that amount from your American bank to your Italian bank fairly quickly."

"And if I don't agree to pay?" Don asked quietly.

"My dear Mr Micklem, other people have said that to me. I assure you it would not be difficult to persuade you to pay. Don't imagine you will be submitted to any torture. I have no patience with that form of persuasion. There are more subtle methods of persuading a man to do what you wish without inflicting on him physical pain. You have met Dr Englemann?"

"I've met him," Don said.

"Dr Englemann is a brain specialist. Unfortunately for him, his enthusiasm led him into a number of reckless experiments. The police are now looking for him to charge him with murder. He is happy to be under my protection. I am able to finance his experiments, and in return, he does me a number of favours. At the moment he is working on a theory that the mind can be influenced by a series of intricate nerve operations. For instance, if a man has weak powers of concentration, by an ingenious nerve graft these powers can be stimulated. Dr Englemann is only in the theory stage at the moment. He needs men and women to experiment on. Anyone who resists my wishes is handed over to him. Only a month ago I had an obstinate man who refused to pay his ransom. I would like you to see him. I must ask Englemann to show him to you. The operation the doctor attempted was ambitious and a complete failure, but the results interested me. The patient lost the use of his arms, he is unable to talk fluently and his memory appears to be impaired. He is altogether rather a miserable creature, although the doctor finds him still useful for further experiments. So you see, Mr Micklem, it might be disastrous for you if you also tried to resist my wishes. Dr Englemann is very anxious to see if he can rejuvenate the optic nerves. If you refuse to pay your ransom I will offer you to him as a guinea pig. think it is only fair to tell you that although Englemann's theories are brilliant, he has to nerve himself to perform any operation. He is, I am afraid, inclined to drink far too heavily, and his hand is not as steady as it should be. I feel fairly certain this is the reason why he has had so many failures.

It is possible that if you have the operation you might easily become blind and very possibly paralysed."

Don stared at the fat, smiling face. His own face had lost some of its colour, and his eyes showed the anger that made him want to jump up and get his hands on Alsoni's fat throat.

"You have the advantage now," he said, "but you may not continue to have it. You're not fit to live, Alsoni. If I get the chance I shall kill you. Remember that: you won't have a second warning."

Alsoni chuckled.

"So many people have threatened my life that it ceases to mean anything," he said. He touched a bell on the table beside him and Carlos came into the room. "I shall give you an hour to decide what you will do. If you agree to pay, you will write a letter to your New York bank, authorizing them to pay the money to your bank in Rome. When the money arrives, you will write a cheque for the amount and a covering letter to the bank, stating the bearer of the cheque has your authority to collect the money in bonds. When the bonds are in my hands, you will be immediately released."

"And how do I know that?" Don asked.

"You have my word: a gentleman's agreement. After all, I am prepared to accept your word to say nothing about what has passed between us. You must be prepared to accept mine." He waved his hand. "Take Mr Micklem back to his room, Carlos."

Grinning, the negro came forward, the two wolf-hounds at his heels.

"Come on, bud," he said.

Chapter IX

THE DEAL

Soon after nine o'clock, Felix pushed open Lorelli's bedroom door and entered the small, blue and grey decorated room. But for the fact the room had no windows and was artificially lighted, no one would have guessed it was thirty feet below ground.

Lorelli had slept late, and was now sitting before her dressing table, brushing her hair. She wore a pale-green silk wrap and her

small, well-shaped feet were in feathered mules. She swung around as Felix came in.

"What's been happening?" she asked, and he was quick to note the anxious note in her voice.

"Plenty," he said and pulling up a chair he sat astride it, resting his arms on its back. "This American we've caught turns out to be Don Micklem. In case you've never heard of him, he's worth two million pounds sterling - not dollars. The old man's pretty pleased we've got him and he's putting the bite on him for half a million dollars."

Lorelli put her hairbrush on the dressing table.

"Is that something to get excited about?" she asked. "If he's worth all that money, why stop at a mere five hundred thousand dollars?"

"This is only the first instalment. It wouldn't be possible to get a bigger sum out of him without currency trouble.

Micklem imagines he is going to go free when he pays up. Between you and me, he isn't going to leave here until there's no more two million, and when he does leave, he'll go feet first with a wreath in his hands."

Lorelli flinched. She got up and walked over to the clothes closet. Slipping off her wrap, she took from the closet a black silk frock. She made a ring of the frock and slid it over her head.

Felix eyed her compact, beautifully proportioned body.

"Doesn't Micklem guess?" Lorelli asked as she smoothed the dress over her hips. She moved back to the dressing table and opening a drawer crammed with costume jewellery, she picked out a string of black and red wooden beads.

"That's what foxes me," Felix said. "From the look of the guy, he should be full of fight, but he isn't. Maybe the old man has thrown a scare into him. He is doing exactly what he has been told to do. He's written a letter to his New York bank, authorizing them to pay the money into his bank in Rome. The old man thought he would kick, but he hasn't. You have the job of delivering the letter to Micklem's secretary. She has to take it to New York."

Lorelli stiffened.

"I have to take it?"

"Yes," Felix said, looking at her. "There's nothing to it..."

"Why can't you take it, or Willie or Carlos?" Lorelli said, her voice rising.

"Don't ask me," Felix said sharply. "The old man said you were to take it."

"Why do I always get picked on for the dirty jobs?"

"What's dirty about this one?"

"Suppose they hand me over to the police? Look what happened in London. I was nearly caught."

"Oh, skip it!" Felix said impatiently. "This is dead easy. The police won't be there, and Micklem's staff won't dare touch you so long as we have him where we want him."

"I don't want to do it, Felix," she said. "I don't see why I should do it. I want to keep out of it."

"You don't know it, Lorelli," he said, looking at her intently, "but you are in trouble. This is the wrong time to say what you will or what you won't do. You're to take the letter to the Trioni villa in an hour from now. That's an order."

Lorelli turned white.

"What do you mean - trouble?"

"Alsoni isn't as sure of you as he was. He says in an emergency you have a habit of losing your nerve. I told him you'd be all right and I'd be responsible for you. He wasn't convinced. He's sending you with the letter to test your nerve."

Lorelli-sat down abruptly on the edge of the bed.

"There's nothing to the job," Felix went on quietly. "As a test it's nothing. You've got to pull yourself together. Alsoni is watching you. You don't want me to tell you what that means."

She didn't say anything.

"Here's the letter," Felix said. He took an envelope from his wallet and put it on the dressing table. "You know where the Trioni villa is?"

"Yes," Lorelli said.

"When you get there ask for Marian Rigby. Tell her Micklem is safe and well, and he is no longer in Siena. She is to fly to New York on the first available plane, and she is to deliver the letter to

Micklem's bank. If there is a query as to why Micklem wants such a sum, she is to say he is going to build a villa out here. Tell her that if she tells the police what is happening, Micklem will suffer. Got all that?"

"Yes," Lorelli said.

"Okay. Get there at half-past two. Take the Citroen." Felix lit a cigarette. "Now I've got that off my chest, there's something else I want to talk to you about. You never told me how you got on with Crantor. What kind of guy is he?" Lorelli stared at him in surprise.

"Crantor? I didn't like him. He's ambitious and smart and utterly ruthless. Why?"

"I'll say he's smart," Felix said. "Too damned smart. Alsoni told me to phone Crantor to get some information about Micklem. I expected to have to leave it with him, but he trotted out the facts as if he were reading from a dossier. There was nothing he didn't know about Micklem: how much he was worth, who his bankers were, what insurances he carried - the works. He said he could repeat the performance on anyone in London with an income of more than ten thousand. That's being too damned smart."

"What do you mean?" Lorelli asked blankly.

"Already Alsoni thinks Crantor is a good man. If he knew Crantor is taking this amount of trouble on his behalf he might get other ideas about him."

"What ideas?"

"He might bring him out here and put him in my place," Felix said. "That's just the kind of efficiency that would appeal to Alsoni. That's why you've got to watch your step from now on. Alsoni doesn't approve of our alliance as he calls it. He hinted I was turning soft."

"Then we've got to get out of here!" Lorelli cried, clenching her fists. "You must listen to me, Felix! If the police don't catch us, then Alsoni will get rid of us. We've got to get away!"

"Will you stop this!" Felix said violently, "I'm warning you! If we try to double-cross Alsoni it'll be the last thing we do. Will you get that into your head?"

"So you think it's better to wait for Alsoni to double-cross you?" Lorelli said, her voice shrill. "You'll look a fool if Crantor takes over from you, won't you?"

"If Crantor comes here, I'll fix him before he gets near Alsoni," Felix said viciously.

"If Alsoni hasn't fixed you first!"

Felix stood up and kicked the chair out of his way. He went over to Lorelli, grabbed her by her arms and pulled her to her feet.

"I've never got tough with you yet," he snarled, "but I will if I have to, and believe me, when I get tough with a woman, it's too bad for her." He gave her a hard little shake. "Listen: there's no way out for either of us. We're in this thing too deep. Do you want me to tell Alsoni that you've lost your nerve and you want to quit? You know what he'll do with you? He'll hand you over to Englemann. If you don't pull yourself together, I'll wash my hands of you. I said I'd be responsible for you, but don't kid yourself I'm going to cover you up if you ask for trouble. I'm not sticking my neck out for anyone!"

Lorelli suddenly relaxed against him.

"All right, Felix," she said. "I'm sorry. My nerves are bad, but I'll be all right."

"You'd better be all right," he said and released her. "Now, look, you have nothing to worry about. I'll take care of you. Just do what I tell you. Do you understand?"

She nodded, not looking at him.

"Okay." He glanced at his watch. "I've got to see the old man now. I can rely on you to take that letter?"

"Yes," Lorelli said.

"Good girl," Felix said and patted her arm. "Be there at half-past two."

When he had gone Lorelli moved slowly to the dressing table and sat down. She was shocked to see how pale she was. She picked up her rouge pad and heightened her colour. Then she lit a cigarette.

She felt trapped. She told herself she would never have mixed herself up with Alsoni if she had known he was going to start a world-wide and murderous racket like this. How could she possibly have known?

When she had first met Alsoni, five years ago, he had been an impoverished violinist in a cafe band in Rome. She had been a professional dancer at the cafe. She had regarded Alsoni as had the other members of the cafe staff as an egocentric crackpot, not to be taken seriously.

At that time, Alsoni was always bragging about his ancestors of Siena, hinting darkly that it wouldn't be long before he was back as head of the historical and notorious Vaga family, with unlimited wealth. When he wasn't playing the violin in the cafe band, he would roam the cafe tables, looking for someone who would listen to his monotonous story of how

the Vagas had been exiled from Siena and how they had sworn to return.

Then one day he cornered Lorelli and put a proposition to her. Why didn't she go into partnership with himself and Johnny Lassiter, a young American who washed dishes at the cafe? There was big money to be made playing the badger game. He had already spoken to Johnny who was willing if Lorelli came in with them. He (Alsconi) knew a number of wealthy men who would be easy prey. He would introduce Lorelli to them. Her job would be to get them into a compromising situation, then Johnny would appear as the outraged husband and the sucker would pay up to avoid a scandal.

At that time Lorelli was desperate for want of money. She was sick of being a professional dancer. She discussed the proposition with Johnny, and after some hesitation, had agreed to give Alsconi's idea a trial.

Over a period of sixteen months the three of them had made a considerable sum of money. Alsconi had insisted that he should take two-thirds of the proceeds as his introductions were not only profitable and safe, but they were also free from police prosecution. Lorelli and Johnny split the remaining third between them.

But it wasn't long before Johnny began to hanker for a bigger rake off. Why should they turn over two-thirds of the proceeds to Alsconi, he argued to Lorelli, when they did all the dirty work and took all the risks? Why not drop Alsconi and handle the set-up themselves? By then Lorelli had a vague suspicion that Alsconi was not only cracked, but also dangerous, and she hesitated. While she was hesitating, Johnny suddenly disappeared, and a few days later, his murdered body was found by the police floating in the Tiber.

Alsconi had shrugged at the news. Obviously, Johnny had made an enemy, he had said, smiling. He was a reckless, foolish fellow. What could he expect? He told her to look out for a new partner: someone more reliable than Johnny. She had found Felix and had introduced him to Alsconi who had been impressed by Felix's record. By then the badger game was small beer to Alsconi, although Lorelli didn't know it. With the money he had saved from playing his violin in the cafe band and from the proceeds of the badger game, he was ready to begin his extortion racket and his threat of "pay up or die" was producing quick and big dividends. He made Felix his second in command and let Lorelli into the racket. She enjoyed working with Felix. Money rolled in far quicker than it had when playing the badger game. The first dozen or so victims paid up without a fuss, then Alsconi raised his demands and he met with resistance. The first murder came as a shock to Lorelli, but by then life was too easy to think of backing out. She was in love with Felix and she was making money.

As the months went by and more murders followed and the police seemed helpless to stop Alsconi, Lorelli ceased to be shocked. She assured herself she had killed no one, so why should she worry? But Gina's death had shaken her badly and now Micklem had traced her to Siena, she felt panic-stricken. She had been mad, she told herself, to have had anything to do with either Ferenci's or Gina's deaths. She must get away before the police moved in. If Felix hadn't the sense to get out, then she would go without him.

As she sat staring at herself in the mirror, a solution to her problem dropped into her mind. If she was to get away from the organization she must have a large sum of money and a safe hiding place. Micklem had the money. It was possible she might do a deal with him.

She sat for a long moment thinking, then she got up and went to the clothes closet. She took from it a lightweight beige coat and slipped into it. She put on a close-fitting black hat. Returning to the dressing table she pulled open a drawer and took from it a .25 automatic which she slipped into her coat pocket. Picking up the letter, she left the room and walked quickly down the corridor to the lift.

As Marian paid off the taxi that had brought her from the station, Harry came out on to the veranda and shot down the steps to take her overnight case.

"We've been trying to get you, miss," he said. "I reckon we've telephoned every hotel in Florence."

Marian looked sharply at him: his pale, worried face sent a little stab of alarm through her.

"Has something happened, Harry?"

Cherry came out on to the veranda. There was a fussed, anxious expression on his usually placid pink face.

"Mr Micklem is missing," Harry said.

They joined Cherry on the veranda and Marian led the way into the lounge.

"How long has he been missing?" she asked, making an effort to sound calm.

"Perhaps you would like a cup of coffee, madam?" Cherry said from force of habit.

Marian didn't even hear him, she was looking at Harry.

"Since last night," Harry said, and went on to tell Marian how Cherry and he had followed Carlos and had lost him when he had

driven away in his car. "The road was straight and we could see his headlights. He appeared to turn off the main road into what I thought could be a drive to a house. I reported to Mr Micklem, and he and I went out there. We found a road where this nigger had turned off. Some way up the road was a big house, surrounded by a high wall. Well, you know what Mr Micklem is. He wanted to have a close look at the house. He got into the garden, leaving me on the wall. I waited for about half an hour, then I heard dogs barking. I expected Mr Micklem to come, but he didn't. After a while I saw lights in the garden, and I thought I'd better see what was happening. I was very nearly nabbed by one of the dogs. I legged it back to the car and drove back to the villa and woke up Cherry. We decided to wait and see if Mr Micklem turned up. After a couple of hours I thought I'd better go for help."

"You don't know for certain he was caught?" Marian asked.

"One of the dogs very nearly had me," Harry said grimly. "There were three others. I don't think he could have got away. If he did, why isn't he here?"

She nodded.

"What did you do then?"

"I left Cherry here in case Mr Micklem returned and I went to the police." Harry's face darkened. "Believe it or not, not one of those perishers could speak a word of English. You'd have thought one or two of them would have been educated, wouldn't you, miss? I got nowhere with them. I very nearly got slung into jail. I went back to the villa and put a call through to Superintendent Dicks. When I finally got him, he was pretty quick to take action. He got into touch with the bloke in charge of the Tortoise case in Rome and this bloke flew up right away and Cherry and I went down to the police station and gave him the story. When I described the negro and the house, the local police nearly went mad. They said the negro was a well-known character in the city and was completely harmless. He was the personal servant of the owner of the house, a bloke named Simon Alsconi who was a rich and respected member of the community. They said it was ridiculous to suspect him. Anyway, Rossi made me give him the full story, I could see he didn't think much of it. I must say it did sound a bit thin when he started to pick to pieces. I couldn't prove the nigger had anything to do with the Tortoise organization. I told him how Mr Micklem had seen Lorelli, but of course I couldn't prove she had anything to do with the nigger nor had we seen her near the house. But the fact they couldn't talk me out of was that Mr Micklem had got into the garden and had vanished. Rossi said Mr Micklem had no right to be in the garden and Alsconi could charge him with unlawful entry. He said we had no proof that he was in the house. Finally, he went out to the house. He wouldn't let either Cherry or me go and we had to wait at the police station. They came back after a while. Rossi said the house had been thoroughly searched and Mr Micklem wasn't there. He then had the nerve to suggest Mr Micklem might be suffering from amnesia and he might be wandering about the countryside. He then went back to Rome, leaving the local police to look for Mr Micklem. They don't seem to be looking very hard, and that's as far as we've got at the moment."

"If Don has been kidnapped," Marian said, "the kidnapers would have had plenty of time to take him somewhere far from this house, wouldn't they?"

"Yes, but I don't think they did. I think he's still in the house," Harry said.

"But if the police searched it..."

"You want to see the place. It's just the kind of joint that would have underground passages, secret panels and hidden rooms. It's my bet he's there."

Marian looked across at Cherry.

"What do you think, Cherry?"

"I don't know what to say, madam," Cherry said miserably. "I should have thought they wouldn't have kept him in the house."

"You haven't seen the place either," Harry put in. "Wherever he is, we've got to find him and we've got to start looking somewhere."

"Yes," Marian said. "What are you thinking of doing?"

"Well, miss, this is a job we can't tackle alone. We've got to have help. If the police won't play, we'll have to look elsewhere.

Let's get hold of Giuseppe. He's the boy who can help us. We'll ask him to collect a bunch of his gondolier pals to come here. We could then bust into the house and if Mr Micklem is there, we'd find him."

"But, Harry, you don't know for certain he is there. You can't break in on the off chance. You'll only be arrested and that won't help Don," Marian said. "I'm sure that's not the way to handle it. The Tortoise is an extortioner. He won't pass up the chance of getting money out of Don. I think it is more likely we'll get a ransom note before long. I think we should wait until the ransom note arrives and then take action. I agree we must have help. I'll see if I can get Giuseppe. He may be at the palazza now."

"Well, all right," Harry said, reluctantly. "I don't like sitting here doing nothing. I'm pretty sure if we had a bunch of Giuseppe's pals we could bust in and find Mr Micklem."

"We'll get Giuseppe first," Marian said, and crossing to the telephone she put a call through to Don's palazza in Venice. Giuseppe Spinolo was Don's gondolier, and while Don was not in residence, Giuseppe also acted as caretaker to the small palazza Don owned on the Grand Canal. Marian was lucky to contact him and she told him briefly what had happened.

"Harry wants you here," she went on. "If you can bring some of your friends..."

"I will come at once," Giuseppe said, "and I will bring my friends. Do not worry, we will find ilsignore. We will be with you some time tonight."

"He's coming," Marian said as she hung up. "Now, Harry, I would like to see this house. Let's get the car out and explore. We'll want to know what the roads and the country are like before Giuseppe comes..." she broke off as Harry suddenly jumped to his feet.

Seeing he was staring past her, she looked quickly over her shoulder.

Standing in the doorway, a .25 automatic in her hand, was Lorelli.

The mid-afternoon sun blazed down into the garden of the Trioni villa and Willie, sitting with his back to a tree where he had a good view of the villa, struggled to keep awake.

He had seen Marian arrive, and he had been told that within an hour Lorelli would be coming to the villa to deliver the first instructions concerning Micklem's ransom.

Felix had said to him: "Your job is to cover Lorelli. Keep out of sight, but be ready to move in if they try any tricks. Use your gun if you have to."

Willie took out a dirty handkerchief and wiped his sweating face. He would have given a lot to be able to shut his eyes and have a refreshing sleep, but he knew that was more than he dared do. He looked at his strap watch. She should be here any moment now. He pulled a .38 automatic from his hip pocket and checked the clip. He balanced the gun in his hand while he looked at the villa, wishing he was in there and out of the burning sun. It seemed to Willie that he had spent all his life wishing for something. His main passions in life were women and high-power cars. Women shunned his pock-marked face and stunted body and he never seemed able to earn enough money to buy the car he wanted. At the age of fourteen he had started life as a porter to a small disreputable hotel in Genoa. His feeble attempts to make money by stealing from the hotel's clients had eventually landed him in jail. He had spent most of his forty years in and out of prison, and it was only when Alsoni had taken him into his organization that his prison sentences ceased. Although he was now reasonably well paid, he still could not indulge himself in the car he wanted, and women were still out of his reach. He hankered for more money. No matter how ugly a man was, he argued, women would favour him if he had money: not the kind of money he earned, but big money, and he ached to have it. If there was one thing he ached for more than anything else it was Lorelli. She bewitched him. He knew she was Felix's woman and that it would be disastrous for him if Felix knew what was in his mind. He knew too Lorelli wouldn't look at him. His face, his physique and his lack of money presented far more formidable barriers than Felix's fists. Up to now he had accepted the position, but he never gave up hoping. He dreamed of Lorelli and hoped. Without his dreams or his hopes life wouldn't be worth living. For forty years he had lived on dreams. Sooner or later, he kept assuring himself, his dreams must turn to reality. He was brooding about Lorelli when, looking up, he saw her. She was making her way towards the villa through the shrubs and trees. He caught sight of her just in time. He had been told by Felix not to show himself, and he flattened out into the long grass, lying motionless as Lorelli passed within twenty feet of him. He raised his head to watch her, and he admired the way she slipped from shrub to tree and from tree to shrub, moving silently and swiftly. He got to his feet and went after her. He saw her run across the open space between the villa and the garden, mount the steps to the veranda and pause outside the front door. He waited behind a tree, watching her. He saw her turn the handle of the door and open it. She looked back, but Willie, who was an expert in such matters, had anticipated such a move and had quickly withdrawn behind the tree. When he peered around the tree again, she had disappeared from his sight. Holding the .38 in his hand, he moved towards the villa, darted up the steps and to the front door. She had left it ajar, and he leaned against the wall by the door and listened. He heard Marian say: "We'll want to know what the roads and the country are like before Giuseppe comes..." Then Lorelli's voice said, "Don't move - any of you!" Willie nodded his head approvingly at the tone of her voice. She had got just the right snap in it. He could imagine her with the .25 in her hand, her green eyes glittering. It was going to be a dead easy job for him. She could handle this: he wouldn't be called on to help. The snap in Lorelli's voice checked Harry's move forward. He looked at her hard white face, at the gun and then back to her again and decided the distance between them was too great. "Sit down!" Lorelli said, and lifted the gun so that it pointed at Harry's eyes. Harry sat down. Lorelli moved into the room. She decided only Harry was dangerous. Marian she dismissed instantly, and after a quick look at Cherry who sat on the edge of his chair, his fat face startled and his eyes popping, she dismissed him too. She kept well away from the three of them and leaned her back against the wall. "Micklem is well and safe," she said, speaking rapidly. "He is no longer in Siena so it is useless to try to find him. He has written a letter to his New York bank and you are to deliver it at once." She looked towards Marian. "If there is any query by the bank about the amount, you are to tell them Micklem is going to buy a villa in Italy." Without taking her eyes off Harry, she opened her handbag, took out the letter and tossed it across the room where it fell at Marian's feet. Harry said in a cold, hard voice, "You don't kid me. I know Mr Micklem is in that house, and if your gang hurts him you and they will be damned sorry." Willie, who had moved silently into the hall, grinned. He propped himself up against the wall, his gun hanging slackly in his hand while he listened. Marian picked up the letter. She slit it open and read the contents. She recognized Don's firm handwriting. The letter contained instructions for selling certain stocks to the value of five hundred thousand dollars which were to be immediately transferred to the Banca de Roma. There was no message for her which she hoped to find. She said quietly, "And when the money is paid into the bank what happens then?" "Micklem will write a cheque," Lorelli said. "You will cash it. When the money is handed to us, he will be released." "What guarantee have I that he will be released?" Lorelli shrugged. "That's nothing to do with me. I am telling you what I have been told to tell you. You are to leave for New York immediately." Marian looked over at Harry, then she shrugged. The transfer of such a sum of money would take several days. There was time to work out what the next move should be.

"Very well," she said. "I will follow out the instructions." "If you contact the police about this," Lorelli went on, "Micklem will suffer. Neither you nor the police will ever find him. If you try any tricks, you will never see him again." Pretty nice, Willie thought. I couldn't have handled it better myself. He made to move back to the front door to be out of the way when Lorelli came out, when her next words brought him to an abrupt stop.

"That is what I have been told to tell you," she said, looking at Marian, "but it is a lie. Micklem will not be released. He is worth two million pounds. They intend to get all of it, and when they have got it, they will murder him."

Marian's face paled. As Harry made to get to his feet, she put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Why are you telling us this?" she asked.

"Because I intend to break away from the organization," Lorelli said. "I can't break away without money. I want to do a deal with you. I know where he is. I can get him out. I'll take half what they're asking - two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. You're getting a bargain. If you deal with them, you will go on paying until there is no more left. If you deal with me, you'll get Micklem back."

"So you're ratting on your pals," Harry said angrily. He turned to Marian. "Don't trust her, miss."

"You don't have to trust me," Lorelli said. "I'll have to trust you. I don't expect you to give me the money until he's free. How long will it take to get the money to Italy?"

"Five or six days," Marian said.

"If I show you how to get him out will you give me your word to pay the money into a bank I will nominate and also to say nothing to the police?"

"If Mr Micklem is unhurt and we free him I will do my best to persuade him to give you the money," Marian said. "I can't do better than that: it is not my money to promise you."

"If they found out what I am doing, you don't know what would happen to me," Lorelli said huskily. "One of them is a drunken surgeon. He spends his time experimenting with animals and humans when he can get them. I've seen the results of some of his experiments. If they found out I'm betraying them I should also become one of his experiments. I am trusting more than my life to you. I must have your promise. I won't help you if you don't give me your word."

Marian hesitated, then she said, "All right. You shall have the money."

"And you'll say nothing to the police?"

"Yes."

Lorelli lowered the gun, then she slipped it into her pocket and moved away from the wall. The other three stood up.

Harry said, "He is in that house somewhere, isn't he?"

"Yes. Thirty feet below the building there is a system of underground rooms," Lorelli said. "I know where he is and how he can be reached. It will be difficult and dangerous."

"How dangerous?" Harry asked sharply.

"Any one of the passages can be flooded at the touch of a button," Lorelli said. "There are alarms everywhere. All the corridors have steel doors at either end, and they are electrically controlled. There are guards and dogs always in the grounds."

"Then how do we get him out?" Harry demanded.

"I must work out a plan," Lorelli said. "I wanted first to be sure you would give me the money. We have at least three days. I'll let you have a plan of the place so you will know where the alarms are and where the guards patrol. I'll give you all the details you want, but it will take a little time. I will come here on Thursday night with a definite plan."

Outside in the hall, Willie listened. His pock-marked face was vicious and frightened. She would be out any moment now. She mustn't see him. He stepped silently to the front door and slipped out on to the veranda.

Chapter X

WILLIE

Don looked ruefully at the five cigarettes in his case and decided to resist the temptation and keep them for a more pressing occasion.

He was sitting on the straw-covered floor, his back against the wall of the cave, the steel bracelet and chain attached to his ankle. It was close on half-past three in the afternoon. Since Felix had "come into the cave some three hours ago, no one had been near him. Felix had come for the letter to Don's New York banker. He was surprised when Don had written the letter without protest. But by writing the letter, Don reckoned on gaining at least four days in which to organize his escape, and he knew he would need those four days. Although the police had failed to find him, he was sure Harry wouldn't give up, and if it were possible to break into this fortress Harry would do it, but it was bound to take time. When Marian got the letter to the bank, she would know that he was alive, and he hoped she wouldn't be influenced by the unsuccessful search made by the police.

Don had no intention of paying the ransom. He had no illusions about Alsconi. He was sure Alsconi wouldn't be content with five hundred thousand dollars nor would he release him. It was a comforting thought to know that Harry would be doing his best for him, but Don knew the difficulties, and he didn't intend to rely on Harry's efforts. If he were to get out of his underground prison, he would have to rely largely on himself.

He regarded the bracelet around his ankle with disgust. Without some tool there was no way of tackling the lock. He had already tried to lever the staple to which the chain was fastened out of the wall without success.

He was considering the problem, wondering if the next time they brought him food he couldn't break off one of the prongs of the fork and use that to pick the lock when he saw a light coming down the tunnel.

He was startled to see Lorelli come out of the shadows into the pool of light in which he was sitting.

Lorelli was agitated. Her face was pale and her eyes showed the fear that gripped her.

She came over to him and dropped on her knees beside him. "I've talked to your secretary," she said in a breathless whisper. "I've told her I would get you out of here. In return I want two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Your secretary has promised me this sum, but you have to pay it, and I want your promise too."

Don saw the fear in her eyes and realized at once that she meant what she said.

"That's quite a chunk of money," he said. "Why this, sudden change of heart?"

"I've had enough of them. I want to break away. I must have money to be safe," she said. "They won't ever let you free. They intend to get all your money and then murder you. I can help you escape, but you must give me your word that you will pay me two hundred and fifty thousand dollars when you are free."

"That's fair enough," Don said. "You won't get the money unless I am free so I'll give you my word. It's a promise!"

"You mean that?"

"I've told you - it's a promise. How are you going to get me out?"

"I'm working on a plan now. All the doors here are electrically controlled. The passages can be flooded. There's a control room that is guarded night and day. Before you can hope to get out of here you will have to overpower the man in charge. It'll be easier to escape during the night. Everyone will be asleep except Carlos who is in charge of the control room at night."

Don grimaced.

"You mean I'll have to overpower him?"

Lorelli nodded.

"Can you get me a gun?" Don asked.

"I think so. I'll try."

"Do more than try. Without a gun, I don't think I'm going to have a great deal of success with Carlos. What about this?"

He tapped the bracelet around his ankle.

"I could get you a file."

"I'd rather have a hair-pin," Don said and grinned. "Have you got one?"

Her hand went up to her red-gold hair and she found a hairpin which she gave to him. Then she got to her feet.

"I'll come again," she said. "I'll try to get a gun for you, but it won't be easy. If I have to I'll let you have mine." She looked down at him. "I'm trusting you to give me the money when I get you out."

"I'm not out yet," Don said, "but if I do get out, you'll have the money. Don't fool yourself, will you? The police want you. There's nothing I can do about that."

"I'm not worrying about them."

"Where is the control room?"

"Opposite Englemann's surgery. You've been there, haven't you?"

"Yes. Try to get the gun. Carlos will take a lot of stopping."

"I'll do what I can."

She went away quickly, and after a moment or so, Don lost sight of her torch down the tunnel.

He decided the occasion justified a cigarette and he lit one, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs. He felt his future now was a lot more secure. He didn't waste time to wonder what lay behind Lorelli's sudden desire to get away. That was something he could think about later. He settled down to work on the lock with the hair-pin she had given him. It took him a half an hour of patient fiddling before the lock turned, and the bracelet dropped off his ankle. It was a snap lock, and he could fasten the bracelet back on to his ankle again in a matter of seconds. He was about to stand up and savour his freedom when he spotted a light coming down the tunnel and he hurriedly replaced the bracelet and slid the hair-pin under his watch strap.

Dr Englemann came out of the shadows. He lurched slightly as he walked and his lined bitter face was pallid. As he came into the light, Don could see the sweat beads on his forehead.

"Hello," Don said, "What do you want?"

Englemann looked down at him, his deep-set eyes glittering.

"There seems a possibility, Mr Micklem," he said, his words slurred, "that you may be placed at my disposal for a certain experiment. Of course the matter isn't entirely settled, but it would help me if you wouldn't object to a few preliminary tests some time this evening. I would like a specimen of your blood and your pulse rate. I would also like to examine your eyes."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Don said curtly, "but I object strongly. It is only fair to warn you that if you come within reach of me I shall take great pleasure in strangling you."

Englemann's face hardened, but he took a step back. "I am anxious not to lose time. My experiment is of the utmost importance, but if you won't co-operate, then I must wait until I have permission to force you to co-operate."

"You're going to have a long wait. I intend to pay the ransom."

"I think not," Englemann said. "I told il signor Alsconi that you are merely trying to gain time. I know your type. You are not the kind of man who can be forced to do something against your will."

"Then you had better tell Alsconi you have made a mistake," Don said. "I'm not at all anxious to be a subject of one of your experiments."

"Signor Alsconi did tell you what I am attempting to do?" Englemann said. His hands moved unsteadily to his coat lapels and anchored there. "You realize the importance of the experiment?"

"He told me," Don said. "He also mentioned that you would probably be tight when you did the operation and it would be certain to fail."

Englemann looked at him; his eyes seemed to catch fire. "I shall take great pleasure in having you on the operating table, Mr Micklem," he said. "I don't think I shall have to wait very long."

He turned and walked away, steadying himself, his hand on the wall of the tunnel.

Don watched him go. He was annoyed to find his heart was thumping and his mouth had turned dry.

Willie sat under the shady tree where he could watch the entrance to the Trioni villa. He was in such a state of nerves and excitement that sweat ran down his face as if a sponge of water had been squeezed over him.

He felt something should be done immediately about Lorelli's treachery. His first inclination was to bolt back to Felix and tell him what he had overheard, but Felix had told him to watch the villa until Jacopo relieved him, and this put him in a quandary. Felix expected his orders to be obeyed, and if Willie deserted his post, he could run into trouble. He reluctantly decided to wait for Jacopo and then report to Felix.

Then into Willie's cunning and easily frightened mind, there dropped an unpleasant thought: Lorelli was Felix's girl. How was Felix going to react when he heard she was selling them out? Suppose he didn't believe what Willie had to tell him? Felix had a reputation of being quick with his fists, and often, before he struck a blow, he had been known to slip on a leather glove, covered with brass studs. Willie had seen a man's teeth broken by a punch from that glove, and he flinched at the recollection. But surely, he reasoned, Felix wouldn't be such a mug as not to believe him? He wouldn't want two million pounds to walk out on him and the cops to walk in. Surely he couldn't be so besotted with Lorelli that he would let her get away with this? But he would have to be careful how he broke the news to Felix. Maybe he had better keep his gun handy. If Felix looked like starting trouble, he would show him the gun.

But what was he personally going to get out of this? Willie asked himself. Would it be a smarter idea to put the bite on Lorelli? He could keep track of her until she got the money, then move in and demand half: a hundred and twenty-five thousand bucks. His face lit up at the thought. But after thinking this idea over, he realized that he hadn't the nerve to go through with it. Alsconi would go after Lorelli, and he would eventually catch her. Willie knew enough of Alsconi's methods not to know how long his arm was. No one had quit the organization and got away with it. If he took money from Lorelli he would be putting himself in bad with Alsconi, and he wasn't all that soft in the head.

After wrestling with the problem for some minutes, he came to the conclusion that the safest way to play the hand was to tell Felix, and rely on Felix to do the right thing by him. He'd ask Felix to get him a bonus: that was the least he deserved.

It was a pity about Lorelli. She was almost certain to be handed over to Englemann. Willie grimaced at the thought. But it was her own funeral. She was asking for trouble, and she would certainly get it.

While Willie was sweating over this problem, Felix was reporting to Alsconi who sat at his desk, his hands folded on the blotter.

Within reach of those long white fingers was a small ivory button let into the desk that when pressed would fire a gun, cleverly concealed in the front of the desk, and which was pointing at this moment at Felix.

"Micklem's letter has been delivered," Felix was saying. "There was no trouble. His secretary is flying to New York right away. She believes the money will be at the Banca de Roma in five days."

Alsconi absently rubbed the top of the ivory button with the tip of his forefinger. It gave him a feeling of intense pleasure to know that he had only to press down on the button for Felix to get a bullet in his stomach.

"So they appear willing to co-operate?" he said.

"They seem more than willing."

"And Lorelli delivered the letter?"

"Yes."

"She was alone?"

"She thought she was alone," Felix said. "I had Willie watching outside in case there was trouble."

"She made it clear that if they went to the police, Micklem would suffer?"

"She followed my instructions," Felix said curtly. "She did the job very well."

"Splendid." Alsconi examined his finger-nails, a bland expression on his fat face. "Where is Willie?"

"He's still at the villa. I told him to wait until Jacopo relieved him," Felix said.

Alsconi scratched the side of his nose while he looked at Felix.

"So you have the report only from Lorelli, and no confirmation yet from Willie?"

Felix stiffened.

"Confirmation? I don't understand. I haven't yet talked to Willie, but he won't have anything to tell me. Are you suggesting we can't trust Lorelli any more?"

Alsconi lifted an eyebrow.

"Certainly not. It is always better to have confirmation of any report. For all we know Lorelli might have lost her nerve at the last moment. She might not have gone to the villa. I am quite sure she did go, but it will be more satisfactory not only for me but for her if Willie confirmed what took place at the interview."

"Willie was watching from the outside," Felix said. "He wouldn't have heard what was said."

Alsconi picked up the telephone receiver.

"Carlos? Send Jacopo at once to the Trioni villa to relieve Willie. Willie is to report to me immediately he comes in."

He replaced the receiver. "Don't let us assume anything, Felix. It is a fatal mistake. I'll talk to Willie."

Felix shrugged angrily.

"If that's the way you want it."

"Yes. We have agreed that Lorelli is inclined to get flustered. I want to be sure that she has handled the assignment well. Very soon I shall have a special job for her. Crantor has a large amount of sterling that should be brought here. I want Lorelli to go to London and bring this money back." Alsconi played a soundless tune on the edge of his desk. "You are satisfied that she is still reliable? The money is in cash, and there is a lot of it. I wouldn't want her to run off with it."

"She wouldn't do that," Felix said. He had to make an effort to meet Alsconi's probing eyes. "Of course she is reliable, but we can't send her on that job. The London police have a description of her. It would be risky to send her to London again."

"Ah, yes. I had forgotten that. Well, someone must get the money. I need it. Would you trust Willie to do it?"

Felix shook his head.

"No. Willie's all right for the day-to-day work, but I wouldn't trust him with money."

"Then I'll have to see if Crantor can suggest anyone," Alsconi said. "We had better find some other work for Lorelli to do. She is rather lost here, I feel. No scope for her." He paused, then went on, looking fixedly at Felix. "I have been thinking that we might begin limited operations in South America: Buenos Aires, for instance. Would she mind going there, do you think?"

Felix very nearly betrayed himself. He covered his confusion by taking out a cigarette and lighting it. Was this a coincidence or had Alsconi somehow overheard their conversation?

"Buenos Aires? I don't know. I can ask her."

Alsconi smiled.

"Leave it for a moment. When I have more time I will talk to her myself. It is a long time now since I have had a chat with her. Sometimes I wonder if it is wise to employ women in the organization. They have their uses, of course, but they can be unpredictable. I don't like unpredictable people."

"You can't say Lorelli is unpredictable," Felix said hurriedly. "You seem to have lost faith in her, but you have no reason for it. After all she is one of the original members of the organization. She deserves better treatment. I have always found her reliable when it comes to carrying out orders."

"You are in a better position to judge her than I am," Alsconi said. "But I think a change would be good for her: new faces, new routines. Would you be interested in going with her to Buenos Aires and handling my business there?"

"If you told me to go, I'd go," Felix said, aware that he was beginning to sweat. "But I should have thought I was more useful to you here. I've handled the set-up for you for two years now."

It isn't an easy set-up to run. If I had the choice I would stay here."

Alsconi lifted his eyebrows.

"That would mean losing Lorelli. I thought you were attached to her."

"No woman has her hooks that deep into me," Felix said. "Do you intend sending her to Buenos Aires?"

"Perhaps not. It's an idea that occurred to me." Alsconi shrugged his shoulders. "I'm still thinking about it. I should have to be very sure that Lorelli could do the work and wanted to do it. Let us continue to think about it." He waved his hand the gesture of dismissal.

Felix was glad to escape from the staring, probing eyes.

He was badly rattled and he went to his room» took from a cupboard a bottle of whisky and poured himself liberal shot. Then he sat down, holding the glass in his hand while he considered the situation.

After some thought, he told himself that AlsconVs reference to Buenos Aires must have been a coincidence. ft ^Vent only to show how crazy and irresponsible Lorelli's ideas. If he had thought, it was obvious that a town with so muc)i money as Buenos Aires would eventually come on Alsconi's schedule. Besides, if Alsconi had overheard Lorelli trying to persuade him to clear out, he wouldn't have put him on his guard to this. He would have struck. He knew how Alsconi worked, he was quick and ruthless.

He finished his drink and set down the glass. tfe decided the situation wanted careful watching, but it wasn't d^gerous. The great point in his favour was there was no one to tAce his place. The organization didn't run itself and he had purpose underlined that to Alsconi. There were a hundred and one details to be watched and Felix had all these details at his fingers' end.

Alsconi wouldn't be so stupid as to get rid of him, he told himself. He would only saddle himself with all the dirty work that Felix now shouldered. But from now on, he would be on his guard. He would watch Carlos who carried out Alsconi's instructions.

His hand went inside his coat and his fingers touched the butt of his .45. Carlos was quick and big, but a .45 slug would stop him.

He had another drink and then got to his feet. He would go along and talk to Lorelli. He'd throw a hell of a scare into her.

She must stop this yammering about leaving the organization once and for all. That kind of talk could be fatal.

He went over to the mirror and straightened his tie. He grinned at his reflection. The whisky gave him a feeling of security. He was still smiling as he went out of the room.

But he wouldn't have felt so secure if he had known that at that moment Alsconi was talking to Crantor who sat in his hotel bedroom straining to hear Alsconi's voice that came to him over the crackling telephone line.

"I want you to fly out here at once," Alsoni said. "Take route 3 and bring the goods with you. You know what I mean?"

"Yes," Crantor said, scarcely believing his ears. This was the first time he had heard Alsoni's voice. It was a big moment for him.

"Be here by midnight tonight," Alsoni went on. "I am making changes here. I may find a better job for you."

"I'll be there," Crantor said, his nightmare of a face lighting up.

"Good," Alsoni said and replaced the receiver. He reached for the house telephone. "Carlos? Who is down there with you?"

"There's Menotto, Mr Felix and Miss Lorelli," Carlos said. "Jacopo has gone to get Willie."

"Send Menotto to me, then turn the current off," Alsoni said. "No one is to leave. Do you understand? Let me know if anyone does try to leave."

"Yes, boss," Carlos said; the surprise in his voice made Alsoni grin evilly.

A faint sound behind him as he sat with his back to the tree, made Willie's hand fly to the inside of his coat and jerk out his .38. He rolled over, bringing the gun into a firing position.

Jacopo who had come out from behind the shrubs came to an abrupt standstill.

"That's the way numbskulls get shot," Willie snarled. "Why didn't you call out, you dimwit?"

"I didn't see you," Jacopo said, moving forward again. "What's the matter with you -jumpy?"

Willie slid the gun back into its holster that was strapped under his armpit. He got to his feet.

"Nothing's the matter with me. You taking over now? You're early for a change, aren't you?"

"The old man wants you," Jacopo said; his eyes showed his curiosity. "Rather you than me. What have you been up to?"

Willie stared at him, his thin, rat-like face questioning. "You mean Alsoni wants me?"

"Who else? You'd better get moving. He said he wanted to see you at once, and he's waiting."

Willie wiped his sweating face with his dirty handkerchief. He had only spoken to Alsoni once in two years.

Excitement and fear jostled his mind. Here was his chance to get his bonus. He wouldn't have to rely on Felix. He could give Alsoni the dope about Lorelli direct. He felt a twinge of fear. But what did the old man want him for? Had he done something wrong?

Jacopo, who took a pride in his appearance, regarded Willie with contempt and disgust. Willie hadn't shaved that morning. His shirt was filthy and his shabby black suit was stained and creased.

"You'd better clean up before you see him," he said. "You look like a tramp."

"Never mind what I look like," Willie snarled. "Did he say what he wanted me for?"

"Is it likely; but you can guess, can't you? He wants to kick your teeth in for doing nothing for the past months," Jacopo said. "Or maybe Englemann's persuaded him to let him have you."

Willie cursed him.

"You'd better not keep him waiting," Jacopo said, grinning. "He said at once and that means at once."

"I'm not scared of him," Willie said untruthfully. "I've got something to tell him that'll get me a sack of dough. You'll stop grinning like an ape when you see the car I'm going to buy."

"Got a touch of the sun?" Jacopo asked blankly.

"You wait and see," Willie said darkly. "I keep my eyes and ears open. I've got information that the old man will pay big money for."

"What information?" Jacopo demanded.

"He'll tell you if he wants you to know," Willie said. "Where's the car?"

"Down the lane. What have you got to tell him?"

"Go jump in a lake," Willie said and set off at a run through the trees.

For the first time in his life Willie did not obey an order, and it was to prove fatal to him. Jacopo had said that Alsoni wanted to see him at once. Willie was anxious to make a good impression on Alsoni. He decided to sneak back to his room, have a shave and a wash and put on his best suit. The old man wouldn't know he had spent ten minutes sprucing himself up before reporting to him, and the effect of his new suit might have good results, Willie told himself.

He left the Citroen at the bottom of the drive and made his way through the shrubbery to the back entrance of the palazza. He entered the underground quarters by the concealed door a few seconds before Carlos threw the switch that put the door out of operation. Unaware that the exit was now sealed off, Willie scuttled quickly along the corridor to his room. He was opening the door when Felix appeared.

"The old man wants you," Felix said. "Have you seen him?" "Not yet," Willie said uneasily. "Thought I'd have a wash first. What's up?"

"You'd better get a jerk into it. He wants to see you right away." "I can't go looking like this," Willie whined. "What's he want?"

Felix crowded him into the small, fusty room Willie regarded as his home.

"Nothing to get excited about," Felix said, grimacing at the smell in the room. "It smells like a pig-sty in here."

"I can't smell anything," Willie said, stripping off his coat. He hung his gun holster over the back of a chair, then pulled off his shirt. He ran hot water into the toilet basin. "I'm not in trouble, am I?" He looked anxiously over his skinny shoulder at Felix.

"No. He only wants to know what happened at the villa when Lorelli delivered the letter."

Willie stiffened and the cake of soap slipped out of his hand. The old man was smart, he thought, as he bent to pick up

the soap; nothing seemed to escape him.

Felix watching him, saw his start, saw the startled look on his rat-like face and suddenly felt an ice-cold chill creep up his spine.

"You saw Lorelli?" he said, making his voice sound casual.

"I saw and heard her," Willie said and tried unsuccessfully to conceal a leer. He splashed his face with water, and began to lather his prickly stubble.

"She didn't see you?"

"No." Willie hesitated. He was undecided whether to tell Felix what he had overheard. He didn't want to make an enemy of Felix. He would have to work with him long after Lorelli was forgotten, and Felix wouldn't be pleased if Willie told Alsoni the news without first telling him. It wasn't as if Felix could now stop him tilling the old man. Alsoni was waiting for him, and that would be more than Felix dared do. And since the old man was waiting for him, Felix wouldn't dare get tough with him either. He decided to tell Felix. Two moments of sensation were better than one, he reasoned. In his position of safety he was tempted to see Felix's face when he heard his girl was selling him out. "If she had seen me," he said and leered, "she wouldn't be here now."

Felix's reaction was so quick Willie hadn't a chance to grab his gun. He found himself caught by his throat and slammed against the wall.

"What the hell do you mean?" Felix snarled, his face livid with rage and fear.

Willie caught hold of Felix's wrists and tried to lever his hands from his throat. His grotesque face covered with white lather turned purple as the steely fingers sank into his windpipe. Felix shook him, then slackened his grip.

"What do you mean?" he repeated.

Willie drew in a long, shuddering breath.

"Let go of me!" he gasped. "I'll tell the boss. Get away from me!"

Felix slapped his face very hard with his open hand. The lather flew in an explosion of wet whiteness and splashed the wall.

"Why shouldn't she be here?" he demanded. "Come on; spill it before I knock your teeth down your throat."

"She's double-crossed us," Willie panted, tears of pain starting from his eyes. "She's sold us out."

Felix lifted his clenched fist, then stopped. His face had turned the colour of snow.

"You lying rat!" he said viciously.

"I heard her," Willie gasped, trying to grind himself into the wall to get away from Felix. "She said she wanted to quit the organization. She wanted money. She said she would get Micklem out for two hundred and fifty grand."

Felix remembered what Lorelli had said: You and I have to get out of this racket before it's too late. Sooner or later the police are going to get on to us. We've got to get out!

The crazy little fool! She was committing suicide.

He stepped away from Willie.

"You heard her say that?"

Willie put his hand to his face and wiped off the lather.

"Yes. You've got no right to hit me..."

"Shut up!" Felix snapped. "Let's have it. Every scrap of it."

Willie told him how he had seen Lorelli enter the villa and how he had gone after her in case she ran into trouble.

"I did what you told me," he said, his voice snivelling. "There were three of them in the room: the guy who got away the other night, a fat old bloke they called Cherry and this girl Rigby. She said she would go to New York right away.

Then Lorelli said she was going to tell them something she wasn't supposed to tell them. She said Micklem would never be released and we were after all his dough. She said if they promised to pay her two hundred and fifty grand, she would get him out."

"Did they agree?" Felix asked.

"Of course they did, but it's my bet she'll never see the dough. She said she would work out a plan how to get him out. She's going to see them again Thursday night. She's going to show them where the alarms are and tell them about the guards."

Felix leaned forward. There was sweat on his face.

"Listen, Willie, if you're lying, I'll kill you," he said in a low vicious voice.

Willie flinched and cringed back.

"I'm giving it to you straight'," he whined.

Felix took out his handkerchief and wiped his face.

"What are they going to do - tell the police?"

"No. Lorelli made them promise to keep the police out of it."

Felix moved away from Willie.

"You haven't told anyone about this?" he asked.

"No," Willie said.

"You didn't tell Jacopo?"

"Of course I didn't. It's not his business." Willie began to feel a little more sure of himself now that Felix seemed to have got over the shock. He picked up his safety razor and began to scrape the stubble off his chin. "The old man ought to be pleased when I tell him. I'm going to ask him for a raise. He ought to come across."

Felix scarcely heard him. This was the end of Lorelli, he thought. Alsoni would hand her over to Englemann. The

thought turned him sick. He suddenly realized just how much Lorelli meant to him; the realization came as a shock. This might be his end too. Alsoni might not believe he hadn't anything to do with it. He might even think he had put Lorelli up to asking for the money. Fie glanced over at Willie who was now washing his face. There was nothing he could offer Willie that would make him hold his tongue. He knew that. Willie was a rat, and he'd be mad to trust him. He would take everything he was offered, and still go to Alsoni. If he was to save Lorelli, Willie had to be fixed, and he was suddenly determined to save her.

As Willie began to diy his face on a grubby towel, he said, "What do you think will happen to her? Think Englemann will work on her?"

Felix shrugged.

"I don't know," he said, forcing his voice to sound harsh, "and I don't care. She's asked for it and she'll get it."

Willie nodded.

"That's the way I figured it," he said. "It's nothing to do with me what happens to her. Think I could ask the old man for a bonus?" He opened a drawer and took out a clean shirt. "There's a car I saw in Florence the other week. If the old man shells out, I might be able to buy it."

"He'll give you something," Felix said and wandered over to where Willie's gun was hanging. He got between Willie and the gun. "Don't press him. If he doesn't offer you anything, I'll have a word with him."

Willie's face brightened.

"You will? That's fine. It's time I had a bit more money. I work hard enough for what I get."

Felix's hand went behind him, his fingers closed around the butt of Willie's gun and gently eased it out of the holster. He let the gun slip through his fingers until he was holding it by its barrel.

"You'd better hurry," he said. "The old man won't give you anything if you keep him waiting much longer."

Willie shook the shirt out of its folds and slipped into it.

"Yes," he said. "I've been too long already."

He turned to the mirror and began to comb his thin, greasy hair. He saw in the mirror Felix had moved forward. Their eyes met in the reflection of the mirror. The expression he saw on Felix's face suddenly turned him cold. He saw Felix's hand flash up. He opened his mouth to shout, but he knew he had left it too late. Then the butt of the gun smashed down on the top of his head and he fell limply forward, bouncing against the toilet basin. His dying body slid to the floor.

Chapter XI

THE TUNNEL

About ten minutes after Englemann had gone, Don unlocked the bracelet around his ankle and got to his feet. He knew he was taking a risk of being discovered, but he couldn't continue to sit and do nothing. He couldn't resist the temptation to explore.

He crossed the cave and stood at the mouth of the tunnel, peering into the darkness. Luck favoured him. His sharp eyes caught the glint of metal high up against the wall, and taking out his cigarette lighter, he thumbed the flame alight. In a bracket attached to the wall was clipped a long, chromium-plated flashlight; probably put there, he thought, in case of an electric power failure. The beam of the light, when he pressed down on the button, was powerful and told him the battery was comparatively new. He set off down the tunnel, passing the ramp on his left and continued on for some fifty yards before he came to a steel door that blocked any further progress. There was a rubber-covered button near the door, but although he pressed it several times, there was no response, and baffled, he stepped away from the door to examine it from head to foot in the light of his torch. It was set flush with the rock face, and when he pushed against it, it was immovable. He made his way back to the ramp, and climbing it, he reached the door he knew led into the corridor where Englemann's surgery was as well as the control room if what Lorelli had told him was correct. He pressed on the rubber-headed button he found by the door, heard a faint click and the door moved inwards. He peered into the brightly lit corridor. It was a temptation to go forward, but he resisted it. At least he knew he could get to the control room when he wanted to, but this wasn't the time. He would wait until Lorelli contacted him that night. He took hold of the steel rail on the door and pulled the door shut, then he went down the ramp to the tunnel again.

Having nothing better to do, he began a careful examination of the walls of the tunnel and he quickly made a discovery. Let into the stone wall at eye level and roughly about twenty feet apart were a number of small steel plates with small knobs in the centre of them. He took hold of one of the knobs and found the plate slid back, making a peep-hole that looked directly into a room equipped as an office. There was no one in the room, and Don closed the plate. He went along to the next plate and moved that aside. He found himself looking into Lorelli's bedroom.

Lorelli was seated at her desk. She was engrossed with pencil and paper, and Don guessed she was preparing a plan of the underground fortress which she had promised him.

He was about to call to her, when he heard a sound from the door. Lorelli started, dropped her pencil, grabbed up the sheet of paper she had been drawing on and pushed it into the top drawer of the desk.

The door rattled impatiently and Felix called, "Open up. I want to talk to you."

"I'm coming," Lorelli said. She hurriedly undid the buttons of her dress and mussed up her hair, then she ran over to the door and unlocked it. "I was changing."

"Since when do you lock the door when you're changing?" Felix asked, coming in and closing the door.

"I just turned the key without thinking." She moved over to the dressing table, sat down and began to brush her hair.

"What is it?"

Felix sat on the bed. He lit a cigarette and blew a thin stream of smoke towards the ceiling.

"Alsconi was asking what happened at the villa," he said.

The hairbrush she was using nearly slipped out of Lorelli's hand. She put it down and picked up a comb.

"He seemed to think it went off too easily," Felix went on. "I told him you had no trouble: that's right, isn't it?"

"Of course," Lorelli said curtly. "I told you what happened. You don't want me to go over it again, do you?"

"So it's definite the money will be paid into the Banca de Roma in four or five days?"

"Yes; anyway that's what Micklem's secretary said." Lorelli finished combing her hair. She reached for her handbag, opened it and took out her cigarette case. She lit a cigarette.

Felix saw her .25 automatic in the bag.

"That's fine," he said and got to his feet. "The old man's still a little doubtful about you, but I told him how well you carried this job out. I'm pleased with you." He came over to the dressing table. "I think I'll give you a new handbag as a reward for your cleverness." He picked up the handbag, moving a shade faster than Lorelli, whose hand had darted out to snatch the bag out of his reach. "This one's getting shabby."

"Please put it down!" Lorelli exclaimed, her voice shrill.

Felix looked at her. She saw then how cold, white and set his face was.

"You sound jumpy." He turned the bag over. "I think one of those new lizard skin jobs would suit you." He opened the bag and took out the .25.

Lorelli sat very still, staring up at him, her eyes wide open.

"You're spoiling the shape of the bag, carrying this in it," Felix went on. He put the bag on the dressing table, holding the gun in his right hand, the barrel pointing at Lorelli's feet.

She didn't say anything. She was rigid, her hands gripped between her knees.

"It's a nice little toy," Felix went on, turning the gun over. "At close quarters it could do a lot of damage." He slid out the clip, emptied the six bullets into his hand, removed the bullet from the breech, put the empty clip back and laid the gun down on the dressing table. "Safer unloaded, don't you think?" he went on and stood the seven bullets in a row by the gun.

Lorelli watched every movement, her heart beating so violently she had difficulty in breathing.

"Yes, I must see about a new handbag for you," Felix said and wandered back to the bed and sat down.

Lorelli felt sick with relief. For a horrible moment, she had wondered if Felix had guessed she was betraying him. The business with the gun shook her nerve. She picked up a nail buffer and began to polish her nails.

A long silence hung over the room. She looked out of the corners of her eyes at him. He was leaning back, his head against the wall, looking up at the ceiling. The expression on his face set her heart thumping again.

"I was worrying about you," he said suddenly. "It's a funny thing for me to worry about anyone, but I was about you."

"What do you mean?" she asked sharply. "What is there to worry about?"

"Odd, isn't it?" Felix said, ignoring her question. "You're the only woman I've really ever cared for. When I first met you, I had no idea I could get so fond of you. I sometimes wonder if you're as much in love with me as I am with you. Are you?"

Lorelli touched her dry lips with the tip of her tongue. The expression on his face, the tension in the room and these odd words warned her something badly was wrong.

"Aren't you being sentimental?" she said huskily. "You can't measure love. How can I possibly know if I love you more than you love me?"

He stubbed out his cigarette.

"Yes, I guess that's right, but you do still love me, don't you?" "Yes, of course." He looked over at her.

"Felix! What is it? Why are you looking like that at me?" Lorelli cried. "What's the matter?"

"You know you said you wanted to go to Buenos Aires? I've been thinking about that. If we did decide to go, what would we do for money?"

Lorelli stared at him. "But you said you wouldn't go."

"I can change my mind, can't I? If I thought we could get hold of some money..." he broke off and shrugged. "It costs a lot to live in hiding. Then there are the fares. We would have to fly. That costs money."

Felix's face hardened.

"Just how much money have you?"

"A half a million lire. It would be enough to get us there and to keep us for a month until I found something to do."

Felix shook his head.

"It's not enough. Alsconi would hunt for us. We need much more than that to be safe. You wouldn't dare earn a living. He has spies everywhere. You'd be spotted."

"It would be enough. Oh, Felix, please come with me." She leaned forward and beat her clenched fists on her knees.

"You must come with me!"

"Will you go alone if I don't come with you?" Felix asked, not looking at her.

There was a long pause. She hesitated, then controlling her agitation, she said, "No, I wouldn't leave you. Of course, I wouldn't, but you will come with me, won't you?"

Felix stood up.

"Well, at least I have the answer to my other question," he said. "Now I know just how much you love me."

"I - hope you do," Lorelli said.

He came over to her.

"So you didn't see Willie at the Trioni villa?" he said in a quiet, conversational tone.

For a moment, Lorelli didn't get the impact, then she felt as if a splinter of ice had been driven into her heart. She stared at Felix, her face blanching under her make-up, her eyes wide with terror.

"Willie?" she gasped. "Was he at the villa?"

"Of course," Felix said. "You don't imagine I'd let you go there without someone to take care of you in case there was trouble, do you?"

"Oh!"

She jumped to her feet and looked wildly around the room as if looking for a means of escape.

"Willie has just got back," Felix said, watching her. "Alsconi is waiting for him. He wants Willie to confirm you had no trouble at the villa."

Lorelli backed away from his fixed, glaring stare.

"You mad little fool!" he went on, his voice suddenly out of control. "Do you imagine you can get away with this?" He went to her and crowded her against the wall. "Do you?" His hands closed over her shoulders, his fingers digging into her flesh. "Willie heard everything that was said."

Lorelli's knees buckled. If he hadn't held her, she would have fallen. He pulled her over to the bed and let her drop on it. He stood over her, his fists clenched.

"You fool! So you planned to sell me out!" he went on furiously. "Two hundred and fifty grand! Do you think you'd ever have got your hands on the money?"

Lorelli shrank back.

"I had to do it! They'll pay the money. I know they will! It's our only chance to get away. The money is for both of us."

"Is it?" Felix laughed. "I gave you the chance to offer it to me and you didn't even mention it. So you wouldn't leave me? That's funny; when all the time you were planning to sneak away and lose yourself in Buenos Aires. Lose yourself? That's a laugh too. You're crazy to think you could get away. You wouldn't get as far as the boat. You wouldn't even get out of Siena!"

She struggled upright. Her face rigid with terror.

"You won't tell him? You won't give me away?" She scrambled off the bed and down on to her knees, catching hold of his hand. "You can't tell him, Felix! You said you loved me. You know what he would do to me! Felix! Don't do it!"

Don who was watching was shocked by her abject terror.

Felix jerked his hand out of her grip and moved away from her.

"He asked me if you would like to go to Buenos Aires. He's planning to start operations there. He thinks you should go."

Lorelli closed her eyes.

"Then he knows?"

"It's possible. It might be a coincidence, but at least it shows how crazy your idea is."

"We can find another place," she said feverishly. "There must be dozens of safe places..."

"Don't kid yourself," Felix said savagely. "You're going no place."

"If you tell him, I'll kill myself. I'll never let Englemann touch me."

"Very dramatic," Felix sneered. "Okay, go ahead and kill yourself. Do you think I care?"

She began to cry, resting her arm on the bed and her head on her arm.

Felix lit a cigarette. His hand was so shaky he had trouble holding the match steady.

"All right, all right, cut it out," he said. "I'm not telling him. I must be stark, raving mad to do this for you, but I won't tell him."

She looked up.

"You mean it?"

"I mean it. Now shut up snivelling!"

"But what about Willie?" She got off her knees and sat on the bed. "He knows! We can't trust him! He'll tell Alsconi."

Felix showed his teeth in a mirthless smile.

"I was wondering how long it'd take before the nickel dropped. I've fixed Willie."

"But you can't trust him..." Lorelli began, then seeing the expression on Felix's face, she stifled a scream.

"Willie will stay fixed." He came over to her. "We're both in this up to our necks. Alsconi's waiting now for Willie's report, and Willie's in my room with his head smashed in. You're full of bright ideas: how do we get out of this jam?"

"You've killed Willie?" Lorelli gasped, staring at him in horror.

"What else could I do? How much have you got in cash here?"

"I don't know - not much."

Felix snatched up her bag, opened it and emptied the contents on to the dressing table.

"Is that all - five thousand lire?"

"Yes."

"How much in the bank?"

"I've told you: a half a million lire."

"I have four million. That'll get us somewhere. We've got to get out and get out fast before Willie's found."

The sound of the telephone bell made him stiffen. They looked at each other.

"Answer it!" he said.

With an unsteady hand, Lorelli picked up the receiver.

"Is Mr Felix there?" Carlos asked. "The boss wants a word with him."

Lorelli looked across at Felix, sick terror in her eyes.

"Alsoni wants to speak to you," she said and held out the receiver.

Through the peephole, Don watched Felix's sweating face. This ten minutes of drama had held him rooted, but now his mind was already at work, wondering how this change of situation would affect him. If these two panicked and bolted, he would be cut off from Lorelli's help, and without her help he knew his chances of getting out of the cave were slight. He watched Felix cross the room and take the receiver from Lorelli's shaking hand.

"I am waiting for Willie," Alsoni said softly in his ear. "Where is he?"

"I'm waiting for him too," Felix said. "Maybe he's had a breakdown. I'd better drive down and see what's happened to him."

"He hasn't had a breakdown," Alsoni said. "I sent Menotto to look for him and he tells me the car is at the bottom of the drive, but there's no sign of Willie."

"I'll come up," Felix said.

"That won't be necessary," Alsoni said. "You can stay where you are." He chuckled, a sound that made Felix stiffen.

"You'll probably have to anyway," and the line went dead.

Felix replaced the receiver. There was a look in his eyes that brought Lorelli to her feet.

"Wait here," he said curtly and went quickly out of the room.

Lorelli ran to the door and looked out into the corridor, then she turned and came back into the room. Watching her, Don saw terror was turning to hysteria. If they were to make a move, he had to do it now.

"Lorelli!" he said sharply.

Lorelli screamed and jerked around, her eyes wildly searching the room.

"I'm here," Don said, pushing the slot back as far as it would go. "It's Micklem."

She located the opening in the wall through which he was looking and she backed away.

"Pull yourself together," he said. "You want the money to get away. I have it. We must help each other. Give me the gun!"

"No!" Lorelli said. "I'm not going to help you. I'm getting out of here."

"How far do you think you'll get?" Don said. "Don't be a fool. Give me the gun. If you get in his way, he'll wipe you out as he wiped Willie out. You can't trust him. I can take care of you. Give me the gun!"

He was counting on her terror. The snap in his voice seemed to hypnotize her. She picked up the gun.

"And the cartridges - hurry!" he said.

She brought the gun and the cartridges over to the opening.

"Quick!" Don said as he saw her hesitate. "Give it to me before he gets back!"

She slid the gun through the opening, then she handed in the seven bullets.

"Don't lose your nerve," Don said. "I'll take care of you." She then seemed to realize what she had done; she had given him her only protection not only from Felix, but worse still, from Englemann.

"No! Give it to me back!" she cried. "I didn't mean to let you have it. I must have it back!" She made as if to thrust her hand

through the opening, but Don slid the plate across just as Felix came into the room.

Lorelli spun around. One look at Felix's white, sweating face sent her hands to her mouth.

"I can't open the door at the end of the passage," Felix said, the edge of panic in his voice. "The current seems to be cut off."

Lorelli shut her eyes and sagged against the wall. He went over to the telephone and lifted the receiver.

Carlos said, "Yes?"

His negroid voice was as thick and as smooth as black treacle.

"Something seems to have gone wrong with the door at the end of the passage," Felix said. He had to make a tremendous effort to keep his voice steady. "I can't open it."

"That's right, Mr Felix," Carlos said cheerfully. "Boss's orders. He told me to cut the current off."

Felix suddenly felt he wanted to be sick.

"Okay. I'll have a word with him," he said. "He can't know I'm down here."

"He knows all right." There was a jeering note in Carlos's voice. "He asked who was down here before he told me to cut off the current."

"Put me through to him!" Felix snarled.

"Right away, Mr Felix." Carlos pulled out the plug, then rang Alsoni's room.

"Yes?" Alsoni asked.

"Mr Felix wants you, boss."

"Does he? Tell him I'm busy," Alsoni said. "I'll talk to him tomorrow morning and not before."

"Yes, boss," Carlos said, his thick lips coming off his teeth in a delighted grin. He got back to Felix. "Sorry, Mr Felix, but the boss says he's busy. He'll talk to you tomorrow morning."

Felix slammed down the receiver. Sweat ran down his face as he turned to look at Lorelli.

"You clever little..." The word he used made Lorelli flinch. "We're trapped down here. Alsoni's on to us. He's cut the current off, and there's no way out. I hope you're pleased with yourself and your bright ideas."

Lorelli collapsed into a chair. She held her head between her hands.

Felix went out of the room at a run and into his room. He flung back the door and entered, not looking at Willie's body that lay half under the toilet basin. His .45 automatic lay on the top of his chest of drawers. He snatched it up, and as he was about to push it into the shoulder holster he wore under his coat, he paused. The weight of the gun in his hand told him it wasn't loaded, and yet he knew an hour or so ago, before he had killed Willie, he had checked the gun, making sure it was loaded.

With shaking hands, he pulled out the clip and found it empty. He turned swiftly, jerked open a drawer in the chest for the box of cartridges he always kept by him. It usually rested in the right-hand corner under a pile of shirts. When he moved the shirts, he saw the empty hollow where the box had been, but the box itself was no longer there.

He had used Willie's gun when he had hit him over the head. He had dropped the gun beside Willie's dead body. Now he looked for it, but couldn't see it. He kicked Willie's body aside, but the gun wasn't there.

He stood still, his heart pounding, his hands clenched at his sides. Someone - probably Carlos - had been in his room while he had been wasting time talking to Lorelli and had unloaded his gun, taken his slugs and also Willie's gun.

Well, at least he had Lorelli's gun, he thought. It was only a toy, but it was better than nothing. He could guess what would happen. When Alsoni was ready he would tell Carlos to move in and take him. Felix knew he wouldn't stand a chance against Carlos unless he had the .25 which would slow Carlos down if it didn't stop him.

He went back to Lorelli's room.

She was still holding her head in her hands. He scarcely looked at her. He went to the dressing table for the .25. He had left it there with the seven bullets arranged in a neat row beside it and he could scarcely believe his eyes when he saw it was no longer there.

"Where's your gun?" he said, his voice off-key.

Lorelli started and looked up.

"Where's the gun?" he repeated.

"Why? What do you...?"

She jumped to her feet when she saw his vicious expression.

"Where's the gun?" he snarled, moving towards her.

"Don't look like that at me!" She backed against the wall. "Keep away from me!"

Felix came up to her. He grabbed hold of the front of her dress with his left hand and pulled her against him.

"Where is it?"

"I gave it to Micklem."

"You-what!"

"He asked for it. I wasn't thinking. I - - He..."

"Micklem? Are you crazy? What are you yammering about?" Felix shook her. "I want the gun! Where is it?"

"There was an opening in the wall. Micklem was..."

She broke off and screamed as Felix's open hand struck her on the side of her face, jolting her head back.

"Where's the gun?" he shouted. "You little fool! Someone has unloaded my gun. Carlos can move in now and take us.

How do you think either of us can stop that black ape without a gun? Where is it? Do you hear? Where is it?"

Lorelli's eyes rolled back and she sagged against him in a faint.

Don had seen and listened to this scene. He now quietly closed the slot. He had the gun, and he was now on equal terms with anyone who tried to stop him. Lorelli would have to look after herself for the moment. He told himself he would do something about her later. He paused only long enough to load the gun, then he set off down the tunnel to the ramp, climbed it and when he reached the steel door, he pressed the rubber-headed button. The door moved inwards, and holding the .25 in his hand, the safety catch back and his finger on the trigger, he stepped into the lighted corridor.

He looked to right and left, then he shut the door, having first made sure he could open it by another rubber-headed button on the corridor side of the door.

Opposite to where he was standing was the door leading to the bathroom; the door further up led to Englemann's surgery. The door opposite must be the control room door. At the far end of the corridor was the steel door that led to Alsoni's room. Moving quickly and silently, Don made his way down the passage to this door, pressed on the rubber-headed button, but nothing happened. He tried once more, then gave up. He returned to the control-room door and paused to examine it. The door was of solid steel. There was no handle nor bolt to it. Don decided not to rush his fences. He would make his bid to escape that night. It would be easier to get through the grounds under cover of darkness than now.

He looked down the corridor. There were three more doors to his left. Carlos would be in the control room. Englemann should be in his surgery. He went over to the door on the left-hand side of the bathroom, listened, then hearing nothing, he turned the handle and eased the door open. The room beyond was in darkness. He entered and closed the door.

Turning on his flashlight, he sent the beam around the small room which was furnished as a bedroom. He found the light switch and turned on the light. From the books in the bookcase that ran the length of one wall, he guessed this must be Englemann's bedroom.

The telephone on the bedside table caught his eye. He went over to it, and lifted the receiver. His face lit up with a delighted grin as he heard the dialling tone that told him he was connected to an outside line.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, the .25 in his left hand, he dialled the number of the Trioni villa. The villa's bell had scarcely begun to ring when there was a click on the line and Harry's voice growled, "Ullo? Who's that?"

"Scarcely a respectful way to address your lord and master," Don said softly. "Can't you do better than that?"

He heard Harry gasp.

"Is that you, Mr Micklem?" he bawled.

"Sure, it's me," Don said, jerking the receiver away from his ear. "Pipe down: you nearly deafened me."

"Where are you, sir?" Harry said, slightly lowering his voice. "Blimey! We've been worried sick about you."

"I'm still underground, but I've managed to gain a little freedom, and I've been lucky to find a telephone, but I'm a long way from getting out."

"We're going to fix that, sir," Harry said excitedly. "It's all laid on for tonight. Giuseppe is coming with a bunch of his pals. That red-head's sold the gang out. Miss Rigby..."

"I know all about that, but it's come unstuck," Don broke in. "A character named Willie was listening to your plans. He's given her away. At the moment she's trapped down here with me, the negro and another character called Felix."

"Oh!" Don could hear the excitement drain out of Harry's voice. "So what do we do?"

"You'll have to leave it to me to find my own way out," Don said. "How many men is Giuseppe bringing?"

"Six."

"Fine. Now listen, Harry, your job is to take care of the four guards and the dogs, so once I'm out of the house I'll have a clear run. The dogs will take a bit of handling. I'll leave it to you to work out how you're going to fix them. I don't think you have a hope of breaking in here. The doors are of three-inch steel and they're electrically controlled. I'll make my attempt to break out at half-past one tonight. Get your men outside the walls by then. Give me twenty minutes and then move in. I've got a gun. If you hear shooting, break into the house. If nothing happens by two-fifteen, you'll know I've come unstuck."

"If that happens," Harry said grimly, "we're coming in after you, even if we have to pull the joint apart, brick by brick."

"Don't kid yourself, Harry, it'll be a bigger job than you think. The entrance to where I am now is in the big front room with the casement windows leading to the terrace. The door is on the left-hand side as you enter the casement windows. It wants finding. The police missed it."

"We'll find it," Harry said. "I told Giuseppe to bring some dynamite with him. We'll get to you somehow."

"Give me a chance to get to you first. If I don't show up by two-fifteen, the ball is in your court. I'd better get under cover now, Harry."

"Okay, sir, and good luck," Harry said. "We'll be right with you."

Don replaced the receiver. He got to his feet and crossed to the door.

Englemann said from behind him: "Don't move, Mr Micklem, or I'll have to shoot you."

Don stood motionless.

"Drop that gun," Englemann went on.

Don let the gun slide through his fingers. It fell on the carpet with a little thud. Then slowly, he looked over his shoulder.

Part of the bookcase had swung inwards and Englemann stood in the lighted opening, a .38 in his hand

Chapter XII

THEWATERTRAP

As Harry put down the receiver, Marian came hurrying into the lounge.

"That was Mr Micklem," Harry said and grinned when he saw Marian's face light up.

"I thought from the way you were shouting it must be," Marian said. "Is he all right, Harry? Where is he?"

"He's fine, miss, but he's still down there. He's managed to get hold of a gun, and he thinks he'll be able to break out. He says he's going to have a go at half-past one tonight." He looked at his watch. "It's just on six-thirty. Giuseppe should be here any moment now. We're to be in the grounds, ready to help him when he breaks out."

The sound of his excited voice brought Cherry into the room. He was told the news. Harry went on to give them a full account of his conversation with Don.

"If this man Willie was watching the villa," Marian said, "it's possible he or another of the gang is still watching us."

Harry thumped his forehead with his fist.

"You're right, miss. I should have thought of that. I'll see if I can spot anyone."

"Be careful, Harry," Marian said anxiously. "We'd better wait until Giuseppe comes..."

Harry grinned.

"Don't worry about me. If he's there, I'll find him before he finds me. We don't want him reporting back that we've got reinforcements."

Cherry said, "I'm coming with you."

"This isn't your line," Harry said patiently. "You stay here with Miss Rigby. I can handle this."

Cherry's fat face turned obstinate.

"I intend to walk down to the gates," he said. "He may try to make a bolt for it if he sees you. I shall be in the position to head him off."

"You'll probably be in the position to collect a thick ear," Harry said. "These blokes are tough. Better leave him to me."

"I shall have my sword stick," Cherry said. "I can more than look after myself."

He marched out before Harry could argue further, put on his black felt hat, picked up the walking-stick that concealed the thin-bladed sword and set off down the drive.

Harry shook his head.

"Obstinate old goat," he said, "but he's got lots of guts. I'll get off." He opened a drawer in the desk and took out Don's Beretta. "Here you are, miss, just in case Willie or his pals head this way. Shoot him in the leg if you spot him, but don't shut your eyes when you pull the trigger."

"I don't want it. You must have it, Harry."

"Not for me," Harry said. "I can get along all right with these," and he clenched his big knuckly fists, grinning.

Unaware what was in store for him, Jacopo sat in a thicket, seventy-five yards or so from the villa. The evening sun was comfortably warm, the apple he was eating was sweet and crisp, and he was contented in mind and body. Jacopo liked nothing better than to sit in the shade and relax. He was the least important member of the organization, and he was proud of it. He had no ambition, no thirst for money, women or cars as Willie had. All he wanted was a life of peace and to do as little work as possible. He was one of a dozen men Alsconi employed merely to shadow people. His job was to sit by the hour in cafes, hotel lobbies or in cars, waiting for one of Alsconi's victims to show himself. It was the job Jacopo was born to do, and apart from his ability to sit and do nothing for hours and not to raise suspicion, he had no other money-making talents.

He watched Cherry come out of the house and stride down the drive towards the gates and wondered casually where he was going. His instructions were to watch the villa. He was only to report to Felix if the police arrived. He imagined Cherry was going for an evening stroll. He wasn't given the chance of seeing Harry steal out of the villa for Harry left by the rear exit and melted into the shrubs like a ghost.

During the war, Harry had served in a Commando unit, and he hadn't forgotten his training. One of his specialities had been the knifing of German sentries. Many a time he and other members of his unit had been landed on the sand dunes of France. Harry had gone forward alone, moving soundlessly, until he had located the sentry. He had reached the unsuspecting man and had driven his knife into his neck and the sentry had died without knowing who had struck the blow.

Jacopo wouldn't have relaxed as he munched his apple if he had known that Harry was moving silently in his direction. As it was, he flicked the core of the apple away and turned his thoughts to Willie. He wondered what information Willie had that he was so excited about. Jacopo wrinkled his nose in disgust. He had no time for Willie: all the man could think of was money, women and cars.

Jacopo's one interest in life was singing. He had a natural tenor voice, and if he hadn't been so hopelessly lazy he might have become a second-rate tenor in some third-rate opera company. He hummed a snatch of *La donna è mobile* under his breath which was a mistake for Harry was within forty yards of him. Harry hadn't seen him, but his sharp ears caught the hummed tune and his blunt-featured, pugnacious face lit up with a grin.

Jacopo felt in his pocket for another apple. He wished now he had thought of bringing a bottle of wine along with him. It would be another two hours before Menotto relieved him. Menotto was another of Alsconi's watchers. He and Jacopo got on well together. They were both lazy, both unambitious and both disliked violence. He found the apple, rubbed it on his sleeve and looked at it with a contented expression on his thin, swarthy face.

As he was about to bite into it, Harry who was by now within three yards of him seemed to Jacopo to rise out of the ground and drop on him.

Jacopo nearly died of fright as Harry's hands closed around his throat. He felt steel-like fingers that bruised his flesh tighten unbearably on each side of his neck. He had one brief, horrible moment as he realized he was being killed, then a red light flashed before his terrified eyes and he plunged down into darkness.

Harry got to his feet. Cupping his mouth with his hands, he bawled at the top of his voice, "Hey, Cherry!"

He then took from his pocket two lengths of cord he had purposely brought with him and set about tying Jacopo's wrists and ankles together.

Puffing and panting, Cherry came lumbering up the drive, the sword drawn and flashing in the sun.

Harry waved to him.

"I've got him all right," he said. "I didn't want you to get sunstroke standing out in the open."

Cherry snorted. He came and stood over the unconscious form of Jacopo and gave him a poke with his sword.

"Hey, steady on," Harry said. "That sticker's dangerous."

"I wish I'd caught him," Cherry said darkly. "I'd have given him something to remember me by."

Harry hoisted Jacopo up and slung him over his broad shoulder. "I bet you would, but I want this bird to talk. Come on. Let's get back and bring him round. Maybe he'll be able to tell us how we can get in to Mr Micklem."

"If he doesn't, he'll be sorry," Cherry said, who was obviously thirsting for blood.

Harry marched off to the villa where Marian was standing on the steps watching for him. Her eyes grew wide when she saw the unconscious body hanging over his shoulder, and Cherry, his sword flashing in the dying rays of the sun, marching behind.

"I've got him," Harry said a little unnecessarily as he came up the veranda steps. He dumped Jacopo down on the boards. "A bucket of water might fit the bill, Cherry."

"I'll get it," Cherry said, and hurried off.

"Will he be all right, Harry?" Marian asked, looking down at Jacopo's slack, white face.

"Right as ninepence, miss," Harry said cheerfully. "I only just squeezed him a bit. Scared the life out of him, but no real damage done."

Cherry came back with a bucket of water and without waiting for instructions, emptied the bucket over Jacopo's head and shoulders.

Seconds later, spluttering and gasping, Jacopo was sitting up, his back resting against the veranda rail.

Harry knelt beside him.

"Listen, Joe," he said in a slow distinct tone, "can you understand English?"

Jacopo nodded, his eyes bulging.

"Right," Harry said. "I want to know how we can get to Mr Micklem. I have an idea you can tell me." He brought up his fist and touched Jacopo's nose with it. "You can either tell me willingly or I can force it out of you. That's up to you, but you'll tell me sooner or later, don't make any mistake about that."

Jacopo looked into the cold, grey eyes and what he saw there made him shudder.

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know, signore" he said hurriedly.

"That's the boy," Harry said approvingly. He unfastened the cord around Jacopo's ankles and then caught hold of his sopping shirt front and hauled him to his feet. "Come on inside and tell me all about it." He led him into the lounge.

"Perhaps you'll take down what he's going to say, miss?" he went on to Marian as he shoved Jacopo on to a straightback chair. "I know where Mr Micklem is," he went on to Jacopo. "I've talked to him within the past half-hour on the telephone, so be careful what you say. The first lie you tell me I'll punch you in the right eye. Understand?"

Cringing back, Jacopo said he understood.

Alsconi was mixing himself a whisky and soda when Menotto came in through the casement windows.

Alsconi paused, the ice tongs in his hand while he stared at Menotto.

"What do you want?" he asked softly. "I didn't call you."

Menotto's fat, swarthy face was pale, and sweat glistened on his forehead. His dark curls lay limp; his wide, dark eyes were frightened.

"They've got Jacopo," he stammered.

Alsconi selected a cube of ice and placed it in the glass.

"Who has got Jacopo?" he asked, moving to his chair. He sat down.

"The people at the villa. I went down there to take over. I saw one of them carry Jacopo into the house," Menotto said.

"About ten minutes later, two cars arrived. In them were six men, Italians. They didn't look as if they were from the police."

Alsconi drank half the whisky, then he put down the glass and scratched the side of his nose.

"I see," he said. "I see."

Menotto watched him fearfully as he stared blankly at the opposite wall.

Alsconi realized immediately that this was his end in Siena. He realized too that he had made a final mistake in sending Jacopo to watch the villa. Willie would never have been caught; he had been a professional. Jacopo was nothing better than an amateur and he would talk. He knew too much. He knew where Micklem was. He knew of Alsconi's activities. He was the proof the police wanted: yes, a fatal mistake.

Alsconi looked at Menotto.

"You and I will leave here in half an hour," he said. "Bring the car to the side entrance. You will find in my office five wooden boxes. Put them in the car. There is a handbag in my bedroom, ready packed, put that in the car too. Pack a bag for yourself. We shall not be coming back."

"Yes, signore" Menotto said and went quickly from the room.

Alsconi got to his feet and carrying his half-empty glass to the liquor cabinet, he poured more whisky into the glass. He had made preparations for this situation more than a year ago. He had rented a villa in Palermo, and in the villa he had installed a strong-room that now held the bulk of his fortune. He would fly down there that night. His yacht was ready in the harbour. The money would be transferred to the yacht and he would sail for some out-of-the-way port in North Africa. It was as simple as that. Then he remembered Crantor, and he frowned. Crantor was bringing with him fifteen thousand pounds sterling in five-pound notes, and Alsconi was short of English currency.

Crantor was coming by air-taxi. He would take off from a field near Rye where no prying customs official would inquire into the luggage he was carrying. He would land on a disused American Air Force landing strip forty miles from Siena.

Alsconi decided he would have to meet the aircraft. He was certainly not going to make a present of fifteen thousand pounds to Crantor. The obvious thing to do was to take the air-taxi and land somewhere in Palermo under the cover of darkness. But the air-taxi presented difficulties. There was room for only one passenger. Crantor would have to take Alsconi's car and drive to Palermo. Menotto? Alsconi shook his head. He couldn't trust Menotto out of his sight. It was a pity for Menotto was a first-class cook, but he

would have to be wiped out. It would be fatal to let him fall into the hands of the police.

It would also be fatal to let Englemann and Carlos be caught by the police. Englemann would talk. Alsconi scratched the side of his nose. He was fond of Carlos, and yet the huge negro was too conspicuous. He couldn't keep him with him any longer. Carlos would be instantly recognized wherever he was, and his recognition would lead the police to Alsconi. No, Carlos would have to go too.

Alsconi prided himself on being able to make quick and ruthless decisions. Felix and Lorelli must be wiped out.

Englemann and Carlos must go with them. Micklem, of course, must also die. It was convenient that the five of them

were underground. They could be wiped out without difficulty.

He left the room. Moving quickly for a man of his bulk, he made his way to the boiler-room at the rear of the house. In the boiler-room were the fuse boxes that controlled the whole of the elaborate electrical system of the underground quarters. He snapped down the four switches that would put the control room out of operation, then he returned to the lounge. He went to the casement windows and looked out.

Menotto was loading the Cadillac with the five wooden boxes he had taken from Alsoni's office.

Alsoni walked over to his desk and picked up the telephone receiver.

"Yes, boss?" Carlos said instantly.

"Connect me with Felix," Alsoni said. "He's with Miss Lorelli I believe. When I have talked to him, I want to talk to you."

"Yes, boss," Carlos said. "Hold on a moment."

It took a few seconds before Felix's voice came on the line.

"Ah, Felix," Alsoni said. "I had planned to talk to you tomorrow, but events appear to be moving faster than I had anticipated."

Felix said in a hard, loud voice, "What's the idea? Carlos says the current has been cut off on your orders. I want to talk to you. I have something to tell you."

"Nothing you have to tell me would interest me now," Alsoni said. "I have very little time. I am about to leave here for good. Jacopo has been stupid enough to get himself caught. I don't have to tell you what that will mean: You will not be coming with me. Since in the past your services have been satisfactory, I will waste a few moments to tell you why you will remain where you are. In your room and in Lorelli's room are hidden microphones: they are connected to tape recorders. Every now and then I check on your conversations. Lorelli's treachery and your attitude to her made interesting listening. Had you dealt with her as ruthlessly as you dealt with Willie, you wouldn't be in the position you are in now. But there it is. I warned you I should hold you responsible for her. You must now pay for your lapse. You have had a good run for your money. I am about to open the vents that will drain the lake into your quarters. People who act like rats must expect to die like rats." He replaced the receiver as Felix began to shout wildly at him.

Menotto came in.

"The car is ready, sir," he said.

"Ah, yes," Alsoni said.

There seemed no point in taking Menotto with him now. It would be easier to get rid of him here than out in the open.

"Move a little to your right, Menotto," he said.

"To the right, signore" Menotto asked blankly.

"Yes: you know your right from your left, don't you?"

"Yes, signore" Menotto said and moved a few steps to his right so that he was now in direct line with the hidden gun in the desk.

"Thank you," Alsoni said. "That will do perfectly."

His long, immaculately manicured finger rested for a brief moment on the ivory button on his desk, then smiling at the puzzled-faced Menotto, he pressed on the button.

Felix flung down the telephone receiver. His handsome face was chalk-white and there was naked panic in his eyes.

"He's wiping us out!" he said hoarsely. "He's letting the water in. He's going to drown us!"

Lorelli screamed. She darted to the door, flung it open and ran out into the corridor. Felix followed her. While she began to pound on the steel door at the end of the corridor with her fists, Felix ran the other way to the end room that was used as a store-room. He found there a four-foot crowbar which he grabbed up and running back along the corridor he shoved Lorelli out of his way and began to pound on the steel door with the butt of the bar. "Look!" Lorelli cried. "It's coming in now!" Felix paused to look over his shoulder. Through a six-inch vent on either side of the corridor came a trickle of water.

Cursing, Felix renewed his onslaught on the door. The clanging noise he made was heard by Carlos who had come out of the control room, his great black eyes rolling, and was standing undecided, looking up and down the corridor for a way of escape. The noise was also heard by Don and Englemann as they faced each other and Englemann's lined face tightened at the sound.

"Someone appears to be knocking," Don said mildly. "Don't let me stop you if you want to see who it is." Englemann said, "Sit down in that chair." Don moved over to the chair indicated and sat down. He watched Englemann circle around him until he reached the door that led into the corridor. Then he saw water in the far corner of the room, seeping across the floor.

"Does that mean anything to you, doctor?" he asked and pointed to the rapidly increasing puddle of water.

Englemann stared, his face turning yellow, then he threw open the door and stepped into the corridor.

Don slid from his chair, picked up the .25 and holding it down by his side, he moved into the corridor. Out there, there was an inch of water on the floor. Englemann leaned against the wall, his face ghastly. Carlos was fumbling at the bolts of the door at the end of the corridor. Don took all this in with one quick glance, then he stepped back into Englemann's bedroom and closed the door. Water was coming in rapidly through the two vents in the wall and it now covered the whole surface of the floor. Don splashed across to the telephone, lifted the receiver and heard with relief the dialling tone. He dialled the number of the Trioni villa.

"Marian?" he said when he heard Marian's voice on the line. "Has Giuseppe arrived yet?"

The urgent note in his voice warned her not to waste time asking questions. "Yes, with five others."

"Tell Harry to come up here right away," Don went on. "Tell him to cancel all other arrangements we made. There are five of us down here and water's coming in fast. If we're not out quickly, we're not going to get out."

"I'll tell him."

Don heard the note of alarm in her voice.

"Keep the line open," he said. "I may be back. I want to find out what's happening."

"Yes," Marian said.

He laid down the receiver. The water was now above his ankles and rising fast. He crossed the room and looked out into the corridor.

Carlos had opened the steel door. Felix and Lorelli had come through into his section of the corridor and so had the water. It was up to their knees and rising fast.

"Get that door shut!" Don exclaimed and waded out into the corridor. "Here, you! Give me a hand with it."

The four of them stared at him blankly. Then Carlos went with him to the door he had just opened and together they tried to force the door shut against the inrush of water. It was only when Felix joined them that their combined efforts succeeded. When they had shut and bolted the door, the rise of water slackened a little.

"What's happening?" Don demanded. "We're all in this work together. Where's the water coming from?"

"It's tapped in from the lake," Felix said. "There's no way of stopping it now the valves are open."

"My men are on their way here now," Don said. "They'll be here in ten minutes."

"They won't get to us," Felix said. "If they turn on the current now to open the doors, the whole place will be electrified and we'll be cooked."

"They'll get to us all right," Don said.

The water was rising fast now. It was nearly up to his waist. He reached out and caught hold of Lorelli who was having trouble keeping upright.

"Can we get to the stairs that lead to Alsoni's room?" he asked Carlos.

The big negro, his face grey, his eyes rolling, nodded. "Well, come on then," Don said impatiently. "That's the way they'll break in, and up there we'll be out of the water."

Pushing Lorelli ahead of him, he struggled down the passage to the steel door that shut off the stairs. Carlos and Felix followed him, but Englemann remained, leaning against the wall, as if stunned by fear.

"You'd better bring your pal along," Don said to Felix as he tried to open the door.

"To hell with him," Felix snarled.

"Give me a hand with this," Don said to Carlos, but although they both put forth their utmost strength, the weight of water against the door held it fast. "Let's have the crowbar." Felix handed it to him.

While Carlos strained on the door, Don managed to get the claws of the crowbar between the door and the post. Felix joined him and they levered the door back. As the water flowed past him into the short passage to the stairs, the strain against the door lessened, and they managed to force it right back.

Carlos and Felix made a dive for the stairs as a sudden rush of water came down the corridor, lifting Lorelli off her feet. She screamed. Don, nearly knocked off his feet, made a grab at her and missed. He saw her go under and then reappear further down the corridor.

Englemann had been knocked down by the rush of water. He came spluttering to the surface. The water was now only three feet from the ceiling of the passage, and was rising fast.

Don went into a racing dive towards Lorelli. He had to swim past Englemann whose groping hands caught hold of Don's coat and dragged him down.

Don closed with him. For a long moment Englemann fought desperately, his hands clutching at Don's throat. Then Don broke his hold and threw him off and turning, went after Lorelli. He reached her side as Englemann came to the surface, his face livid with fear. Lorelli screamed as Englemann clutched hold of her. Don hit him in the face, pulled Lorelli clear of him and shouted to her, "Don't struggle. Let me handle you."

By now they were only a few inches from the ceiling.

"Catch hold of my coat," he went on, and swam with quick, powerful strokes to the open doorway, towing her behind him. He got her through the doorway, then turning, he pushed her ahead of him until they reached the bottom of the stairs. He hesitated, wondering if he should go back for Englemann, then seeing the water had already reached the ceiling of the corridor, decided against it. He got Lorelli on to the steps while the water swirled around them, then half-carrying her, half-pushing her, he got her up the steps to the small landing above where Carlos and Felix were.

Felix was examining the steel door.

"We're not going to get this damn thing open," he said. "It fits too tight."

Don joined him. One look at the door showed him Felix was right.

"Only if the electric current's on, and if it's turned on now, we'll probably be electrocuted."

"We'll take it in turns to signal," Don said. "We've got to let my chaps know where we are."

He picked up the crowbar and began tapping on the door.

Then suddenly the lights went out and they were left in black, suffocating darkness.

"It's a wonder that didn't happen before," Don said. "The last of the fuses must have blown."

He continued his tapping.

"The water's rising," Lorelli said suddenly. "It's round my feet."

Carlos crowded up on to the top step, pushing Felix back.

"Get out of my way," he snarled.

Felix, suddenly knee-deep in water, panicked. He grabbed hold of Carlos and tried to get back to his original position. Don heard Carlos grunt, then there was the sound of a heavy blow and a groan, followed by a splash.

Lorelli screamed again.

Don reached out into the darkness with groping fingers. He touched Carlos's sleeve. Snarling in panic, the great negro turned on him, his hands grabbing Don's coat front. He swept Don off his feet. Don hooked his leg around Carlos's thigh and caught hold of his neck with both hands. Carlos hit him a sledgehammer blow in the body. Don's fingers slid down the great throat until they reached the artery, then he squeezed with all the strength in his hands. He got another punch that sickened him, then Carlos lost his balance, and together they fell off the steps and rolled into the water.

Under the cold, suffocating water, Don felt himself bumping down the steps into the submerged corridor. Carlos's grip slackened. Don made a tremendous effort, and threw the negro off, then he fought his way to the surface, reached one of the steps that was just clear of the water, and as he got one knee on it, he felt Carlos's fingers close around his ankle. He kicked back, but his foot missed Carlos and he was jerked into the water again. He had just time to draw in a deep breath before he sank. He groped around in the water for Carlos, but couldn't find him, then he broke surface.

The light on the landing suddenly glimmered, making a tiny orange glow.

In the dim light he saw Carlos was standing on the lower step, his great lips drawn back, his white teeth gleaming.

Don swam towards him and as he reached for the step, Carlos kicked out at him, his boot narrowly missing Don's face as Don threw himself sideways. He looked beyond Carlos to where Lorelli stood at the head of the steps, watching. He knew in a few minutes the rising water would bring him within reach of the huge boot. Unless Lorelli did something, he had the choice of drowning or having his head kicked in.

Lorelli acted. Picking up the crowbar, she crept down the steps until she was within range, and then swinging the iron bar above her head, she aimed a vicious blow at Carlos.

The negro half-turned, threw up his arm, but was a fraction late. The bar caught him on the top of his head and he fell slackly forward, sliding into the water.

Don made a grab at him, caught his coat, but his weight was too much for Don's failing strength. As he began to sink himself, he let go of Carlos and kicking out feebly, swam to where Lorelli, up to her waist in water, was holding out her hand to him. She pulled him, gasping, on to a submerged step. He heaved himself further out of the water. Then as he stood upright, he heard a faint shout that came through the steel door at the head of the stairs.

Catching Lorelli by her hand, Don staggered up the steps, as the shout came again.

Chapter XIII

THE LAST LAUGH

Water was above his knees as Don, his arm around Lorelli, reached the top step. They leaned against the steel door.

"Is that you, Harry?" Don shouted.

"It's me all right, sir," Harry shouted back. "I'm trying to get the door open. Can I use dynamite?"

"No!" Don shouted. "We're right by the door and we can't get away from it. The water's up to us and rising fast."

"Okay, I'll fix it somehow," Harry said. "Can you hang on for five minutes?"

"It'll have to be faster than that," Don said as a sudden surge of water nearly had him off his feet.

"I'll fix it," Harry said.

Lorelli clung to Don.

"They won't do it," she said. "They can't do it."

"I've never known Harry to be beaten yet," Don said, trying to sound more cheerful than he felt. He couldn't see how Harry could get them out in time. "Hold on to me and take it easy."

The water had risen to Lorelli's shoulders. In the dim light, her face was drawn and white.

They waited as the minutes dragged by, the water rising inch by inch.

"You still there, sir?" Harry's voice demanded suddenly.

"Yes. What's happening?"

"I've sent three of Giuseppe's men down to the lake. They're going to blast the pipe that's taking the water in to you. They'll be as quick as they can."

"Fine," Don said. "Well done, Harry."

"I'll be back," Harry said. "It won't be long now."

Don held Lorelli above the water which was up to his shoulders.

"Keep your arms and legs moving," he said to her. "We've still got about three feet of head room. They'll fix it before it reaches the top."

By now he was swimming himself, holding on to her with one hand.

The water continued to rise, although its speed had slackened slightly. Don reached up and touched the ceiling. In another three or four minutes, the water would be over their heads.

"Turn on your back, and get your head as far into the water as you can." He supported her as she floated. "Scared?"

"Not as much as I was. Are you?"

"I guess so, but it doesn't help, does it?"

"Felix is dead, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's dead. Don't think about any of them."

"And I'm not even sorry. I feel as if he never existed."

The dim orange light flared up suddenly, lighting up the uneven surface of the rock six inches from their upturned faces, then it went out, leaving them in darkness.

"Well, Alsoni has the last laugh," Lorelli said. Her voice was steady. "What a fool I was to think I could break away from him. Would it be better just to let go and sink?"

"That's a rotten idea," Don said. "We're going to get out of this. It's like the movies. They're always rescued in the nick of time."

"They're leaving it a little late. I'm horribly cold." Don had an idea that they hadn't more than a few seconds left. He reached up for the ceiling expecting to find it within a few inches of him, but his groping fingers encountered space. With a sudden surge of hope, he stretched higher and just managed to touch the ceiling.

"I think they've done it," he said. "The water's dropped at least a foot."

"Are you just saying that?"

"Reach up and see for yourself."

"Yes. I can't feel anything."

Don dropped his legs and his feet found a step.

"They have done it!" he exclaimed. "We can stand! I told you, didn't I? The water's going down!"

Lorelli sank down beside him. She leaned against him and began to cry.

Harry's voice bawled, "Are you still all right? We've diverted the water; now we're going to tackle the door."

"We're okay, Harry," Don shouted back. "How are you going to get the door open?"

"I've found the switchboard. I'll turn the juice on."

"Wait a few minutes," Don said. "Let's get clear of the water first."

"Okay, sir; just give the word when you're ready."

By now the water had sunk to Don's knees and he could feel it rapidly receding.

"We'll be out in five minutes," he said to Lorelli.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked, drawing away from him. "Are you going to hand me over to the police?"

"I'm not going to do anything with you," he said. "It's what you are going to do with yourself, that'll be your problem. As far as I'm concerned, you died down here with the rest of them, and I like to think that's exactly what you did do.

You'll have a few hours' start, but you must know sooner or later the police., will catch up with you."

She didn't say anything for a long moment, then, "Yes; perhaps Felix is better off after all."

By now they were standing on the top step free of water.

"I'm going to tell him to open the door now," Don said.

"Alsoni owns the Bazzoni villa in Palermo," Lorelli said. "As he tried to drown me like a rat, I may as well continue to act like one. He has a fast yacht in the harbour. It's called the Nettuno."

"My men may have got him."

"He's not so easily caught. I hope you won't let him get away. Before they open the door I want to thank you for what you've done for me. I should be dead now if it hadn't been for you. Felix didn't help me."

"We're quits. If it hadn't been for you, Carlos would have finished me." Raising his voice, he shouted, "Okay, Harry, see what you can do now."

Two minutes later, the steel door swung open.

An hour later, and back at the Trioni villa, Don was speaking to Rossi, captain of police at Rome headquarters, over the telephone.

Out on the veranda Cherry was administering to the needs of Giuseppe and his men, while Harry leaned against the veranda rail and listened to what Don was saying.

Upstairs, Marian was looking after Lorelli, providing her with a change of clothing.

Don was saying, "No doubt at all. I have a witness for you that no jury will shake. Alsoni is making for Bazzoni villa in Palermo. You'll have to move quickly if you're going to catch him. He has a couple of hours' start. He has a fast yacht in the harbour: it's called Nettuno."

Rossi said, "Give me your number. I'll call you back."

Don gave him the number and hung up. He got to his feet as Marian and Lorelli came into the lounge. Lorelli was wearing one of Marian's black frocks. Her red-gold hair was packed up out of sight under a close-fitting hat. She looked pale and uneasy.

Marian left them together and went out on to the veranda.

Don said, "Well, what are your plans?"

Lorelli shrugged.

"What can my plans be? I have no money." She took a cigarette from the box on the table and lit it. "I won't get far."

"I'll let you have some money," Don said. "The best thing I can do for you is to take you to Florence tonight. The police in Siena will be looking for you. You'll stand a better chance in Florence. Anyway, I won't be able to get the money for

you until the bank opens. I can cash a cheque in Florence."

She stared at him.

"You'll do this for me?"

"I said I'd give you a chance. It's not much of a chance, but it's up to you how you use it. I'll give you a million lire, and I'll take you to Florence. The rest is up to you."

"If the police caught me with you, you'd get into trouble."

"That's my funeral," Don said shortly. "Are you ready to leave now?"

"Yes, I'm ready."

"Wait here for a moment." He went out on to the veranda. "I want the car," he said to Harry. "Okay for gas?"

"She's full up, sir," Harry said and went off down the steps to the garage.

Don drew Marian aside.

"I'm taking her to Florence right away," he said. "If Rossi calls back, tell him I've gone to bed and I'm not to be disturbed. I'll be back around midday."

"You're going to help her get away?" Marian asked. "Is it wise, Don? The police want her."

"I know. It's one of those things. If it hadn't been for her, that negro would have fixed me. I owe her something. I can't just wash my hands of her."

"You'll take Hairy?"

"No. There's no point in getting him in a jam³ if we're stopped."

Harry drove the Bentley to the bottom of the veranda steps. He got out and looked inquiringly up at Don.

"Ready when you are, sir."

"I wish you would take him," Marian said.

Don shook his head, walked back into the lounge and beckoned to Lorelli.

"Let's go," he said.

She followed him down the steps, not looking at the group on the veranda who watched her silently.

Harry said, "Will you drive or shall I, sir?"

"You're not coming," Don said as he opened the off-side door for Lorelli. He came around and slid under the driving wheel. "And don't argue, Harry," he went on as he saw the obstinate look cross Harry's face. "I'll be back around midday tomorrow. Keep an eye on Jacopo."

He let in the clutch before Harry had time to remonstrate which obviously he was about to do, and sent the car down the drive.

"Have you told the police about Alsoni?" Lorelli asked as they headed along the road towards Poggibonsi.

"Yes," Don returned. "There'll be a reception committee waiting for him at Palermo. He won't get away this time."

"I think he must be meeting someone. I can't understand why he killed Menotto. He hasn't driven a car for years.

Menotto always drove him. I am sure he would never plan to drive to Palermo himself. He must be relying on someone to take him."

"Don't worry your brains about him," Don said. "The police will take care of him. Jacopo didn't know about the Bazzoni villa, did he?" "No: only Felix and I."

"That's the point. He's sure you are dead. He'll think the Bazzoni villa is still safe. He'll walk right into the trap."

"I'll believe that when he is caught," Lorelli said. "He is very clever. If he does escape, you will have to be careful. I'm warning you. It is through you he is in trouble now. He won't forget. If he escapes, he won't rest until he has levelled scores."

"He won't escape," Don said, then abruptly, "Who killed Shapiro?" She looked at him.

"That's for the London police to find out if they can," she said indifferently. "Why should you care who killed him?"

Before Don could reply he saw the reflection of powerful headlights coming towards him. The road they were climbing was sinuous. He couldn't see the car, but the approaching headlights told him it was coming fast.

"This fella's in a hurry," he said and pulled well in to his right, dipping his headlights.

Then the car was upon them; well on the wrong side of the road and travelling at over fifty miles an hour, which was much too fast for such a road, it came at them with its headlights full on.

Don was completely blinded by the glare of the other car's lights. He ramméd his foot down hard on the brake. He heard the squealing of tortured tyres as the other car also braked, then he felt a violent blow against the side of his car which skidded sideways, then under the pressure of the brakes, came to a stop.

Swearing under his breath, for he loved his car, Don flung open the car door and jumped out.

The other car had slewed around right across the road, its rear wheels inches from the overhang that went down into the valley of olive trees.

A man in a trench coat and slouch hat had got out of the car, leaving another man sitting in the off-side seat. He went to the front of the car to examine the damage. He took no notice of Don as he came up.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at?" Don said in Italian. "You were over on the wrong side of the road."

The man in the trench coat threw the beam of a small flashlight on to the front wheel. The fender had been crushed down on the tyre, bursting it and ripping a large hole in the cover.

"We are in a hurry," he said in English. "Is your car badly damaged?"

"I don't give a damn if you are in a hurry," Don said, exasperated. "You have no business to drive like that on this road."

"I asked if your car..." the man in the trench coat began when his companion got out of the car and came into the circle

of light made by the flashlight.

"I seem to recognize your voice," he said and lifted the .45 he held in his hand so the barrel pointed at Don. "Surely it is Mr Micklem?"

The man in the trench coat turned the beam of the flashlight on Don's face.

"So we meet again," Alsconi said. "You appear a difficult man to get rid of. Stay where you are." The gun moved threateningly. To Crantor he went on, "See if there is anyone with him in the car."

Crantor walked over to the Bentley. Lorelli saw him coming, opened the car door and slid out. The gun in Crantor's hand brought her to an abrupt stop.

She stifled a scream as she recognized him.

It was only when Alsconi went down to where Menotto had left the car that he had sudden doubts whether he could drive the big Cadillac, and he had immediate regrets that he had wiped Menotto out without considering that he was depriving himself of the services

of a chauffeur.

He hadn't handled a car for five or six years, and even then he had been a poor driver.

Crantor was due to land at midnight. It was essential to be there when he arrived. Alsconi had less than an hour and a half to reach the airstrip. Ahead of him lay forty miles of difficult driving.

He got into the car, and spent three or four exasperating minutes trying to find out how the headlights operated. Having finally turned them on and then turned on the ignition, he started the engine. He was thankful for the automatic gear box; at least he wouldn't have to cope with a clutch or a gear change. He drove down the drive to the gates, and he found that fifteen miles an hour was as fast as he could drive without having difficulty in keeping the car to the narrow tarmac.

The guard at the lodge opened the gates for him and stared curiously at him as he edged the car through the gateway. Alsconi was far too busy getting the big car on to the road to notice the curious stare.

With more space to manoeuvre, he increased his speed, but he found twenty-five miles an hour was all he could safely drive at.

The hill road with its sharp bends bothered him, and he was sweating freely and cursing himself for getting rid of Menotto by the time he got to the crest. The clock on the dashboard warned him he was well behind time. It was essential that he should reach the airstrip before the aircraft landed. The aircraft would take off immediately Crantor disembarked, and Alsconi wanted to be on it when it did take off. He knew his best chance of escape was to fly to Palermo and get aboard his yacht before the police were alerted. He edged the speed of the car up to thirty-five miles an hour and almost ran off the road. If he hadn't slammed on the brakes, he would have gone over the overhang.

Cursing under his breath, he continued up the road at a greatly reduced speed.

An hour later, still crawling at twenty miles an hour, he reached the broad, straight road that led to the narrow road to the airstrip, and he pushed the speed of the car up to thirty-five miles an hour. Wrestling with the wheel, he managed to maintain this speed until he reached the right hand turn which would bring him after a mile drive to the airstrip.

As he drove down the narrow, bumpy road, he saw, in the distance, the flares were alight, and he heard the roar of the aircraft's engine. He pushed down the accelerator, nearly swerving on to the grass. Then he saw the lights of the aircraft and he cursed. The aircraft was taking off, and as he drove on to the landing ground, the lights of the aircraft went out and the machine disappeared into the darkness.

He pulled up, sweating and furious. Now he had the long run down to Villa San Giovanni ahead of him. It would mean the loss of at least twenty-four hours before he could board the Nettuno. It was infuriating, but not a disaster. Felix and Lorelli were the only two who knew about the yacht, and they were dead by now. But he would have to be careful.

Although the police would have no idea which way he would be heading, they would be on the lookout for him.

Crantor, carrying a large suitcase, came out of the shadows and approached the car.

"ull signor Alsconi?" he asked softly.

"Don't mention my name, you fool!" Alsconi snarled. "Have you the money?"

"Yes." Crantor paused by the car, trying to see Alsconi's face. This was a big moment for him.

"We're going to Palermo," Alsconi said. "I'll tell you the way as we go. You drive." He moved his bulk across the bench seat.

"Palermo?" Crantor said, startled. He opened the car door and slid under the steering wheel. "That's in Sicily, isn't it?"

"Where else, fool, could it be?" Alsconi snapped. "I wish to get there quickly. Will you stop making obvious remarks and get me there as quickly as you can?"

Crantor flushed. His own vicious temper stirred. He started the engine and drove down the bumpy road at a speed that made Alsconi's small eyes widen.

"Turn left at the bottom of this road," he said. "Then straight on."

He huddled down in the comfortably padded seat and stared bleakly through the windshield as the car swayed and banged down the road and swung on to the main road with a squeal of tortured tyres.

Crantor felt the car's great surge of power. He liked to drive fast, and he sent the car roaring down the road with the speedometer needle touching 98 miles an hour.

What did this mean? he asked himself. Why Palermo? What was inside the wooden boxes that were stacked on the back seat? Why this urgency to get to Sicily? Had something gone wrong? Was Alsoni pulling out?

He glanced at the fat, huddled form at his side. The light from the dashboard showed up the slack, worried face, the bleak, screwed-up eyes and the black shadow of a careless shave.

He found Alsoni disappointing. After all he had heard of him, he had expected to find someone iron-hard instead of this fat, petulant, elderly man.

Alsoni felt Crantor's searching gaze and he in turn looked at him and inwardly shuddered. What a face! If he had known Crantor looked like this he would never have planned to make use of him. It was a face as easily recognized as Carlos's giant body. It was a face once seen couldn't possibly be forgotten. But the man could drive. If they continued at this speed they would be in Naples by the morning. He straightened a little in his seat.

"Very soon now," he said, "we shall come to the hill road into Siena. You will have to drive more slowly, but don't go too slow. It is essential I should be in Palermo as soon as you can possibly get me there."

"Will Felix be in Palermo? I understood he was in Siena," Crantor said as he edged up the speed of the car.

"Don't bother me with small talk," Alsoni said irritably. "I have things to think about."

Crantor drove on, his mind seething with rage at the snub. And it wasn't until they began to climb the twisting hill road and when he had to slacken speed, that he began to consider his position.

Alsoni had said there was to be a change. He had told him to come out immediately. Could that mean he was now to work closely with him? Did he want to? If Alsoni treated everyone in this way was it worth while working with such a man?

Crantor suddenly thought of the fifteen thousand pounds in five-pound notes he had brought out of England and that were now lying on the floor of the car. If he had known Alsoni was going to be like this, he would have taken the money for himself and dropped out of sight. It wouldn't have been easy, but it could have been done. It was not too late to do it now. Again he thought of the wooden boxes. What did they contain? More money?

His mind was so preoccupied with these thoughts that he came upon Don's Bentley without seeing it until it was too late. He swept around the curve in the road, then suddenly realized he was too far over to the left. He saw the Bentley's dipped headlights, and he slammed his foot down on the brake pedal.

He felt the violent impact and heard the front tyre burst. For one nerve-racking moment as the car swung broadside on, he thought it was going to crash down into the valley. He heard Alsoni cursing as he wrestled with the wheel, then the car came to a standstill. Shaken and furious with himself, he opened the car door and got out.

Lorelli looked beyond Crantor and recognized Alsoni's bulky figure. She felt herself turn cold.

Crantor said, "What are you doing here with Micklem?" He had lowered the gun. There was a puzzled expression on his face. "What is this?"

"Crantor! Bring her here! "Alsoni barked. "Don't let her get away."

Lorelli looked around wildly for a means of escape as Crantor caught hold of her wrist. She tried to jerk free, but he held her and pulled her across the road to where Alsoni was standing, covering Don with the gun.

In the reflected light from the Cadillac's headlamps, Alsoni looked white and flabby. His mouth twitched and there was fear in his eyes.

"Watch this man: shoot him if he moves," he said, then he caught hold of Lorelli's arm and pulled her into the light so he could see her clearly. "So you got away? And you have been talking, haven't you? You've been giving away my secrets." He dropped the gun into his pocket and caught hold of her by her throat, shaking her. "Haven't you?" he shouted at her.

Lorelli buckled at her knees, her hands pulled at Alsoni's wrists, trying to break his vicious grip.

"You've told him about my yacht, haven't you?" Alsoni snarled. "Haven't you?"

"Take your hands off her!" Don exclaimed. "You can't get away. The police are on the yacht now, waiting for you. They're at the Bazzoni villa as well."

Alsoni threw Lorelli from him so she sprawled in the road. He dragged out his gun, his face murderous. Stepping back so he could still watch Don, Crantor aimed a quick slap at Alsoni's wrist, knocking the gun out of his hand.

Alsoni staggered back, his face livid.

"Wait!" Crantor said sharply. "What is this? What's happening?"

"Happening?" Alsoni cried, his voice shrill. "She's betrayed us! That's what's happening! She's given us away to the police."

"What's this about a yacht? What yacht?"

"How can I get away unless I use the yacht?" Alsoni snarled. "The police have a description of me." Fear made his face slack and ugly. "There's money in the villa. How am I going to get away now?"

This news, came as a shock to Crantor. So Alsoni was on the run and the police had a description of him! Crantor's brain worked quickly. They hadn't a description of himself, he thought, but if he were caught with Alsoni... What a mug he had been! He should have taken the fifteen thousand and dropped out of sight. Then he had a sudden idea.

"What about the motor launch?" he asked. "Have you still got it?"

Alsoni blinked, then clapped his hands together.

"Of course!" He had forgotten the motor cruiser in the harbour of Civitavecchia: the cruiser that was used to smuggle French currency into Italy. "That's it! It had gone out of my mind. While the police wait for me in Palermo, I'll take the

launch to Monte Carlo. We will go at once to Civitavecchia."

He picked up the gun that Crantor had knocked out of his hand. Lorelli had got to her feet and was now standing by Don, her face white. She watched Alsoni fearfully.

"Is Micklem's car damaged? Look and see," Alsoni said to Crantor. "I'll watch these two."

Crantor went over to the Bentley: apart from a buckled rear wing there seemed nothing the matter with the big car. He opened the door, slid under the driving wheel and started the engine. He shifted the gear lever and moved the car a few yards, then cut the engine and came back. "It's all right."

"Then we'll use it. It will be safer, and they will go with us. The police won't think of looking for me in a British car with three other people in it. Get those boxes out of the Cadillac and put them in his car. Then get the Cadillac off the road. Hurry!"

While Alsoni continued to cover Lorelli and Don, Crantor transferred the boxes into the boot of the Bentley. He put his and Alsoni's suitcases in beside them.

He returned to the Cadillac, released the parking brake, then going around to the front of the car, he leaned his weight against the bonnet. The car moved, its back wheels dropped off the road, and it crashed down the steep bank and ended up some fifty yards down the hill against an olive tree.

"You will drive, Mr Micklem," Alsoni said. "You will take me with all possible speed to Civitavecchia." He looked at Lorelli. "You will sit beside him. If either of you make a move to attract attention, I shall shoot you. Do you understand?"

"You're not going to get far," Don said. "You're just kidding yourself if you think you're going to get away."

Listening, Crantor thought the same.

"Get in the car!" Alsoni snarled.

Don and Lorelli walked over to the Bentley; the other two followed. They got in the car and Don started the engine. He turned the car and headed back to Siena.

The time was now a few minutes to one o'clock. They had a hundred and twenty miles to cover to reach the port. The roads would be deserted. Alsoni reckoned they should arrive by half-past three.

"Lombardo should be sleeping on board," he said to Crantor, "but if he isn't we will not be able to wait for him. Can you handle the boat?"

"I can try," Crantor said doubtfully. "I haven't handled a big motor-boat before, but I'm pretty good with engines."

"Don't talk like a fool," Alsoni snarled. "You would have to navigate the boat. Could you get me to Monte Carlo?"

"No," Crantor said. "I don't know anything about navigation."

Alsoni thought for a moment: this could be a disaster if Lombardo wasn't on board and it was unlikely that he would be.

He leaned forward and tapped Don on his shoulder.

"Can you handle a boat? If you can and if you can get me to Monte Carlo I will refrain from shooting you when we reach Civitavecchia."

"That's comforting news," Don said dryly. "I'll take you there on condition that Lorelli and I take the boat back after I've landed you."

"Certainly," Alsoni said and smiled in the dark. "You would of course give me your word not to tell the police that you have landed me at Monte Carlo?"

"Of course," Don said gravely, knowing Alsoni would never let him go free.

"Then let's get on," Alsoni said and sat back.

It was striking three o'clock as Don drove along the sea road into Civitavecchia.

"Stop for a moment," Alsoni said. "There are a few details to be arranged."

Don pulled up.

"There is the guard at the harbour who may ask questions. I know most of the guards," Alsoni said, "but we may be unlucky.

Have your gun ready." He looked at Crantor. "I will open the window and speak to the guard. If he seems suspicious, shoot him. You have a silencer?"

"No," Crantor said.

"I have. Take my gun and give me yours." As Crantor appeared to fumble for his gun, he said, "There may be more than one guard." "There won't be at this hour."

Crantor had slipped his gun out of sight by his side and now with one hand, and it wasn't easy, he was unloading the gun.

"Give me your gun!" Alsoni snapped. "Why are you keeping me waiting?"

"It is caught in the lining of my pocket." "You shouldn't have kept it in your pocket, you fool!" Alsoni snarled.

"Hurry!"

You won't be calling me a fool much longer, Crantor thought savagely as he jacked the bullet out of the breech. He handed the empty gun to Alsoni and took the .45 that was equipped with a silencer.

"You two in front say nothing," Alsoni said, snatching Crantor's gun from his hand. "I shall shoot Lorelli through the head if you make a false move. Now, drive to the harbour entrance. It's straight ahead, and across the railway lines."

Don engaged gear. During the drive to Civitavecchia, he had been trying to think of a way to catch these two off their guard, but as long as they had guns in their hands, there was nothing he could do. He was confident his chance would

come when he got on the motor launch. Crantor, he decided, was the dangerous one for he was active and his movements were quick. He was sure he could take Alsoni by surprise, but not Crantor.

He slowed down to pass over the railway track, then his headlights picked out the red and white bar that guarded the entrance to the harbour. By the bar was a sentry box. A man in khaki uniform with a rifle in his hand, stood by the bar and blinked in the glare of the lights. "Be ready," Alsoni said. "I will sit well back. You will have to shoot him through the window."

The guard ducked under the bar and came up to the car.

"It is all right," Alsoni muttered. "I know this man." Raising his voice, he called, "Is that you, Bellini? I haven't seen you for months. How are you?"

The guard grinned.

"Il signor Tampato!" He came up to the window. "This is a pleasure! You are going perhaps to Rome? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"We are going to Rome," Alsoni said, "but as we were so near, I wished my friends to see the boat. Is Lombardo on board?"

"No, signore," the guard said. "He no longer sleeps on the boat. He married three weeks ago."

Alsoni's fat face tightened.

"Never mind," he said. "We will not be long. I just want them to see it."

"I am sorry, signore, but the harbour is closed. Less than an hour ago I had instructions from the police to let no one enter. There is some bandit attempting to escape."

Alsoni laughed.

"Do I look like a bandit? Come now; I shall not be long: a half an hour perhaps." His fingers dipped into his pocket and he took out a thousand lire note. "Here, buy yourself something to remember me by. You musn't keep my friends waiting."

"Thank you, signore, but please be as quick as you can. I will get into trouble if you are seen."

He went to the bar and lifted it. Don drove under it.

"To the left," Alsoni said and waved to the guard.

They drove past a big shed that hid them from the guard.

"Stop here," Alsoni said. "Turn off the engine and give me the ignition key."

Don obeyed.

"I will remain in the car," Alsoni said to Crantor, "and watch these two. Put the boxes and our cases on board."

Crantor got out of the car. He looked for a moment at the powerful motor cruiser that was moored nearby, then he opened the boot of the car and carried the boxes across the quay and on to the boat. He returned for the suitcases, and having put them on board, he came over to the car.

"Get out, you two," Alsoni said.

Crantor stepped back and watched Lorelli and Don, followed by Alsoni, get out of the car.

"Now, Mr Micklem, I'll be obliged if you will go on board with Crantor and get the boat ready," Alsoni said.

Don took hold of Lorelli's arm.

"You're coming with me," he said, not liking the cold, vicious expression on Alsoni's face.

"No!" Alsoni said sharply. "Just you, Mr Micklem. She stays here."

"If she doesn't come with us, then I don't take you to Monte Carlo," Don said quietly.

"She is not coming!" Alsoni said violently. "You will do what you're told or you will be shot!"

"That won't get you to Monte Carlo," Don said, watching Alsoni closely. The look of maniacal rage in Alsoni's eyes warned him that he might shoot.

"Wait!" Crantor barked. He had moved away so that he could cover the three of them with the .45.

Alsoni looked at him, saw the gun was pointing at him, and his small eyes widened.

"Don't point that thing at me!" he rasped. Crantor smiled.

"You shouldn't have told me the police have a description of you. Tortoise," he said. "It's my turn now to call you a fool! They haven't a description of me. She's going on this trip, but you aren't. I have money, a boat, a navigator and a clear field. You'd only complicate..."

Alsoni swung up the .38 and pulled the trigger, his lips curling off his teeth in a vicious snarl. The faint click of the hammer told him the gun was empty. He looked down at the gun, his face slack, his eyes staring.

Crantor shot him three times in the body. The gun made three sharp plops like someone clapping his hands. Alsoni buckled at the knees, took two staggering steps forward, the .38 falling from his hand, then he spread out face down on the cobble stones.

Neither Don nor Lorelli moved.

Crantor swung the gun to cover them.

"Get on board!" he said harshly. "Hurry!"

Don moved to the edge of the quay and dropped down on to the deck. He held out his hands to Lorelli and swung her down beside him.

Crantor scrambled aboard, keeping away from them.

"Get the engine started," he said.

Don went down into the cockpit.

Lorelli said to Crantor, "What are you going to do with me? Why didn't you let him kill me?"

"I once said you and I could be useful to each other," Crantor said, staring at her. "You didn't seem to think much of the idea then. You have until Monte Carlo to change your mind. I have fifteen thousand pounds in that bag. I think there is a fortune in lire in those boxes. We could make a new start in life together. Think about it." He motioned with the gun. "Get into the cockpit. I'm staying here."

Don's head and shoulders appeared out of the cockpit.

"I can't see what I'm doing. Have you a flashlight?"

Crantor took his torch from his pocket and bent slightly to hand it to Don. Lorelli, with the quickness of a cat, gave him a hard, sudden push. Caught off balance, Crantor fell forward. He fired blindly as he fell. The bullet smashed against the steel floor and ricocheted out of the cockpit, narrowly missing Don. As Crantor crashed down into the cockpit, Don closed with him.

His left hand grabbed Crantor's wrist, his right hand fastened on Crantor's throat. He hammered Crantor's gun hand on the floor of the cockpit. The gun went off again, then Crantor's fingers opened and the gun slid into the darkness.

For a few seconds the two men fought like animals. Crantor broke Don's hold on his throat and his fist thudded into Don's face, sending him backwards.

Crantor made the mistake of reaching for the gun. Don threw himself on him and slammed a punch to Crantor's jaw. Crantor sagged. Don scrambled to his feet, and as Crantor heaved himself up to his knees, Don's fist smashed against his jaw again, sending him backwards. His head struck the wall of the cockpit and he slumped face down on the steel floor.

Don groped for the flashlight, found it and turned it on. He bent over Crantor. Satisfied that he was unconscious, he picked up Crantor's gun and backed away.

"Are you all right?" Lorelli said breathlessly.

"He won't bother us for a few minutes," Don said. He turned the beam of the flashlight on Lorelli's tense, white face.

"Nice work. It's becoming quite a habit. That's the second time you've pulled me out of a jam." He handed the torch to her. "Hold this while I tie him up."

She took the flashlight. Don put the gun on the deck and then tied Crantor's wrists behind his back with his silk tie.

Lorelli reached out and picked up Crantor's gun. As Don straightened, he found himself looking down the barrel. "Hey! What's the idea?" he said, startled.

"Get him off the boat and get off yourself," she said in a fierce hard voice.

"You're not taking the boat, are you?" "Yes. Hurry! Get him off!"

"Don't rush your chances. I said I'd help you and I still will. Can you handle this boat?"

"Of course. I've handled it dozens of times before, and I don't want your help."

"You'll want some money, won't you?"

"Money?" She laughed. "I have all the money I want now. This is the chance I've been hoping for. Get him off the boat. I want to get away."

"Right-ho," Don said and heaved Crantor up on to the deck, climbed on to the quay and pulled Crantor up after him. He laid Crantor out on the cobble stones, then squatting on his heels, he looked down at Lorelli.

"You're sure you can handle this boat? You don't want me to help you?"

She shook her head.

"It's all right. I've done the Monte Carlo run before on my own."

"Well, okay. Then there's nothing I can do for you?"

Her face softened as she looked up at him.

"No, thanks. I can manage now. I'm going to make a new start. I don't suppose we'll meet again."

"You never know. Watch out for police boats. He'll give them a description of the boat when he comes to the surface."

She smiled.

"I'll be miles away by then. This is the fastest boat on the coast. They won't catch me." She swung the starting handle, and as the twin engines roared into life, she said, "Good-bye and thanks again."

"So long and good luck," Don shouted above the noise of the engines. He cast off the mooring rope.

The boat began to move. Then as Lorelli opened the throttle, the boat gathered way and went roaring out towards the open sea, leaving behind it a broad white wash of churned-up water.

She raised her hand and waved. Don waved back.

Then he lost sight of the boat as it raced away into the darkness of the night.